

AP22: WANG MANG, EASTERN HAN, AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE UNIVERSAL STATE (5/89; 1/91; 1/95, 10/96)

A. Wang Mang's Usurpation

22a. In what ways was Wang Mang's usurpation a culmination of trends since the last years of Emperor Wu; in what ways did it represent something new? Which of these two types of explanation best explains his failure?

1. His Context

a. Inadvertent prophet of civilizational crisis

Wang Mang 王莽 was the scion of a consort family, much like Huo Guang and Kuang Heng before him. Unlike them, however, he ultimately moved beyond heading a dominant court faction within the old order and instead usurped power in his own name, founding a new dynasty. Such a usurpation by a consort clan had been the great fear of the house of Liu and its partisans right from the beginning, since Empress Lü's time. Now it had finally happened.

After ruling informally for more than a generation, in 9 AD Wang set up his own new dynasty, which with a singular lack of imagination, he called the Xin 新 (meaning "new") Dynasty. He reigned in his own right from 9 to 23 AD, when a combination of a popular Daoist rebellion and an uprising by members of the Liu clan brought him down. Counting his time as dictator of the court since at least the last decade of the 1st century BC, he stayed in power for a whole generation.

In some ways there was nothing really new going on here. His usurpation was just a culmination of what had been going on since Emperor Wu's times, or at least since the last years of Emperor Wu, when Huo Guang began consolidating his power over the court on the basis of his family connection with Empress Wei, mother of the heir apparent.

However, Wang Mang also represented the culmination of the trend toward blending together the reformists' and modernists' positions. For at least the previous couple of generations, the reformists had succeeded in gaining and keeping power only at the price of becoming modernist interventionists in

practice, even if they did not admit what they were doing in principle.

Wang believed that he and his friends had carried this blending to the point where it constituted (at least in their own minds) a restoration of old ultimate ideas so profoundly radical as to constitute something genuinely new. Hence the name of his New Dynasty.

Historians and politicians have never been able to agree as to how genuinely new Wang's policies were. Ban Gu, writing a generation after Wang's death, concluded he was a hypocrite and something of a monster, though an incompetent one. A millennium later, the reforming N. Song statesman Wang Anshi considered Wang Mang an exemplar. In the 20th century, the cultural reformer Hu Shi considered him "China's first socialist."

My own judgment, for what it is worth, is that his ideas represented a genuine but muddled recognition that the old visions of Heaven had become inadequate, but that he necessarily had to fail because he could not create a new vision merely from the parts of the old ones, and hence had (like modern socialists) to substitute an inadequate Heaven on Earth for a real Heaven above. The inevitable failure of this exercise merely deepened the muddle and constituted the onset of the overt stage of the crisis of China's first stage of high civilization.

b. The "Old Text" school

Wang Mang was himself the best example of that grand muddle. He called himself a reformer, and claimed with some justice to come out of that aspect of the soft Confucian tradition which was attempting to reassert its softness by archaizing, by going back not just to Mencius, but by trying to recreate the forms of society that they believed existed during the aboriginal stage of Confucianism in the time not just of Confucius but of Kings Wen and Wu and the Duke of Zhou five hundred years before Confucius.

The last half of the 1st century BC was the period when new (supposedly newly discovered) versions of the Confucian classics discovered earlier were beginning to be widely promulgated. Most of these "new" versions were supposedly found during Emperor Wu's reign in the walls of Confucius's old house in Jinan, the old Lu capital, when, as a pious act, that 500-year old building was being restored.

In the course of taking the old wall apart the restorers supposedly found old versions of the *Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Book of Documents*, etc., all written in the old orthography used prior to the reforms of Qin and Han. Hence they were called the "Old Texts" (*guwen* 古文) even though scholars had been laboriously translit-

erating them into the new orthography for more than a century.

These new editions had an effect on mid-Han Confucianism much stronger than that of the Dead Sea Scrolls on late 20th century Christianity and Judaism. Their discoverers claimed that all existing texts had suffered from an interrupted pedigree. Supposedly, the existing texts had been written down from memory by scholars who had survived the Qin burning of the Confucian books. Of course this was nonsense, and nonsense likely deliberately spread by Wang Mang's faction. Qin had likely not even attempted to do more than symbolically burn a few copies of the Confucian books conveniently at hand in their capital. Many other copies survived elsewhere, and these were available for copying into the new orthographic standard set by Qin, and its clerk-script successor which evolved under Han.

It was the change in orthography which divided the Warring States and early imperial period textual traditions, and in this respect the newly discovered texts were no different than those employed as the basis for new transcriptions soon after 200 BC, the results labeled as the "New Texts" by the Old Texters.

These newly discovered old texts were also written in Warring States period script, and so they had to be transliterated into the orthography of Han times. By Wang Mang's time, however (two centuries after they had been banned from official use), no one but a few experts could any longer read the old scripts, and these experts were mostly attached to the Confucian University founded by Emperor Wu and expanded and subsidized by Wang Mang. Wang was thereby able to present himself as the great but humbly self-abasing sponsor of Confucian scholarship.

The archaic Confucianism contained in these new-old versions of the sacred texts seems to have been in key respects different from the so-called new text versions, but these differences may well have been planted in them by Wang Mang's kept specialists.

The labels here are confusing. The "new texts" are the ones that had been transliterated into the new orthography back in the 2nd century BC either from memory or from texts that had survived the Warring States and Qin's banning of the books and the Han Dynasty's rescuing of some of these books in the provinces. Surviving scholars in the direct line of transmission of these books got hold of surviving copies and transliterated them into the new orthography standardized by Qin and accepted by early Han.

These had been the accepted versions of the classics for nearly two centuries. Despite their long pedigrees, these were the so-called "new text" (literally "modern text" *jinwen*

今文) versions disparaged by Wang Mang. (Remember, calling something “new” was disparaging for an audience of mostly archaizing Confucians.)

The “old texts” were the ones that off and on since the late 2nd and during the 1st century BC had turned up, some allegedly discovered in the walls of Confucius’s house, or in Warring States period graves. They were called the “old texts” because they were written in the pre-Qin orthography, and were only transliterated into the new orthography a century or so later than the new texts.

These “old texts” had a peculiarly archaist bent. They emphasized the sage-like as opposed to the philosopher-like characteristics of Confucius, thereby making him look more like the earlier sages who founded and ruled Zhou or even the still more archaic states which preceded it.

And yet (cf. subsection 3 below for details), these archaic sage-kings are shown ruling China with a bureaucratic apparatus peculiarly like that available to Han Dynasty rulers, and hence by methods which strikingly echoed those of Wang Mang’s putative enemies, the modernists.

2. The Consort Families’ Rise

Wang Mang’s career also represented the culmination of the trend toward the rise of the consort families. This trend had begun, at least abortively, with the power at court of the brothers and nephews of Empress Lü back at the beginning of the dynasty. It had resumed during the old age of Emperor Wu with the rise of the relatives of Empress Wei a century later, and had accelerated thereafter.

The norm had been for the head of one of the consort families—a brother or nephew or cousin of one of the leading segments of a consort clan—to become the dominant politician at court. This was becoming ever more common all during the 1st century BC.

There was a certain logic to this trend. To have a strong male relative of the mother of the heir apparent at his right hand backed the power of the emperor at the center of the empire. Such a chief assistant was, because his power depended on his being the head of a consort family, utterly dependent on some female of his clan becoming and then remaining the chief wife of a reigning emperor. The emperor could change the designation of his chief wife at any time and for any reason.

The chief wife’s relative had, therefore, better remain loyal to the center, and thereby give the center an ally against the growing regionalized power of the imperial clan members running the pseudo-fiefs and the regional power of those men of merit estab-

lishing dual-base families.

These shrewd meritocratic climbers were becoming ever more numerous. They normally kept one branch of their family at court to continue to gain merit and loot, and another (usually the main) branch out in one of the provinces, using the revenues derived from merit to acquire land and power regionally and locally. Therefore, in the course of Western Han times, what had started out as a meritocracy focused exclusively on the center was turning itself into a regionally and locally based landed and hence increasingly aristocratized meritocracy.

To countervail that power it was useful to have relatively dependent consort families backing the emperor at the center. Indeed, the emperors consistently picked out lesser families to become consort families. Normally, the Han emperors did not go for girls from the greatest of the regional aristocratized meritocrat clans. They would pick some family that was more marginal, and perhaps had produced a beautiful young woman as well. (The contemporary custom among upper class American males of selecting lesser class “trophy wives” to replace aging first wives from their own class may be somewhat analogous to this practice.)

The Wei clan was a classical instance of this abiding pattern. As a young man in the 130s BC, Emperor Wu was traveling on an imperial progress and was visiting one of the pseudo-fiefs in the north on the fringes of what had been the Warring States period state of Zhao. At one out-of-the-way stop, a beautiful dancing girl from the Wei family performed for him, and he fell head over heels in love with her.

It turned out that she was the daughter of a member of a very minor local ex-aristocratic clan who had fallen on such hard times that the senior Mr. Wei had to send his daughter out into show business. Ms. Wei apparently wiggled her nether parts (we have only some tomb murals depicting Han court dancing rather vaguely, but it could well have included sub-belly-button wiggling) so well as to enchant the impressionable teen-aged ruler. To win favor with the young emperor, the local administrator gave her as a servile dancing girl to him, and he placed her in his harem.

Lady Wei quickly produced a bunch of daughters, disappointing both the emperor and her own relatives, but eventually she also gave birth to a son, the first and for a long time the only son that Emperor Wu fathered.

She immediately became Emperor Wu’s principal consort and her relatives suddenly became very powerful. You can see why they would have identified themselves with the throne. But for the emperor’s favor to this hoochy-koochy dancer, the Weis and their in-

laws and cousins like Huo Guang wouldn’t have amounted to anything.

In a sense, the Wangs in the latter years of the 1st century BC were just later versions of the same sort of fortuitous spread of fortune for a consort family that the Weis had originally represented. Wang Mang was the nephew of the consort of Emperor Yuan 元 (r. 48-32 BC). With the aid of his aunt, the dowager empress, his power waxed greatly during the ensuing reign of Emperor Cheng, 成 (32-6 BC) but when the eccentric Emperor Ai 哀 came to the throne in 6 BC, Wang Mang was temporarily pushed aside. However, he joined with the dowager empress to push the succession of the child Emperor Ping 平 in AD 1.

At this point, Wang Mang began to weave a more ominous variant on the old pattern. Five years later, he married his daughter to the teen-aged Emperor Ping. When the latter died (Wang Mang is rumored to have poisoned him) later that year (6 AD), he put a two-year-old great-grandson of Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 73-48) on the throne, with himself as regent. Three years later, in 9 AD, he put this child aside and assumed the throne in his own right.

3. His Reign and Heritage

a. Archaizing Confucianism and Zhou Li maximal socialism

Wang Mang also represented something more than just the political adventurism of a swashbuckling nephew of a chief consort empress. Even his going beyond the power grabbing of a Huo Guang was not that far outside the normal pattern. However, he never intended to just be the shrewd and somewhat unprincipled manipulator of court factions of the sort that Huo Guang represented. He tried to be something more, and something that turned out to be profoundly destabilizing in the long run. He was, or at least persuasively seemed to be, so humble and filial a Confucian that the court meritocracy soon rallied to his side and did not notice for a long time just how adventurous and unprincipled a courtier he was turning out to be.

This new role as patron of Confucianism allowed him to go around his dependence on his consort aunt to give him a power base separate from that linking the consort to the person of the emperor. His patronage of Confucianism also allowed him to become the patron of the court level meritocracy, including its cadet members still studying in the national university, whose numbers rose from a few thousand to 30,000 under his sponsorship. In the long run that proved a very dangerous thing for the stability of the center.

Even after Wang's fall, the Latter Han emperors could never again be sure of the reliability of the consort families as a separate though parallel to the court meritocracy countervailing influence to both the court and regional aristocracy. Fortunately, the peculiar mix of ideas constituting archaizing Confucianism was sufficiently discredited by Wang's failure as to no longer be available to other would-be usurpers of his type.

Nevertheless, certain aspects of this archaizing Confucianism survived the crackup of Wang's attempt to impose it. The people who were reconstructing the Confucian classics on Wang's behalf toward the end of Western Han, particularly Liu Xin and his son Liu Xiang, were discovering and/or inventing all sorts of new things.

They came up with a new edition of one of the key books of what was becoming the soft Legalist tradition, the *Zhou Li* 周禮 (*Rituals of Zhou*). In some form this book probably went back to the early years of the Zhou Dynasty. It represented a kind of sacred administrative handbook on how the Duke of Zhou and Kings Cheng and Kang actually organized and then administered the central authority of the Zhou feudal overlords.

The *Zhou Li* had, however, been repeatedly added to during the rest of the Zhou period, most recently in Warring States times. It was apparently revised again at the hands of these men of the last years of Western Han, the Lius (Liu Xin and Liu Xiang, no relation to the imperial household) involved in the other "Old Text" versions of the Confucian classics.

The Lius may have been the ones who wrote into the *Rituals of Zhou* a goodly portion of the much more elaborate bureaucratic structure that the Han Dynasty had taken over from Qin. This allowed them to claim (at least via this pious fraud) that Han was still re-presenting onto Earth the same order of Heaven originally re-presented by Zhou, and that therefore Han was equally legitimate.

These Han administrative anachronisms were imposed on the *Zhou Li*'s narrative of the original Zhou structure. Unfortunately, there was nothing in the original Zhou book that had anything to do with market relations or the buying and selling of land because these had not yet come into existence at the beginning of Zhou times. And so these reformists were tempted into imagining what it would be like if the bureaucracy of the Han Dynasty could create, without a market, the very elaborately productive agricultural and non-agricultural economy of Han times, which was in fact at least partly created by market exchanges.

In effect the Lius created what amounted to a vision of a socialist commonwealth and embodied it in this sacred book. This, they

could now argue, is what the real old time Confucians had been aiming at. This is what Confucius enjoined people to study. This was the system actually employed by the Duke of Zhou and his immediate successors.

At the very least this Old Text version of the *Zhou Li* encouraged Wang Mang in his impulse to carry out Mencius's injunction to provide equality of access to land, and to do this through the instrument of the state, by coming up with a modern equivalent of the well-field system that the earlier soft Confucians had envisaged as existing at the time of the Zhou conquest or even before.

This impulse had two effects when Wang Mang adopted it as his policy when still chief minister and then retained when he named himself successor to the Mandate of the Han emperors.

To begin with, he actually moved to take away land from the aristocratized meritocracy that had grown up during the preceding couple of centuries. To put it mildly, these fellows did not like losing their land. It was not just the loss of wealth, but also the loss of the prime material validator of their aristocratic status. They were so angry that eventually they launched a rebellion against him in order to defend their landed interests.

Second, the ideal of an archaized Confucianism seems to have set up a resonance amongst the religious Daoist sects which had been absorbing the Mohists during the preceding few centuries and (who knows?) were perhaps also by then absorbing some Buddhist influence too. There are hints of Buddhist influences in China noticed by the central rulers as early as the time of Emperor Yuan from the 30s BC on.

These Daoist sects also rose up in rebellion in order to get their own version of equality of access to land, something far more radical than what Wang Mang intended. Their rural communes were apparently envisioned as being akin to the Agrarian Daoists' ideal of everyone farming the land in common, with no difference between rulers and ruled.

However different their goals, the religious Daoist rebellions and the aristocratic rebellions were both evoked by Wang's reforms, and they combined in a series of unprincipled tacit coalitions to overthrow Wang and his New Dynasty. The would-be archaized Confucian sage finally found himself isolated in Xi'an with a treasury full of gold and nobody trading in his marketplaces because they would not use his coins.

He had extorted this gold in exchange for another of his creations, the world's first fully fiat money, making it out of copper rather than paper in the course of archaizing its shapes. His weird, archaic looking moneys had very high face values, but no backing and

no takers. Not only did the aristocrats not flock to his court, but merchants no longer came to his markets for fear he would foist his valueless money on them.

And yet these wildly unsuccessful coins nevertheless embodied the radically new principle of fiat money, a principle that the pseudo-fief bad-coin making merchants of early Han had not figured out. As it turned out, this discovery of fiat money was premature. True credit money had to be invented first before it could be mutated into fiat money unbeknownst to its users, who thought it was backed by the credit of its issuer.

Credit money, however, could only become important when re-presented from certain aspects of the Buddhist vision of Heaven (cf. chapter MP23 and chapter ME13 in my *Chinese Economic History* text). Poor Wang Mang also ran into the effects of Gresham's Law (bad money drives out good) nearly a millennium before Chinese economists first stated it (which was a half-millennium before Gresham himself did).

b. His death & posthumous reputation

Wang Mang was overthrown in 23 AD and a Han restoration occurred two years later. He supposedly had become very fat, and when he was killed in the palace courtyard by the rebels, it occurred to one of them to rip open his robe, stick a wick in his belly button and light it. Supposedly Wang was so fat that this human candle which his corpse had become remained lit for ten days. Unfortunately this is too good a story to be more than apocryphal. It was intended to symbolize the general belief that Wang had absorbed all of the fat from the people.

Ever since his fall historians have treated Wang Mang in one of two ways: The first alternative was to see him as a wholesome Confucian gone wrong or had been undone by selfish aristocrats (as Hu Shi argued early in this century in his *China's First Socialist*). The second alternative view was the line taken by most Confucians ever since Ban Gu, author of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (written in the 30s and 40s AD, during the next generation, after Wang's fall) which treated him as a wicked, unprincipled and greedy power-seeker.

Ban characterized Wang as having been unprincipled from the beginning of his political career, arguing that he jumped onto the bandwagon of archaizing Confucianism without really understanding or sympathizing with it, and bent it to his own corrupt ends. Of course Ban Gu had his own interests to consult. The Wangs had done in the Bans (previously a family of successful courtiers and generals) during the court intrigues of the preceding generation, and the Bans had just barely managed to survive the Wang Mang

interlude.

Unluckily for Wang's reputation, the Bans survived, and some of them shifted from politics to history-writing just in time to do in his reputation for nearly the next two thousand years. Wang Anshi's embrace of the *Zhou Li* during the 11th century and Hu Shi's partial rehabilitation of Wang Mang's reputation in the 1920s was carried further under the Communists after 1950. Of course there were limits to how "progressive" Wang Mang could be judged in Marxist terms, but he was considered to have been as progressive as it was possible for someone to be who lived at the very beginning of the centralized or bureaucratic stage of feudal society.

B. The Eastern Han Restoration

22b. To what extent was Eastern Han able to return to the status quo ante of Western Han? To what extent and why did it fall ever deeper into a crisis of civilization, to what degree because of its nature as a restoration?

1. The Guangwu Restoration

The Liu imperial lineage managed to achieve a Han restoration despite the chaos of reform mixed with rebellion during Wang Mang's last years. Liu Xiu, the head of a collateral branch of the by then numerous imperial clan, fought his way to the throne. Emperor Guangwu 光武 (his posthumous temple name, literally "brilliantly martial") earned this temple name in a series of exhausting campaigns directed more against other claimants and Daoist rebels than against the enfeebled central authority of Wang Mang.

Guangwu's Daoist sectarian rivals burned themselves out in much the same way that Medieval Christian heresiarchs did. The "Heavenly Kingdom" (Tianguo 天國) they tried to make on Earth proved impossible to achieve. They were easily co-opted or put down by aristocrats who eventually backed the Han restoration as the only way to secure their own positions.

Confucian historians have traditionally looked upon Guangwu's reign as, if not a golden age at least as a brass age. The state once more managed to contain the Xiongnu, perhaps in part because China's generation of weakness at home under Wang Mang had also deprived the Xiongnu rulers of an easy source of revenues. Wang Mang had made ambitious plans to go on the offensive in the north, but was distracted by his growing do-

mestic troubles and never did anything so grandiose in practice. However, Guangwu was no more capable than Wang Mang of launching a successful offensive against them.

This was at best a frayed-sleeve, run down at the edges kind of restoration, forced by poverty into a kind of bargain-basement version of Emperor Wen's frugality.

It turned out the new court could not go back to the old capital near Xi'an because it could not afford to rebuild the palaces ruined during the final siege of Wang Mang's regime. They had to move east to the relatively intact secondary capital, Loyang.

And of course to the Confucians this shift ran up a red flag: Han was following the path taken by Zhou in its decline. This was a restoration of a dynasty still losing its grip on Heaven's Mandate. Like Eastern Zhou, Eastern Han could only reestablish itself in Loyang, which was too close to the local potentates of the center and east to maintain the primeval glory and vigor of the central authority of the preceding epoch.

Even at the time, the Confucians noticed that the capital at Loyang was within convenient commuting distance of the bases of the powerful aristocratic families that had in the course of Western Han established large land holdings in the middle reaches of the Yellow River valley. The heads of these clans found it more convenient to commute to a court at Loyang from their ancestral estates to keep up their meritocratic connections. This allowed them to turn even more fully than before into an aristocracy. (Never mind that these local potentates while genuine landlords, were neither vassals nor ex-vassals. Han Confucian and 20th century Chinese Marxist historical categories had no other categories into which to place them.)

Latter Han (*Hou Han* 後漢, the alternate name for Eastern Han) had other reasons for moving its capital to the east. It was not tough enough to mobilize its resources as close to the threatened frontiers as Former Han could do in Xi'an. We see here for the second time in Chinese history (but by no means the last time) the characteristic tendency for weak dynasties to shift east and/or south so as to put as large a buffer of north Chinese territory as possible between themselves and the marauding peoples of the northern periphery.

2. Eastern/Latter Han's Long Decline

a. The landed aristocracy

The central authority was now sufficiently weak so that we can discern within a generation of Guangwu's death, i.e. by the third

quarter of the 1st century AD, the first hints of usurpation of independence from the center by the regional potentates of the Yellow River valley, of the lower Yangzi, and of the Sichuan plateau that would by the early 3rd century AD crystallize out as the Three Kingdoms.

However, the great regional aristocrats did not have it all their own way, even though they were stronger than they had been during Western Han times. Their power was, after all, just a continuation of the trend we saw during Western Han of meritocrats turning into landed aristocrats and leaching power away from the court. It was just that there was more of this going on during Eastern Han. The other local centers of power were probably no weaker than before in absolute terms. They were just weaker relative to the stronger regions.

The central authority of Eastern Han wasn't nearly as bad off as the Confucian historians sometimes make it out to have been. However, ever since the coming of Buddhism, at least, Confucian historians have bemoaned loss of power by the Eastern Han monarchs as making possible the growth of this alien religion.

One of the ways they illustrate this alleged Eastern Han debility is by noting that gold disappears from Eastern Han life. In fact, modern archaeology has confirmed this disappearance. Fewer gold objects have turned up in Eastern Han tombs than in Western Han tombs. The lists of imperial gifts to worthy people at court and outside of court frequently include gold during Western Han, and mostly do not include gold during Eastern Han times. The first impulse by Chinese scholars even of modern times has been to agree with the old Confucian accusation and suggest that the gold was either leaking out via trade and bribes to beyond the northern frontiers or was already being tied up as the gilding on statues of Buddha in temples and monasteries.

However, as Peng Xinwei¹ shows, very valuable gifts continued to be made by the court to the courtiers. It is just that they were not made in gold, but rather in silk. Peng suggests that the terms of trade—i.e. the exchange price of gold for other objects—in China vis à vis Central Asia and Western Asia was tending to suck gold from both ends of Eurasia toward the center.

The archeologists do indeed find increasing amounts of gold in Central Asian graves from late ancient times on, and the Roman historians also report a drain of gold to the east. So if the gold was going to Central Asia, it may not have been a sign of either

¹ *A Monetary History of China* (Bellingham, 1994), chapter 2.2.

political or economic weakness. The Chinese may simply have wanted to exchange this gold for Western and Central Asian products, including silver, which they valued more relative to gold than did Central or West Eurasians.

b. Rise of the eunuchs

The Eastern Han rulers did not just remain rich. They also retained sources of countervailing power that they could for some time continue to use to partly neutralize the regional power of the aristocrats. They could still (albeit more carefully than before) turn to the consort families, just as they had during the 1st century BC. They did so increasingly again during the 1st century AD.

Unfortunately, however, the trend toward power aggrandizement by the bosses of the consort families—the uncles and nephews of reigning empresses or dowager empresses—continued. So by the end of the 1st century AD the emperors no longer saw much profit in playing the old game of marriage politics, using weaker families as consorts to counter the power of strong, regionally based aristocratic families. The aristocratized meritocrats were becoming far too strong for comfort. Typically, an emperor was getting bullied by both consort clans at court *and* by still greater families out in the provinces.

What else could they do? The emperors could do more of something already being done to a significant degree by Emperor Yuan's time in the middle of the 1st century BC, but which was obscured by the rise of Wang Mang. This was to turn to the eunuchs.

Use of eunuchs (*huangguan* 宦官; the etymology being suggested by the construction of *huan*: a servile official under a roof) was not unique to China. It was also common from ancient times in the Middle East. There was a kind of “eunuch zone” stretching east from Mesopotamia to the western shore of the East China Sea.

Eunuch territory stopped short of Japan for reasons nobody has altogether satisfactorily explained. The Japanese claim that it was because they have always hated to disfigure themselves, but the Japanese once went in for whole-body tattooing, and there is an even older Chinese Confucian taboo against self-mutilation, so that one might imagine the Chinese would not have resorted to using eunuchs either. But of course they did.²

The Chinese courts got around that self-

mutilation taboo by recruiting eunuchs from the ranks of prisoners, foreigners and lower class people. Punishment by castration was a conspicuously humiliating way to declass a criminal in a Confucian society, since it all too literally cut him off from potential descendants, and hence from whatever actual ancestors he could lay claim to.

In any event, eunuchs begin to be mentioned frequently in Warring States sources. We don't know how much earlier they were used in China,³ but as soon as we start to get detailed accounts of the court politics of the great feudal principalities in Warring States chronicle histories, eunuchs enter the narratives. For example, we saw the eunuch Zhao Gao playing a significant role in the court politics of Qin during the reign of First Emperor.

c. The eunuchs' new political roles

From the late 1st century BC, the role of eunuchs began to become institutionalized. By their unique qualities, eunuchs can perform two functions: First, they are the only men, or ex-men, who can stay behind in the Forbidden City when the sun goes down. Second, they are also potentially the emperors' most intimate pals, since they are *his* only male companions once the sun goes down.

Because of these connections, eunuchs are also the people most likely to be sent shopping for the ladies of the court and by logical extension, ultimately for the court in general. They came to handle the privy purse—the emperor's own budget—which during this early phase of the evolution of the imperial system, comprised virtually all of the budget. A formally separate budget for the outer court of meritocrats did not yet exist.

Control of this privy purse was one of the throne's main sources of power. The meritocrats had to repeatedly come and beg for money from the throne to run their bureaus. That chief fiscal device for the “One/Lone Man” keeping control over the many ministers was in practice increasingly under the actual control of the eunuchs. They were more often than not the ones who actually spent the funds from the privy purse rather than the men of the outer court who had to take what the eunuchs bought for them.

For example, it was in Han times that the eunuchs began to be linked to several new techniques useful to government. The most important new invention suitable for government use during Han times was not carbon paper. That was a much later Western invention which benefited bureaucrats. The Han

Chinese invented the prerequisite for carbon paper. They invented paper in the first place.

They did so sometime during late Warring States times, though the invention has long been attributed to an early 2nd century AD eunuch, Cai Lun 蔡倫.

The paper attributed to Cai Lun was a kind of cheap silk felt, silk being the favored medium for bearing imperial writing. It was originally made out of broken silk cocoons, which were as a consequence no longer suitable for unwinding, spinning into thread and weaving. Instead, the broken cocoons were boiled in appropriate chemicals to form a kind of silk pulp, and a mat was lifted up through the pulp, picking up a thin layer of tangled fibers. These dried into a kind of silk felt, analogous to the wool felt that the pastoral-nomads used to cover their portable houses.

This was a much thinner felt because it was made of silk rather than wool fibers. It was also a lot cheaper for distinguished people to write things onto, and it was a lot less bulky than writing on the somewhat cheaper and much less dignified writing medium of bamboo slats, which amounted to a small picket fence made up of bamboo slats bound together by cords running through top and bottom, with no more than a few lines of text per slat. (That is one reason why the Chinese write in columns. The most common form of writing was on these vertically arranged slats.)

There is archeological evidence that paper was in use by the government for several centuries before Cai Lun's time at least for wrapping objects, and was made out of hemp fiber. Cai Lun or some other eunuch may have added silk fibers to the hemp (the gunk in which vegetable fibers are embedded is apparently necessary to keep the paper from falling apart) and used the resulting paper for official records. If Cai Lun did not do the original R&D work on this improved paper, he may have been involved in the first large-scale production of the new material under palace auspices. Even this would give the eunuchs a significant role in one of the most important inventions in the history of civilization.

Since the eunuchs played an important role in the political economy of the state, and held a privileged position within the inner court, they could also play for their imperial masters the role of countervailers to both the consort clans and great regional families.

d. Unprincipled anti-eunuch factions

Two sorts of people had their teeth set on edge by the rise of the eunuchs. One was the consort clan heads who were being pushed aside by them. The other group comprised the men of merit at court, particularly the mem-

² Jennifer Jay has recently suggested that the Japanese court did not need eunuchs since their service functions were carried out by the court ladies who were themselves of relatively high rank (or were the servant-companions of high ranking females) and sexually available to most of the males at court, given the uxorial marriage patterns of ancient Japanese society.

³ It is possible that the ideograph for eunuch was used in late Shang divination texts.

bers of the Confucian University. The university had swelled in numbers under Wang Mang's sponsorship, and even Emperor Guangwu did not reduce its enrollment despite his fiscal woes. He kept the university's men of merit all on salary at the center, both professors and students, lest they go off into the wilderness to make even worse mischief for him.

Why the resentment of eunuchs by meritocrats? After all, a eunuch is a kind of physiologically determined meritocrat. His template of merit—what he is best used for initially—is determined by the horrid physical operation that he's been put through. Of all men of merit, he is the one most likely to be loyal to the throne because by physical impediment he has been made useless for any other purpose than being a servant of the throne.

Perhaps that was it: Why should a eunuch make common cause with a meritocrat? The completeness of their fit to the needs of the throne may make the eunuchs physiologically predestined enemies of the other meritocrats.

(In fact, however, eunuchs sometimes became family men. If they were Chinese, they could favor their brothers' or sisters' children. Sometimes they could adopt children, perhaps a nephew or cousin. The statesman-general Cao Cao, who overthrew Latter Han, came from such a family. Even this, however, was considered a loathsome practice by purist Confucian meritocrats, much as the stricter sort of Christians nowadays disapprove of adoption of children by homosexuals.)

The meritocrats and the consorts formed an alliance in the early 2nd century against their common enemies, the eunuchs.

The result was a standoff. In the course of the 2nd century the two factional clusters—meritocrats-consort clans vs eunuchs and their allies—proved to be too evenly matched for either to become or remain dominant. But such a situation was inherently unstable. Before long, well-placed outsiders could overthrow the resulting precarious balance of power.

In particular, by the third quarter of the 2nd century, a military man and something of a lunatic named Dong Zhuo 董卓 usurped power from both sides. Once he determined on rebellion, Dong moved quickly into the capital area, took it over, ran the money supply into the ground (supposedly making a coin so small it would float) and thereby drove all the good money out of the Loyang capital region, carried away from the marketplaces in the moneybags of the merchants and artisans.

This emptying of the capital completed the undermining of the central authority. In effect Dong could not maintain himself

within the ruin he himself had made. He left the capital, and was eventually run to ground by the private armies of the great regional clans of the old fulcrum subzone surrounding Loyang.

The vacuum Dong Zhuo left behind was quickly filled by a fellow who was a saner version of the same sort of thing, but with a new wrinkle. The new man managed to combine military power with a position at court linked to the eunuch faction.

This was Cao Cao 曹操, who was the grandson of a eunuch through adoption. As the eunuchs became more politically important, they realized that to fit in even as pure meritocrats they needed to have families, and so adopted children. Inevitably these children would be tempted to play roles in the factional politics of the capital.

In the vacuum left by Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao easily usurped power in Loyang, something that would not have been possible before that power vacuum had been created.

After his premature death, Cao's son set up a new dynasty, the Wei Dynasty, which at least managed to control the region surrounding Loyang (hence its adoption of the name of the old Zhou period state centered in that region).

The lower Yangzi was soon under an analogously created and named state of Wu, and Sichuan moved under a state of Shu (also called Shu-Han because its royal house was surnamed Liu, and claimed to be a branch of the old Han imperial line). The Lius were, however, gone from Loyang, and so by the 220s AD the Han Dynasty had disappeared.

Han power was not just replaced by regional states. There were a number of Daoist rebellions that coincided with Dong Zhuo's and Cao Cao's usurpations. The Yellow Turbans in the southwest, the Three Pecks of Rice Band, the Pope Zhang Rebellion in the southeast were the names of the most conspicuously successful of them.

We do not know much about any of these rebellions, except that they wanted to employ militant revolutionary methods to establish the ideals of the old Agrarian Daoists of Warring States times. They wanted to conquer land within which to set up agrarian communes, all of whose inmates would be equal and would together constitute a literal Heavenly Kingdom (Tianguo 天國) on Earth.

Given the fragmentation of the secular authority, and the bloody-minded, strong, independent organization of these sectarians, it was not possible in the short run for the rulers to co-opt them the way Liu Xiu had co-opted their predecessors two centuries before.

These utopian arrangements of the Daoist rebels were justified by an appeal to a Heaven which was an anthropomorphized deity hybrid between Huang Di or Yellow

Emperor and Lao Zi, sometimes referred to as Huang-Lao 黃老.

Of course this tells the alert student of Eric Voegelin's political theory that the Daoists were bringing their Heaven down to Earth, and re-presenting this utopianized Earth to Heaven rather than the other way around.

3. Fading of the Old Heaven

The victories of Dong Zhuo, Cao Cao and the Daoist sectarians show that the old Heavens of the Confucians and the philosophical Daoists were no longer available for the ruling class to use to co-opt either their regional counterparts or the rural and small town masses of the people. Neither Dong Zhuo nor Cao Cao could unify All Under Heaven.

Even the version of the Daoist Heaven capable of mobilizing masses for these agrarian rebellions was itself somewhat too Earthly. It was no longer linked to the simple ancient fertility cult religion of the south, but instead to a very complex re-presentation of Earth up to a Heavenly level so alien to the Confucian tradition as to be incapable of winning the allegiance of the Han ruling class.

Actually, however, we know very little about these Daoist beliefs. The fragmentary accounts that come down to us are, unfortunately, not from these Daoists themselves but from their severest critics and enemies, the ruling class men of the late Han and Three Kingdoms who put them down.

It is probably significant that these rebellions showed up in most concentrated form in the southwest and southeast, the old Chu territory and its adjuncts.

This was the place where Daoism as an ancient religious tradition seems to have originated. It had always remained in practice there even during the Han Dynasty, and even among the local rulers. Evidence of this comes from a set of Western Han tombs in the heart of the old Chu territory (near modern Changsha). The furnishings of these tombs seem to retain many of the characteristics of the old Chu religion. The dead in these tombs were still depicted during Western Han on silk paintings draped atop their coffins as riding dragons to Heaven.

One may easily imagine disgruntled descendants of these people leading one or another of the three and a half century later Daoist rebellions. Nor is it difficult to see these rebellions as being directed as much against the old Zhou Heaven as the Han Dy-

nasty's re-presentation of that Heaven.

Conversely, however, even as it crumbled, the upholders of the Zhou Heaven were capable of containing and then uprooting the Earthly reincarnation of the old Chu Heaven.

In short, by the time of the fall of Han, something more drastic was happening than when Western Han fell or even than when Qin was conquering the other Warring States, or than when Qin itself was going to pieces. Both of the old Heavens of the Chinese first stage of high civilization were falling and not just a particular old political order.

In retrospect, this fall would seem to have begun to happen right from the beginning of the imperial era. The inability of First Emperor to combine the non-Zhou vision of Heaven that went with the title *huangdi* with the Zhou vision of Heaven that went with the appellation *Tian Zi* may have been its first symptom. All the Han rulers could do was paper over that gap. They never integrated the two titles either. The philosopher Dong Zhongshu and then his 1st century BC epigoni were not able to join the two on soft Confucian terms. Wang Mang and his archaizing soft Confucians turning themselves into hard Confucians also failed to co-opt the southern Heaven, and thereby completed the discrediting of the Confucian tradition.

It is significant that all the most interesting Confucians of the first two centuries AD are always asterisked by the intellectual historians as "skeptical" Confucians, or as Confucians who did alarmingly Daoist sorts of things with the *Book of Changes*. In other words, they were fellow traveling with Daoism, and thereby completing the discrediting of the Confucian tradition without really establishing a viable Daoist or hybrid tradition to put in its place. Orthodox Confucians remained numerous, but their writings tend to be relegated to the footnotes of articles and books dealing with the mainstream intellectual history of Eastern Han and the several centuries following its fall.

The Daoist magi peddling immortality at court and lesser nostrums in the countryside turned nasty and cynical themselves in the course of the 2nd century AD. Cao Cao is a good example of their influence at the center.

By no stretch of the imagination can Cao Cao be considered a Confucian. He practiced Daoist magical tricks as political expedients and used hard Daoist philosophy to guide his behavior as a courtier.

He was also a shrewd interpreter of the practical techniques aspects of Legalist teachings. For example, he edited the two military classics of early and middle Warring States times into the combined *Sun Wu Bingfa* text that is still extant.

A decade ago copies of both of the two sources Cao Cao used were excavated from a

Western Han general's tomb, and they demonstrate that Cao Cao edited out from the earlier of the two what he must have considered the superstitious parts and combined the remainder with the most secularly rational parts of the second. That is congruent with the common characterization of him as a skeptical Daoist who would not use the parts of a book a rational but believing Daoist would have accepted back in the 5th century BC.

By the latter years of the Latter Han there began to be spread into sources linked to the ruling class at least rumors of Buddhism. The earliest are some stories attributed to Emperor Yuan's time, near the end of the 1st century BC, about people bringing Buddhist objects to court and no one knowing what to do with them. The first Daoist sectarian rebels who arose in the lee of Wang Mang's reign are sometimes associated with the independent sectarianism of Buddhism. One of the factors making these Daoists rebels so militant might, however, have been their swallowing of Mohist ideas about the legitimacy of defensive war and of militantly independently instituted styles of organization.

No doubt a few merchants, both Chinese and foreign, had by then also carried Buddhist images and practices into China, but these had apparently remained encapsulated within the mercantile class and their servants and remained isolated both from the Chinese population at large and from the ruling class.

In the course of the age immediately following Han's fall there appeared new carriers of Buddhism: people from the northern periphery some of whom had turned Buddhist back where they came from and then carried Buddhism south across the Great Wall into China proper as the faith of conquerors who had come to stay, and not just to raid. It is from that point on that, through interaction with these conquerors, that at least those of the native Chinese ruling class who did not run away from the northern conquerors to settle the south began to display signs of allegiance to the Buddhist vision of Heaven.

Though in his characteristically weird fashion Wang Mang had anticipated with his archaizing Confucianism and his purely fiat money some of the political concepts and economic institutions of the Buddhist age which commenced a third of a millennium after his time, neither he nor his contemporaries could possibly have imagined what was actually to happen once Han had fallen once and for all. Such is the unpredictable nature of history.

Suggested Further Reading:

Dubs, Homer H. (tr.). *The History of the*

Former Han Dynasty, Vol. 3. Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1955.

Sargent, Clyde Bailey (tr.). *Wang Mang: A Translation of the Official Account of His Rise to Power as Given in the History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1977/1947. May usefully be compared to Dubs' superior translation of the *Basic Annals of Wang Mang* in the *Former Han History*.

Duyvendak, J. J. L. Review of C. B. Sargent's *Wang Mang, T'oung Pao*, XL (1950), 216-27.

Bielenstein, Hans. "The Restoration of the Han Dynasty. . ." *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, XXVI (1954), 1-209.

Wiens, Harold J. *Han Chinese Expansion in South China*. Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1967.