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Cover calligraphy	Yan Zhenqing 顏眞卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman
Cover illustration	"Seeing the apparel, but not the person." Cartoon by Liu Bai 劉白, *Pan-chiao man-hua* [Five-cents comics], vol.6, no.1 (1932), p.5

THE THREE KINGDOMS AND WESTERN JIN: A HISTORY OF CHINA IN THE THIRD CENTURY AD ~ II

史 *Rafe de Crespigny*

3. THE EMPIRE OF WESTERN JIN (265–317)*

The Unification of China (265–280)

When Sima Yan 司馬炎 received the abdication of Cao Huan 曹奐 and proclaimed his own empire of Jin 晉, the formal ceremony was no more than the culmination of a process by which his family had seized control of the affairs of the state of Wei 魏.[1] Sima Yan's accession followed closely upon the triumphant conquest of Shu-Han 蜀漢,[2] while the court of Wu 吳 was in turmoil and faced rebellion in the far south.[3] With apparently overwhelming strength, and the energy of a new regime, there was reason to expect that the power of Jin would be swiftly turned against the south of the Yangzi and the unification of the Chinese world would soon be completed. In fact, however, Sima Yan and his advisers were uncertain of their position, and they were reluctant to embark upon another great campaign.

The policies and structure of Jin reflected the origins of the Sima family power and the convictions with which they had seized it. The Sima had obtained support because they were seen as the representatives of the great clans against the Cao family, and it is fair to assume that they believed their position was correct and honourable. Though the political opponents of the imperial government of Wei had pursued their own interests, they identified those interests with a true morality, and they regarded themselves as men of traditional 'Confucian' virtue, contending with an authoritarian centralism identified with 'Legalist' principles. In this respect one may discern a renewal of the debate, identified by Loewe for the Han period, between 'Reformist'

*This work has been prepared as a chapter for the second volume of *The Cambridge history of China*. I present it here in preliminary form because I believe there is room for a general survey of the third century, which saw the transition from a long-unified empire to a comparable period of disunity and conflict, and because I know that I shall benefit from the comments and criticisms of others. I emphasize that the piece is designed as a discussion of events. I refer occasionally to matters of literature and philosophy, but there are other scholars expert in those fields, and I have sought only to provide a historical background to their analysis.

The work appears in two sections: the first, "The Three Kingdoms and Western Jin, I" [3K&WJ I], which appeared in *East Asian History* 1, dealt with the foundations of the Three Kingdoms and the rival empires. This second section is concerned with Western Jin. In preparing it, I have been greatly assisted by my colleague Dr K.H.J. Gardiner, and I am extremely grateful for the advice and guidance he has given me.

'Modernist' approaches to imperial government,[4] and the policies of the Sima reflected a real concern for a structure of government and society which would give proper respect to men of quality.

So the Sima, unlike their imperial predecessors the Liu 劉 of Han and the Cao of Wei, were committed to a position as chief amongst other noble clans, and by both politics and philosophy they were reluctant to claim the full authority of the imperial throne.

On the other hand, it was still necessary to run a government, and Sima Yi 司馬懿, Sima Shi 司馬師, Sima Zhao 司馬昭,[5] and Sima Yan had, each in turn, shown a capacity for firm action. Moreover, in contrast to the policies of Han and Wei, since the rulers of Jin regarded the state as an extension of their family, they had no hesitation in relying upon their brothers and cousins. The day after he took the imperial title, Sima Yan enfeoffed twenty-seven of his relatives as princes,[6] and these princes were maintained in positions of power. Two of the eight senior ministers were members of the imperial clan, several princes served as Area Commanders and provincial Inspectors, with substantial local authority,[7] and all were given responsibility for the administration of their fiefs.[8] The Wei dynasty had fallen into alien hands because its emperors lacked the support of their own relatives, but the Sima had gained their position through appointments granted within the family, and the Jin dynasty would not be so defenceless.

At the same time, however, if the Sima were prepared to rely so heavily upon relationship and personal loyalty, it was difficult for the emperor to enforce the authority which had been claimed by earlier rulers. The Han dynasty, moreover, had developed its legitimacy over centuries, and the Wei had acquired their power through conquest, but although Sima Yi and his relatives had played a notable role in the military affairs of the state, their main route to the throne had been through political intrigue and coups d'état. As a result, the power of the Jin government was restricted, and for some years there remained a sense of uncertainty regarding its competence and its right to rule.

Sima Yan evidently felt he could not afford to risk an immediate attack on Wu, for the consequences of a setback or defeat could have been disastrous for his prestige and even for his new regime. Though Jin now controlled the Sichuan basin, the years of bitter conflict against Shu-Han, and the hostility that remained among the defeated enemy, meant the resources of that region could hardly be mobilized quickly, and the strategic defenses of Wu along the Yangzi appeared secure.

There was trouble, moreover, with the non-Chinese people of the frontier, particularly in the north-west between the Wei river and the Ordos. Years earlier, when the Wei general Deng Ai 鄧艾 was engaged in that region, he had forced the surrender of a group of Xianbi 鮮卑 and brought them into the upper Wei.[9] By the late 260s, however, under the leadership

[*] The standard Chinese history of this period is *Jin shu* 晉書 (*JS*), 130 chapters (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), which was compiled, on the basis of a number of earlier works, by a committee of scholars headed by Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (578–648) under the auspices of the Tang Emperor Taizong 唐太宗. The work includes imperial annals, treatises, individual biographies, and parallel annals (*zaiji* 雜記) of rival non-Chinese states. On the historiography of *JS*, see "Notes on the economic history of the Chin dynasty," in Yang Lien-sheng, *Studies in Chinese institutional history* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp.119–97 [first published in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 9 (1952), pp.107–85] at 119–23, and K.H.J. Gardiner, "Standard histories, Han to Sui," in *Essays on the sources for Chinese history*, ed. Donald D. Leslie, Colin Mackerras, and Wang Gungwu (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), pp.42–52, at 45–6.

Information on earlier history is found in the *Sanguo zhi (SGZ)* of Chen Shou (233–297), with commentary (PC) compiled by Pei Songzhi (396–446). Chapters 79-89 of the *Zizhi tongjian (ZZTJ)* of Sima Guang (1019–86) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1956) present the history of the Western Jin period in chronicle form. Unfortunately, however, there is no substantial translation of this part of *ZZTJ*, nor of its source texts.

[1] The biography and annals of Sima Yan (236–290), posthumously honoured as Emperor Wu 武 of Jin, are in *JS* 2. The annals/biography of Cao Huan, last ruler of Wei, are in *SGZ* 4/Wei 4. The abdication is discussed in 3K&WJ I, p.35.

[2] The conquest of Shu-Han is discussed in 3K&WJ I, p.23.

[3] On the intrigues which surrounded the accession of Sun Hao 孫皓 to the throne of Wu in 264, see 3K&WJ I, p.17. On the rebellion in the region of present-day Vietnam, which broke out in 263 and was put down in 271, see, for example, *SGZ* 48/Wu 3, 1161 and 1168.

[4] See Michael Loewe, *Crisis and conflict in Han China* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp.11–13, and "The Former Han dynasty," in *The Cambridge history of China, vol.1: The Ch'in and Han Empires 221BC–AD 220* [*CC* 1], ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

of the chieftain Jifu Shujineng 禿髮樹機能, these immigrants were causing trouble. A new province, Qin 秦, was established with a special command in 269, but in the following year a local Chinese army was destroyed, and another shared its fate in 271. In response to this sign of weakness the Xiongnu 匈奴 leader Liu Meng 劉猛 rebelled and raided the territory further north, and although he was killed in 272 the unrest continued. Eventually, in 279, when Jifu Shujineng was killed in battle, the remainder of the Xianbi surrendered and the region was restored once again to some form of control.[10]

By this time, the state of Jin was sufficiently well established for a serious attack against the south. There had been no substantial breakthrough on the line of the Yangzi, but the government of Wu was consistently on the defensive, and Sun Hao was losing both support and confidence. There was still uncertainty among the advisers of Sima Yan, but the forward policy had long been advocated by the senior general Yang Hu 楊祜, commander on the Han River, and the project was taken up by his successor Du Yu 杜預 and the minister Zhang Hua 張華.[11]

The essence of the plan was to outflank the position of Wu by an invasion from Sichuan. While Sima Zhou commanded a direct attack southwards,[12] Wang Jun 王渾, Inspector of Yi 益 province, prepared a great fleet and sailed through the Yangzi Gorges, breaking the river barriers and opening the way for the regular troops of Jin to advance down the Han and across the Huai.[13] The campaign began in the spring of 280, and by the third month the combined forces of the invaders were at the walls of Jianye 建業. On 1 May 280, deserted by his last troops, Sun Hao came to the camp of Wang Jun and handed over his seals and insignia to Sima Zhou.

Figure 1

Preparing the ground with a harrow: painting on brick from a third-century tomb at Jiayuguan, north-west China

/1986), pp.103–222 at 104–5, also "The structure and practice of government," *CC* I, pp.463–90 at.488–9.

[5] The biography of Sima Yi (retrospectively entitled Emperor Xuan 宣 of Jin) is in *JS* 1, and that of his eldest son Sima Shi (Emperor Jing 景) is in *JS* 2. The biography of Sima Zhao (Emperor Wen 文), brother of Sima Shi and father of Sima Yan, is in *JS* 2. The rise of the Sima family is discussed in 3K&WJ I, pp.32–5.

[6] *JS* 3, 52; *ZZTJ* 79, 2492–3; Achilles Fang, *The Chronicle of the Three Kingdoms*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952 and 1965) [Fang, *Chronicle*, 1, 2] 2: 506, 516. The term 'prince' here renders the Chinese *wang* 王, indicating the highest rank of a subordinate nobility. Unlike Han and Wei, which established kings/princes *(wang)*, marquises *(hou* 侯*)*, and then several lower orders of nobility, Jin introduced a five-rank system based upon the system attributed to the ancient Zhou dynasty: the change may be interpreted as another sign of their intention to return to the virtues of the ancients, before the centuries of imperial authority.

[7] On Area Commanders and other regional military posts, see p.152 below. For members of the Sima clan holding senior local and military positions, see, for example, Wan Sitong, comp., *Wei fangzhen nianbiao*, in *Ershiwu shi bubian [ESWSBB]*, 2 vols (Shanghai, Kaiming Shudian, 1936–37/1957), 2: 2617–23, and the two compilations entitled *Jin fangzhen nianbiao* by Wan Sitong, in *ESWSBB* 3: 3385–97, and by Wu Tingxie in ibid., pp.3415–51.

Sima Zhou 司馬伷 (227–283), for example, son of Sima Yi and half-uncle of the new emperor, had been appointed General and Inspector supervising all military affairs in Yan 兗 province in 263; in 266 he was enfeoffed as a prince, but continued in office, and was later transferred to other senior military and administrative positions (see his biography in *JS* 38, at 1121, and n.11 below). Sima Liang 司馬亮 (d.291), brother of Sima Zhou, was Area Commander-in-Chief of Yong 雍 and Liang 涼 provinces in the north-west. He too was enfeoffed in 266, but remained in office and went on to occupy further high positions of state (see his biography in *JS* 59, at 1591).

Settlement of the Empire (280–290)

In 264, at the time of the conquest of Shu-Han, a decree of the government of Wei under the control of Sima Zhao abolished the separate administration of government agricultural garrisons *(tuntian* 屯田*)* "in order to equalize the corvée services." The officials in charge were transferred to the regular hierarchy of commanderies and counties, and the court of Jin confirmed the policy two years later.[14]

This pair of edicts did not eliminate all agricultural garrisons,[15] but it did represent a reduction in central control over those substantial assets of labour and land, and the change reflects a weakening of the government's position against the powerful families to whom the Sima owed their accession to the throne. There is considerable debate on the manner in which the nature and the function of the garrisons had been subverted, whether by the encroachment of local gentry and officials who took the people and the land under their own control, or by the excessive demands made upon the colonists by competing local and central interests,[16] but there is no doubt that the centralising policies of the early state of Wei, expressed particularly through government access to the special resources of the garrisons, were now largely abandoned. Because of their contribution to military operations, the garrisons were maintained in form during the next few years, but they played only a limited role in the future economy of the state. After the conquest of Wu, when the major need for military expenditure and energy had passed, the system of agricultural garrisons was subsumed into the general land system of the empire.[17]

As on other occasions in Chinese history, the reunification of the empire left the victorious government with serious problems of disarmament and reconstruction. The situation had not been so urgent at the time of the conquest of Shu-Han, for there still remained the rival and powerful state of Wu, and surplus troops could be transferred to serve on that front. In 280, however, apart from the general defense of the north, there was no need for more than local garrisons, and there remained a great number of soldiers and their families, many of them maintained in service for generations, who should now be settled into productive work. There was room for resettlement along the old frontier with Wu, between the Huai River and the Yangzi and on the lower reaches of the Han, there were other regions which had not been fully occupied or exploited in the years of war, and abolition of the agricultural garrisons allowed a reassessment of their land.

In these cirumstances, the government of Jin established a system of land allocation *(ketian* 課田*)*, based upon the entitlement of each individual in the farming community. The basic unit was fifty *mou* 畝,[18] which was the amount allocated to a 'regular' male, aged between sixteen and sixty years. A 'secondary' male, aged between thirteen and fifteen or sixty-one and sixty-five, received half that amount, and a regular female received twenty *mou.*

[8] *JS* 38, 1121; *ZZTJ* 79, 2493; Fang, *Chronicle* 2, pp.506–7.

[9] The biography of Deng Ai (c.200–264) is in *SGZ* 28/Wei 28. On the disturbances among these non-Chinese people in the 270s, see *JS* 3, 58, and *ZZTJ* 79, 2509.

[10] *JS* 3, 70, and *ZZTJ* 80, 2554 and 2559.

[11] The biographies of Yang Hu (221–278) and of Du Yu (222–284) are in *JS* 34. The biography of Zhang Hua (232–300) is in *JS* 36; it is translated by Anna Straughair, *Chang Hua: a statesman-poet of the Western Chin dynasty* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1973).

[12] The biography of Sima Zhou (227–283), younger brother of Sima Zhao, is in *JS* 38. See also n.7 above.

[13] The biography of Wang Jun (206–285) is in *JS* 42. The description at 1208–10 of his attack against Wu, which included a pontoon raft more than six hundred feet square acting as a floating fortress, is discussed and translated by Joseph Needham, *Science and civilisation in China*, vol.4, no.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp.694–5. A general account of the campaign is in the annals of *JS* 3, 70–1, and in *ZZTJ*, 80-1, 2558–67. Besides Wang Jun's force, five armies were involved in the attack from the north, the total number of soldiers involved being said to have been 200,000.

[14] *SGZ* 4/Wei 4, 153; Fang, *Chronicle* 2, p.468; and *JS* 3, 55. The significance of these decrees is discussed by William Gordon Crowell, "Government land policies and systems in early imperial China" (PhD diss., Seattle: University of Washington, 1979), pp.165–8.

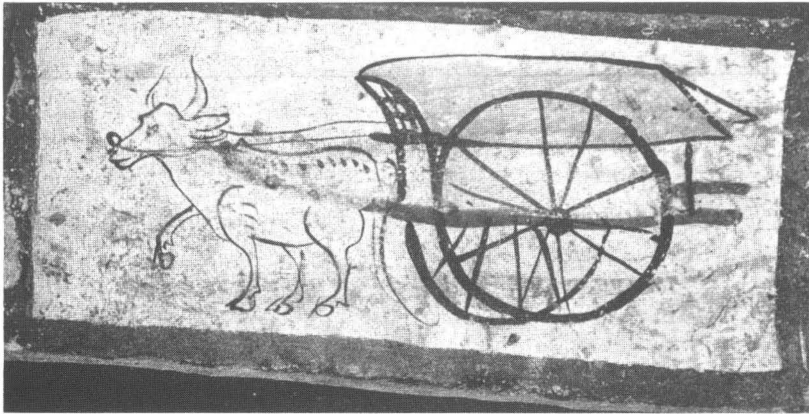
[15] There are references to agricultural garrisons and their separate military administration during the late 270s in *JS* 26, 787 and 789; Yang, "Economic history," pp.173, 175.

[16] See, for example, Crowell, "Government land policies," p.181, n.82, quoting Guang Li'an, Yuan Shixing, Tang Changru, and Zhang Weihua.

[17] *JS* 24, 731, the 'Treatise of Officials', says that there was a Bureau for Agricultural Garrisons 屯田部 among the six established within the Secretariat 尚書 at the beginning of Jin, and this office was presumably responsible for some overall supervision of the garrisons throughout the empire. After the conquest of Wu in 280, the name

Figure 2

Ox-cart: painting on brick from a third-century tomb at Jiayuguan, north-west China



Those older or younger received no allocation.[19] Though it is unlikely the system could have been maintained for long, it served as the formal basis for the resettlement and reconstruction of the countryside in the years after the unification of the empire.

As a corollary to the allocation of land, and reflecting a policy established by Cao Cao 曹操, founder of Wei, taxes were levied on each household: one which was headed by a regular male was required to pay three *pi* 匹 of silk and three *jin* 斤 of silk floss, while one which was headed by a female or secondary male paid half that amount.[20] In this regard, an allocation of tax against each household was markedly easier to administer than the Han system based upon land or a poll-tax, for it did not require such a detailed survey or census;[21] and the assessment in kind reflects a continuing decline in the use of coinage.

There had been currency and inflation problems throughout Later Han, but when the government of Dong Zhuo 董卓 replaced the traditional *wushu* 五銖 coinage with smaller units at the beginning of the civil war in the 190s, it brought a collapse of the money economy. Cao Cao and his son Cao Pi 曹丕 both attempted to restore the *wushu* coinage, but in 221 the government of Wei formally declared that grain and silk should be the official means of exchange. Though the *wushu* were later revived again, and were maintained in circulation by the government of Jin,[22] the official economy still relied upon commodity exchange.

One effect of the years of disturbance had been a decline in private commerce and a more limited pattern of trade than in the time of Han. The great landed estates, concerned primarily with their own self-sufficiency, concentrated their economic activity into small local areas, and numbers of people came to take service with them. In some cases, as we have seen, these

/of this bureau was changed to Bureau for Agriculture 屯田.

18 Under Jin, the area of a *mou* was about one-fifth of an English acre, so fifty *mou* would have been equivalent to some ten acres or four hectares.

19 The *ketian* system is described in *JS* 26, 790, translated and discussed by Yang, "Economic history," pp.179 and 135–40, and by Crowell, "Government land policies," pp. 199–203. I am impressed by, and accept, Crowell's argument that the expression *ketian* refers to an actual allocation of land rather than to the amount a person should cultivate or be taxed upon.

20 *JS* 26, 790; Yang, "Economic history," p.179. A *pi* was 40 *chi* 尺 (feet), in Jin times equivalent to some 9.5 metres or 10 1/2 yards by English measure. A *jin* was about 225 grams, or half a pound avoirdupois.

Cao Cao appears to have collected tax in the form of silk from an early period of his government (e.g. *SGZ* 12/Wei 12, 380, and *SGZ* 23/Wei 23, 668), and he applied a household levy (*hutiao* 戶調) of silk to the region of north China formerly held by the Yuan 袁 family after he had taken it over in the early years of the third century. Obviously, whether under Han, Wei or Jin, the actual commodity used for payment must have varied and been exchanged to meet official requirements.

21 On the tax system of Han, see Nishijima Sadao, "The economic and social history of Former Han," *CC* 1, pp.595–601.

22 *SGZ* 2, 78, *SGZ* 3, 92, with *JS* 26, 782 and 794–5; Yang, "Economic history," pp.159, 191–2. See also He Ziquan, "Early development of manorial economy in Wei and Tsin" [originally published in full form as "*Wei-Jin shiqi zhuangyuan jingji de chuxing*," in *Shihuo*.1.1 (1934): 6–10] in E-tu Zen Sun and John DeFrancis, *Chinese social history, translations of selected studies* (Washington D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1956), pp.137–41, at 140.

followers came voluntarily for protection, while others had been called up by officially-sponsored conscription, and then had their allegiance transferred gradually to their individual commanders;[23] and the same process took place as the government agricultural garrisons were broken up to the advantage of private interests. Despite official programmes for settlement, numbers of people failed to receive any allocation of land,[24] while others found the protection of a powerful magnate more attractive and secure than the risks of individual enterprise and the demands of taxation.[25] Throughout the countryside, land-owners were able to deal with their tenants and dependents through a system of barter and exchange of service, and it was difficult for any government agency to obtain information or to enforce their demands. Taxation and other levies were thus obtained by negotiation on the basis of quotas rather than by formal assessment of value and obligation.

In an attempt to control this expansion of great and their dependencies, the imperial administration promulgated a law of land registration (*zhantian* 占田). In theory, at least, the system provided that each individual should register his land with the government, paying tax on the amount involved, but receiving title in return. As an extension of this measure, the system sought to limit the size of land-holdings throughout the empire, proclaiming that each male was entitled to seventy *mou* and each female thirty. There appears, however, to have been no restriction according to age or family status, so children and old people could contribute to the legal entitlement of their family.[26]

It has been observed that under this system a husband and wife together would have an allowance of one hundred *mou*, the basic figure in the well-field system described by Mencius. Searching for reforms to solve the problems of their time, and observing the excessive land-holdings and the extending power of the great families, several writers of Later Han had proposed the restoration of this ideal, and Sima Lang 司馬朗 suggested the scheme to Cao Cao without success.[27] In real terms, given the interests and

[23] This process is well described by Yang Zhongyi, "Evolution of the status of dependents" [originally published in full form as "Buqu yange luekao," *Shihuo* 1.3 (1935): 97–107] in Sun and De Francis, *Chinese social history*, pp.142–56, at 144–5.

[24] See the report from the official Shu Xi 束晳 to the minister Zhang Hua in the late 290s: *JS* 51, 1431–2, cited by Crowell, "Government land policies," p.205.

[25] A similar change may be observed during the decline of the Roman empire. In Britain, for example, where the former pattern of economy had supported and encouraged widespread trade through market-towns, the last period of Roman rule saw a contraction of commerce, a marked decline in the prosperity and population of towns and cities, and the development of the villa as a localized centre of economic activity. One notable reason for this was the vulnerability of the towns to the ravages of armed enemies and, equally important, the demands of government taxation.

[26] The *zhantian* regulations appear as one sentence in the passage of *JS* 26, 790; Yang, "Economic history," p.179. The text is discussed by Yang at pp.132–40, and by Crowell, "Government land policies," pp.192–9. It has been a source of considerable debate among scholars, but I accept the interpretation of Yang as amended by Crowell.

[27] The well-field (*jingtian* 井田) system is described in the Book of Mencius 3A.3, translated by James Legge, *The Confucian classics*, 5 vols (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 2: 243–5, and dis-

Figure 3

Slaughtering a pig: painting on brick from a third-century tomb at Jiayuguan, north-west China (and consider the story told of Cao Cao in 190 AD: Sanguo yanyi *[Romance of the Three Kingdoms], chap.4)*

strength of the opposition, a policy of equal distribution had not been practicable in the past, and it was even less so now.

Unlike the *ketian*, which probably represented a real programme of allocation usefully carried out in some regions, the *zhantian* was no more than an attempt to establish the principle that each person was entitled to the registered possession of a certain amount of land, with any excess subject to ultimate control and possible confiscation. The system was not intended for immediate operation, but represented a policy which might be enforced at some later time.

Even this, however, was optimistic, for the government was compelled to accept the right of nobles and officials to hold land in addition to the regular allocation, and, most importantly, there was no way to control the numbers of client families who had attached themselves or had been taken into service by powerful clans. In partial recognition of the situation, the Jin allowed privileged and official families to 'protect' a limited number of retainers and tenants.[28] As with the registration of land, the government evidently hoped that if it gave formal recognition to the existence of these clients it would thereby establish some principle of authority, and the situation could be brought under control later. Considering the political support which the Sima family required from the great clans, however, and the fact that the officials administering the restrictions were themselves either members of such families or readily intimidated by their local power, there was never any great likelihood that the imperial government would be able to enforce its writ against the wishes and interests of its powerful subjects.

One can see signs of weakness in the records of population. The 'Treatise of Geography' in *Jin shu* presents only rounded and summary figures for the numbers of households in each administrative area, in no way comparable to the two Han histories, which give figures for both households and individuals. Moreover, where the Later Han figures, from about 140 AD, have a total population for the empire of 9.7 million households and almost 50 million individuals, the Jin figures of about 280 record only 2.5 million households and 16 million individuals, one-fifth of the Han numbers.[29]

Though the years of civil war had certainly taken their toll of the population in the heartland of China and brought a dramatic decline along the northern frontier, we have also observed the remarkable development of colonization in the area south of the Yangzi formerly controlled by Wu.[30] The population of China may have declined since the time of Later Han, but the loss was certainly not so great as the figures would indicate. Bielenstein has shown that the numbers of households given by *Jin shu* for each commandery represent a taxation list, not a true census.[31] They may indeed be best understood as a series of quotas, indicating the assessed value and obligation of each unit, with no more than an incidental

/cussed by Hsu Cho-yun, *Han agriculture: the formation of early Chinese agrarian economy (200 BC–AD 220)* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980), pp.9–10. On modern cartographical and topographical evidence for the existence of the system in pre-Qin times, see Frank Leeming, "Official landscapes in traditional China," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23 (1980): 153–204.

Late Han proponents of the well-field scheme included Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209): see Ch'en Ch'i-yün, *Hsün Yüeh and the mind of late Han China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp.92ff.; and Zhongchang Tong 仲長統 (180–*c*.220): see Etienne Balazs, "La crise sociale et la philosophie politique à la fin des Han," *T'oung Pao* 39 (1949): 83–131, 126 [translated as "Political philosophy and social crisis at the end of Han," in *Chinese civilization and bureaucracy: variations on a theme*, trans. H.M. Wright, ed. Arthur F. Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp.187–225], and Hsu, *Han agriculture*, p.213. The recommendation of Sima Lang, elder brother of Sima Yi, is recorded in his biography in *SGZ* 15/Wei 15, at 467–8.

28 *JS* 26, 790–1; Yang, "Economic history," 180–1.

29 *JS* 14–15. The total figures are given at *JS* 14, 415. Cf. the figures for Later Han from the 'Treatise of Administrative Geography' of the *Xu Han shu* of Sima Biao (240–306), presented in *Hou Han shu [HHS]* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1965), 113/23, 3533–4, with commentary by Liu Zhao (sixth century), discussed by Hans Bielenstein, "The census of China during the period 2-742 AD," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities [BMFEA]* 19 (1947), pp.125–63, at 125–8.

30 3K&WJ I, pp.19–20, and Map 3.

31 Bielenstein, "Census," pp.125–32, 153–5.

Bing province

LP	Luoping
SD	Shandong

Ji province

AP	Anping
BH	Bohai
BL	Boling
GY	Gaoyang
HJ	Hejian
JL	Julu
LL	Leling
PY	Pingyuan
QH	Qinghe
Z	Zhao
ZS	Zhongshan
ZW	Zhangwu

Liang 梁 *province*

GH	Guanghan

Liang 凉 *province*

Qin province

TS	Tianshui

Qing province

BH	Beihai
CG	Changguan
CY	Chengyuan
JN	Jinan
LA	Lean
QI	Qi

Si proince

GP	Guangping
TQ	Tunqiu
W	Wei
YP	Yangping

Xu province

DH	Donghai
DN	Donghuan
LY	Langye
PC	Pengcheng
XP	Xiapi

Yan province

CL	Chenliu
DP	Dongping
GP	Gaoping
JB	Jibei
JY	Jiyang
PY	Puyang
RC	Rencheng
TS	Taishan

Yi province

XD	Xindu

Yong province

BD	Beidi
XP	Xinping

You province

GN	Huangning
SG	Shanggu

Yu province

AF	Anfeng
Lg	Liang
LU	Lu
P	Pei
Q	Qiao
RN	Runan
RY	Ruyin
XC	Xiangcheng
YC	Yingchuan
YY	Yuyang

relationship to the real number of people in each area.[32] As to the numbers of individuals, we have seen how the records of the surrendered states of Shu-Han and Wu present far lower figures than those for the same area recorded by Later Han,[33] and the total given by *Jin shu* follows the same pattern. It must be assumed that these reported the people under the direct control of the administration for the purposes of corvée or conscription, while the remainder of the population contrived to avoid such levies, either by keeping at a physical distance from government agencies or, very frequently, by sheltering under the protection of great families. In practice, the governments of the rival states, and the empire of Jin which succeeded them, had only limited access to the resources which they nominally controlled. The problem, moreover, was not just one of administrative energy and competence, for the growth of economic and political power among the landed families, already established during Later Han, had accelerated in the years of turmoil, and there was now no meaningful machinery by which a government might restore the authority of the old empire.

[32] Analogous to this would be the value of a block of land as assessed by a modern government for tax or rating purposes: this formal and official value need have little to do with the price the property might fetch on the open market.

One must observe that the limited information available in the *JS* 'Treatise of Geography' does not wholly demonstrate the inadequacy of Jin, for the treatises were not given their final form until Tang, and there may have been other records which were lost in the intervening centuries. On the other hand, the impression of superficial administration is reinforced by all sources, and it seems clear that the government relied for its revenues on a general estimate of yield rather than any attempt at a detailed survey and assessment.

[33] 3K&WJ I, pp.18–20, 23.

Map 1

Provinces and commandery units of Western Jin c.280 AD
(abbreviations for some commandery units on the map are given opposite)

In these circumstances, unable to establish full control over the empire, the Jin were compelled to make use of their family connections. During the years of conflict, contending warlords and governments had roughly maintained the Han structure of local administration based upon provinces, commanderies and counties. Because of the threat of mutiny and separatism, Inspectors rather than Governors had been appointed, and there had been varying policies for, and some debate on, the granting of military responsibilities.[34] Based on a practice adopted during the civil wars and under Wei, then confirmed by Jin, a new pattern was developed whereby Inspectors were appointed primarily as civil officials,[35] while another hierarchy, that of Area Commanders, was appointed above them.

Classed in the second of the Nine Ranks, the same as ministers at court and generals of the army, Area Commanders possessed full military power within their territory, and their authority was dominant in the empire outside the capital.[36] Moreover, in a clear demonstration of faith in family loyalty, the government of Jin entrusted members of the imperial Sima family with a substantial number of these appointments, particularly along the northern frontier and in the North China plain.[37] By contrast, the competent official Zhang Hua was removed from his post in the north-eastern province of You because of suspicions about his loyalty.[38]

So the government of China, reunited under Sima Yan, was still weak and ineffective in comparison with Han. It did not succeed in establishing real control over its most powerful subjects, while on the other hand, as time passed, the generation of leaders who had given personal loyalty to Sima Yan and his predecessors during the years of their rise to power gradually died out. To maintain its position, the court relied upon members of the imperial clan, established as long-term rulers with military power over substantial territories across the empire. It was a policy which had often been urged by scholars of the Confucian tradition, but it had been consistently rejected by Qin, Han and Wei. The Sima family of Jin now put it to the test.

Empress Jia and the Eight Princes (290–306)

Sima Yan, Emperor Wu of Jin, died on 16 May 290 at the age of fifty-five, and he was succeeded by his thirty-year-old son Sima Zhong 司馬衷, later known as Emperor Hui 惠.[39]

Sima Zhong had been appointed Heir Apparent 太子 in 267, and in 272 he was married to the Lady Jia Nanfeng 賈南風, daughter of the minister Jia Chong 賈充, an old supporter of the Sima family who had played a leading role in the fighting against Cao Mao 曹髦 in 260.[40] Though there was a general anxiety, from accummulating evidence, that Sima Zhong was mentally disabled and unfit to rule, Sima Yan maintained him as his heir and accepted the alliance with the Jia family.

[34] On the change at the end of Han from Inspectors, who held primarily no more than reporting powers, to Governors (*mu* 牧; also rendered as 'Shepherds'), who were entitled to direct executive control over their provinces, see, for example, de Crespigny, "Inspection and surveillance officials under the two Han dynasties," in *State and law in East Asia*, ed. Dieter Eikemeier and Herbert Franke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), pp.67, and *Generals of the South* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1990), pp. 61, 116 n.53.

At the same time as he urged the adoption of the well-field system (see n.27 above), Sima Lang spoke favourably of the five-rank system of nobility attributed to the Zhou dynasty, and he particularly emphasized the advantage of giving substantial military responsibility to local government officials: *SGZ* 15/Wei 15, 467–8.

[35] As part of the general programme of disarmament after the conquest of Wu, an edict removed formal military responsibility from the Inspectors, though it is evident that they retained some capacity in times of emergency. See *ZZTJ* 81, 2575, transl. Anthony Bruce Fairbank, "Kingdom and province in the Western Chin: regional power and the Eight Kings insurrection." (MA diss., Seattle: University of Washington, 1986), p.85; and Yen Keng-wang, *History of the regional and local administration in China. Part II: The Wei, Tsin, Southern and Northern dynasties*, 2 vols (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1963), 1: 112, citing and discussing the *Jin shu* of Wang Yin.

[36] *JS* 24, 729, the 'Treatise of Officials', discussed by Yen, *Regional and local administration*, 1: 87–111, and Fairbank, "Kingdom and province," pp.75–104. During the years of active warfare, some officers were given responsibility as Area Commanders (*dudu* 都督) or Area Commanders-in-Chief (*da dudu* 大都督), Commanders (*du* 督) or Supervisors (*jian* 監) of military affairs (*junshi* 軍事) in one or more provinces, and these appointments could be held either in addition to a provincial inspectorate or as a separate command. Eventually, the position of Area Commander, with one form or another of special powers (*jie* 節), was established as a high substantive rank in the official hierarchy.

On this vital question, Sima Yan is said to have accepted the persuasions of his first empress, the Lady Yang Yan 楊艷,[41] but the decision was not unreasonable. As the Lady Yang observed, to discard the senior son, even when he was not the most suitable, would open debate on other candidates, and this could easily develop into a general struggle for power. Sima Zhong, moreover, now had a son of his own, Sima Yu 司馬遹, born of the Lady Xie 謝, one of Sima Yan's own concubines who had been sent to teach him the arts of the bed chamber. In 290, Sima Yu was thirteen, and he was a young man of outstanding quality.[42]

Before this, the Empress Yang Yan on her deathbed had recommended that her cousin Yang Zhi 楊芷 should succeed her,[43] and Yang Jun 楊駿, father of the Lady Yang Zhi, had acquired great influence with the Emperor.[44] In his own last illness, Sima Yan sought to establish an interim administration to guide the dynasty until Sima Yu could take substantive power. He had an edict prepared that his senior uncle Sima Liang 司馬亮, son of Sima Yi by a concubine, should become the regent and head of government jointly with Yang Jun,[45] and he sent three of his younger sons into the provinces as area commanders: Sima Wei 司馬瑋 was in Jing 荊 province, Sima Yun 司馬允 was in Yang 揚, and Sima Jian 司馬柬 was in the north-west.[46] Military control of the provinces was thus almost entirely in the hands of the Sima family: Sima Wei, Sima Yun and Sima Jian controlled the south of the Yangzi and the north-west, the northern part of the North China plain was held by Sima Lun 司馬倫, also a son of Sima Yi by a concubine,[47] and the territories south of the Yellow river were governed by Sima Lun's brother Sima Yong 司馬顒 and his nephew Sima Huang 司馬晃.[48]

In accepting two empresses from the Yang clan, Sima Yan had established at his court a powerful group of relatives by marriage, but he was also concerned about the ambitions of the Jia family.[49] He evidently believed, however, that the authority he had granted Sima Liang, together with the regional powers of the princes, would be sufficient to protect the position of the imperial house. In fact, his death brought immediate conflict.

It was the Yang family that took the initiative. With the support of his daughter the Empress, Yang Jun suppressed the edict granting regent's authority to Sima Liang, and after Sima Yan died he took that power for himself. In fear of Yang Jun, Sima Liang made no effective response to the challenge, but fled from the capital and took up the position he had held earlier, as Area Commander in Yu 豫 province, based upon Xuchang 許昌.[50] The Empress Jia, however, had no such inhibitions: on 23 April 291 she organized a coup, with palace guards under her own command, to destroy Yang Jun, his family and their supporters. The Empress-Dowager Yang was deposed, and Sima Liang and the senior official Wei Guan 衛瓘 were invited to take over the reins of government.[51]

Thus far, the Empress Jia could claim to have been acting in accordance with the wishes of her late father-in-law. The situation was confused, how-

/ Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of official titles in imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), renders *dudu* as 'Commander-in-chief'; Fairbank, "Kingdom and province," has 'Military Governor'.

[37] On the regional officers of Western Jin, see the compilations of Wan Sitong and Wu Tingxie cited in n.7 above. Based upon Wu Tingxie, Fairbank, "Kingdom and province," p.109, observes that during Western Jin all senior posts in the north-west were held by the Sima family, as were two-thirds of the appointments in You 幽, Ji 冀, Qing 青 and Xu 徐 provinces.

[38] *JS* 36, 1069; Straughair, *Chang Hua*, pp.31–37. It was suggested by his enemies that Zhang Hua might imitate the rebellion of Zhong Hui immediately after the conquest of Shu-Han (3K&WJ I, p.23.)

[39] The annals of Emperor Hui (259–306) are in *JS* 4. Sima Yan had twenty-six sons. The eldest died in infancy, and Sima Zhong was the second (*JS* 64, 1719).

[40] The biography of the Empress Jia (258–300) is in *JS* 31, and that of her father Jia Chong (d.282) is in *JS* 40. On the coup against Cao Mao, see 3K&WJ I, p.35.

[41] The biography of the Empress Yang Yan (238–274) is in *JS* 31.

[42] The biography of Sima Yu (277–300) is in *JS* 53, and that of the Lady Xie is in *JS* 31 at 968.

[43] The biography of the Lady Yang Zhi (254–291) is in *JS* 31.

[44] The biography of Yang Jun (d.291) is in *JS* 40.

[45] *JS* 3, 80–81, and *ZZTJ* 82, 2599; on Sima Liang (d.291) see also n.8 above.

[46] The biography of Sima Wei (271–291) is in *JS* 59, and those of Sima Yun (272–300) and Sima Jian (262–291) are in *JS* 64.

[47] The biography of Sima Lun (d.301) is in *JS* 59.

[48] The biography of Sima Yong (d.301) is in *JS* 38, and that of Sima Huang (d.296) is in *JS* 37.

[49] One cause of his concern was the Lady Jia herself, who had killed several people with her own hand, including some rival concubines when they were pregnant: *JS* 31, 964.

[50] *JS* 4, 89, and *ZZTJ* 82, 2600.

[51] *JS* 4, 90, and *ZZTJ* 82, 2604–09. The biography of Wei Guan (220–291) is in *JS* 36.

ever, by Sima Wei, who returned from his appointment in Jing province and sought a role in the politics of the capital. Intriguing against his elder kinsman Sima Liang, he obtained approval from the Empress to remove him and Wei Guan, and on 25 July 291, just three months after their appointment, the two men were assassinated. Almost immediately afterwards, on the advice of her minister Zhang Hua, the Empress Jia had Sima Wei arrested and executed on the charge of forging an imperial edict.

With this last twist of treachery the Empress Jia had gained full control of the capital, and for the next several years the highest positions at court were in the hands of her family and their supporters. For a time Sima Yong, recalled from the north-west, was given formal charge of the secretariat, but he had no real authority and in 296 he returned to his former territory. General administration was maintained by the veteran Zhang Hua and the youthful Pei Wei 裴頠,[52] while the empress' nephew Jia Mi 賈謐 held considerable influence at court and was a noted patron of leading men of letters.[53]

In many respects the period of Jia family dominance resembled the occasions in Han when consort families had acquired similar power over the government, and though the regime has been described as a usurpation, it was not incompetent. There were substantial problems on the frontiers, but they were coped with, and despite the military potential of their regional powers the Sima princes appear to have accepted the destruction of Sima Liang and Sima Wei, and the somewhat cavalier treatment of Sima Yong, without great concern and certainly without taking action. In fact, the struggles at the capital had little effect upon arrangements in the provinces provided that the imperial title remained in proper hands.

The situation, however, changed dramatically and fatally when the Empress decided to remove Sima Yu from his position as Heir Apparent. Sima Yu turned twenty in 297, and the time was approaching when he might seek authority of his own or become the centre of a dissident faction. He and Jia Mi, moreover, were clear enemies, and if the Heir Apparent came to the throne the future of the Jia faction was very uncertain. Early in 300, therefore, Sima Yu was tricked into signing a treasonous letter, and the Emperor was persuaded to dismiss him. Three months later, on 27 April, the Empress Jia had the young man killed.

Once again, this was a pattern of conduct often observed during Han. A consort family which had held regency powers was always in trouble when the true ruler came to maturity, and one side or the other would frequently resort to intrigue and bloodshed.[54] The unfortunate Sima Yu had presented just such a threat, and events followed a sad tradition. At this point, however, in contrast to the house of Han, other members of the imperial clan of Jin were in position to defend their interests.

At the time of Sima Yu's death, the two surviving sons of Sima Yi, Sima Yong and Sima Lun, were stationed at Luoyang 洛陽. Sima Lun had transferred from Ji to Yong 雍 province but in 296 he was recalled to the capital and was replaced by Sima Yong. Sima Yong, for his part, had lately

[52] The biography of Pei Wei (267–300) is in *JS* 35. On his position as a Confucianist opposed to the nihilism of his day, see Etienne Balazs, "Entre révolte nihiliste et évasion mystique. Les courants intellectuels en Chine au IIIe siècle de notre ère," *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques* 2 (1948): 27–55, at 50–5 [translated as "Nihilistic revolt or mystical escapism: currents of thought in China during the third century AD" in Wright and Wright, *Chinese civilization and bureaucracy*, pp.226–54].

[53] The biography of Jia Mi (d.300) is in *JS* 40. He was the son of another daughter of Jia Chong, adopted back into the Jia lineage.

[54] To take examples from the second century AD above: in the early 120s, Emperor An destroyed the family of the Empress-Dowager Deng; and the family of his Empress Yan attempted to exclude his son, Emperor Shun, from the succession. In the middle 140s, during the Liang clan hegemony, two young emperors died, and then Emperor Huan destroyed Liang Ji in 159. See, for example, Bielenstein, "Wang Mang, the restoration of the Han dynasty, and Later Han," in *CC* 1, pp.284–6.

been reappointed to formal control of the imperial secretariat and his place in the north-west was taken by his cousin Sima Yung 司馬顒.[55] On 7 May 300 Sima Lun and his allies seized power at the capital. They imprisoned the Empress Jia, forcing her to commit suicide a few days later, and they killed Jia Mi, Zhang Hua, and Pei Wei. Sima Lun became Chancellor of State and appointed his relatives and supporters to the leading positions.

In this respect, the policy of the Jin dynasty had been remarkably successful. Unlike the pattern of Han, the imperial family had been able to resist and destroy the over-ambitious consort group, and power was now returned to the Sima family. Despite Sima Lun's seniority in the clan, however, he was not himself popular, there was objection to his counsellor Sun Xiu 孫秀, and it was claimed that he was acting without proper authority. In the autumn of 300, Sima Yun attempted a coup against Sima Lun, but was killed in the skirmishing which followed. Then, on 3 February 301, Sima Lun forced a form of abdication upon Emperor Hui and claimed the imperial title for himself.

Though there were earlier, similar examples of such seizure of power, it was yet not acceptable to usurp the throne from one's own kinsman, and in April 301 Sima Ying 司馬穎 and Sima Yih 司馬乂, younger brothers of Emperor Hui, joined forces with Sima Jiong 司馬冏, Area Commander at Xuchang, and came from the east against Luoyang. They defeated Sima Lun and forced him to commit suicide, they restored Emperor Hui to his imperial state, and then Sima Jiong used his local military power to take over the regency.[56]

Again, though it was one thing to run the empire as a family affair, there was great room for disagreement as to which individual should hold the highest position. Sima Lun's ambition had brought his destruction, but in May 302, the death of the last of the sons of the late Heir Apparent Sima Yu caused another dynastic crisis, for there was now no clear successor to Emperor Hui. Sima Ying hoped for the nomination, and he resented the dominant position taken by the more distant relative Sima Jiong, while Sima Yung from the west also sought a role. In complex intrigue during the last days of the Chinese year, Sima Ying and Sima Yung involved Sima Yih in their rivalry with Sima Jiong, but when Sima Jiong sought to destroy Sima Yih, Sima Yih turned the tables on him and took his place at the head of government.

Sima Yih appears to have been the most competent of the princes, and also the most popular, but disorder at the capital had already begun to undermine the authority of the central government. There was continuing rebellion in Sichuan, increasing trouble in Henan, and after twelve months Sima Yih was attacked from the east by Sima Ying and from the west by Sima Yung. In an energetic campaign, Sima Yih inflicted heavy defeat on Sima Ying's forces and held off the army of Sima Yung commanded by Zhang Fang 張方.[57] Then, however, he was betrayed and arrested in his own camp by Sima Yue 司馬越, member of a cadet lineage,[58] and on 19 March 304 Zhang Fang had Sima Yih burnt at the stake.

55 The biography of Sima Yung (d.306) is in *JS* 59. I have used a variant transcription of his personal name to distinguish him from Sima Yong, who died in 301 (see n.47 above).

56 The biographies of Sima Ying (279–306), Sima Yih (277–304), and Sima Jiong (d.302), are in *JS* 59. Sima Jiong was the son of Sima You 司馬攸 (248–283), younger brother of Sima Yan, Emperor Wu; Sima Ying and Sima Yih were younger sons of Emperor Wu and half-brothers of Emperor Hui. A variant transcription of Sima Yih's personal name issued here to distinguish him from his great-grandfather Sima Yi (see n.5 above).

57 The biography of Zhang Fang (d.306) is in *JS* 60.

58 The biography of Sima Yue (d.311) is in *JS* 59. His father Sima Tai 司馬泰 (d.299: biography in *JS* 37), a nephew of Sima Yi, held office at Luoyang under Emperor Wu, and Sima Yue had assisted in the coup of the Empress Jia against the Yang family in 291.

On 1 May 304, with Sima Yung's approval, Sima Ying named himself Heir Apparent, and removed several government offices to his own capital at Ye 鄴. Though Sima Yue still held the Emperor at Luoyang, he felt increasing resentment at the shift of power to the new regime in the east, and in the summer of 304 he led an army against Ye. On 9 September, at the battle of Tangyin 蕩陰, his troops were utterly defeated. Emperor Hui was wounded by three arrows, his attendant Xi Shao 嵇紹, son of the poet Xi Kang 嵇康, was killed in front of him, and he fell into the hands of Sima Ying.

A few weeks later, however, the general Wang Jun 王浚, who had been appointed to command in the north by the Jia regime and was threatened by Sima Ying, came south against Ye with an army including a substantial contingent of non-Chinese auxiliaries.[59] Taking the Emperor with him, Sima Ying fled in panic to Luoyang. He was completely discredited, and real power was now held by Zhang Fang, who garrisoned the capital with the most powerful army of the region. Soon afterwards, Zhang Fang brought the court west to Chang'an 長安, where he could also supervise his nominal superior, Sima Yung.

The new regime, however, was surrounded by enemies. The armies of Wang Jun continued their advance, and there was an additional threat from the Xiongnu under Liu Yuan 劉淵 in present-day Shanxi. From his fief territory of Donghai 東海, moreover, and with the aid of his brothers, Sima Yue gathered forces to renew the challenge, and from the summer of 305, in a multitude of engagements, including the siege and capture of Xuchang, Ye, and Luoyang, he advanced towards the west. Early in 306, in an attempt to come to terms, Sima Yung assassinated Zhang Fang, but on 5 June 306 Chang'an was captured and sacked by an army of Wuhuan 烏桓 and Xianbi under the command of Wang Jun's general Ji Hong 祁弘. Emperor Hui was returned to Luoyang, Sima Yung and Sima Ying were captured and killed, and Sima Yue took control of the court.

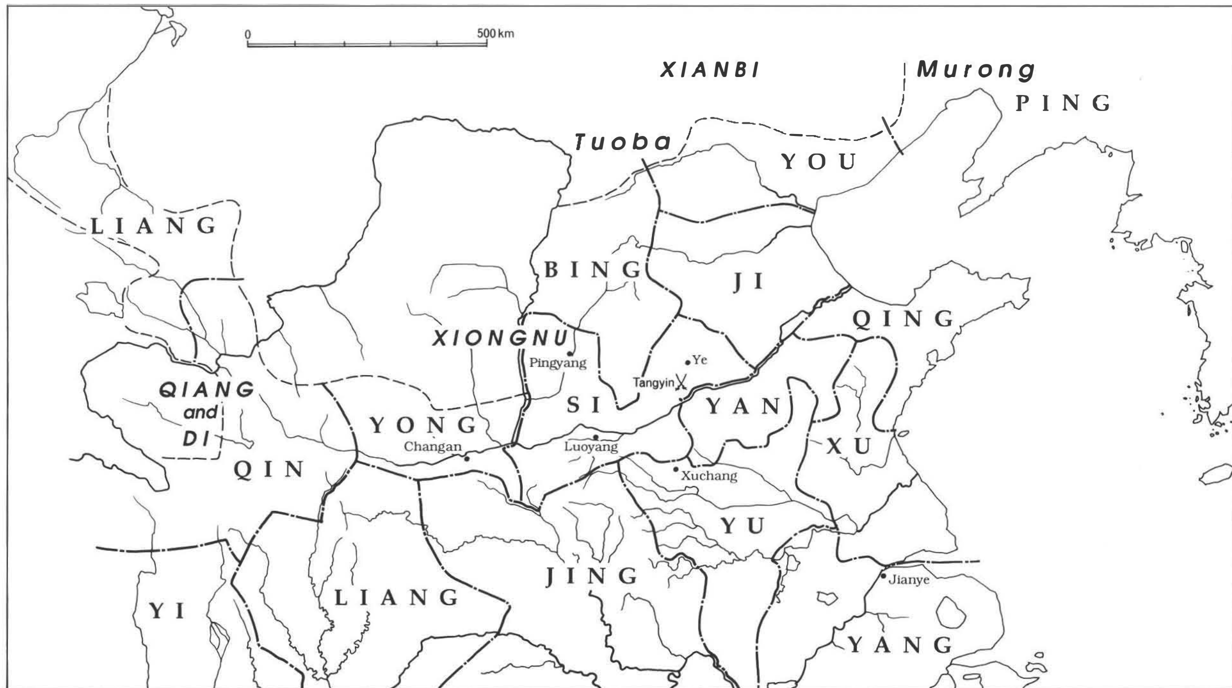
Emperor Hui died on 8 January 307—there were rumours Sima Yue had him poisoned—and he was succeeded by his younger brother Sima Zhi 司馬熾, twenty-fifth son of Sima Yan.[60] The new emperor was not so incompetent as his brother, but he played no real part in politics and left the conduct of affairs to Sima Yue. In fact, however, for all the ruthlessness with which he had pursued his ambitions, the regime maintained by Sima Yue was little more than a fragile facade, and the Yongjia 永嘉 reign period (307–312) was one of continued anarchy. The territory north of the Yellow river was contested ground, there was trouble in the valley of the Huai, Sichuan remained in rebellion, and in 308 the bandit Wang Mi 王彌 from Shandong captured Xuchang city.

The victory of Sima Yue had ended the internecine conflict, but that conclusion brought exhaustion and despair. Though the brothers and cousins of the Sima clan had indeed defended their imperial position, six years of turmoil had produced a ferocious, meaningless record of treachery, murder and war.[61] The credit of the government and the imperial family was

[59] The biography of Wang Jun (d.314) is in *JS* 39. He should be distinguished from the Inspector of Yi province who commanded operations against Wu in 280, and whose biography is in *JS* 42 (see n.13 above).

[60] The annals of Sima Zhi (284–313), Emperor Xiaohuai of Jin, are in *JS* 5. The prefix *xiao* 'filial' is attached to the posthumous title of Sima Zhi and that of his successor Sima Ye; the same custom had been observed by the Han dynasty.

[61] The term *Bawang zhi luan* 八王之亂, used to describe events of this time, may be variously translated as the 'rebellion', 'wars', or 'troubles' of the eight kings or princes, and there is some uncertainty about which were the eight referred to. *JS* 59 contains biographies of eight princes, but I agree with Fairbank, following the analysis of the Qing dynasty scholar Zhao Qi, that Sima Liang and Sima Wei, who appear in that chapter but who died in the struggle against the Empress Jia in 291, should not be listed among the troublesome eight. Zhao Qi's list, which is now generally followed, begins with Sima Lun, who took up arms against the central government in 300, and then includes Sima Yong, Sima Yun, Sima Jiong, Sima Ying, Sima Yung, Sima Yih, and finally Sima Yue, who completed his victory in 306.



Map 2
Northern China in the early fourth century

ruined, and there was no authority that might restore the state or re-establish a position against the forces which threatened from the north.

The Peoples of the Steppe and the Collapse of Western Jin

Since written sources for the study of early East Asia are in Chinese, it is not surprising that most of the history has been discussed from a Chinese point of view. Despite this bias, however, there is ample evidence to show that the traditional attitude towards non-Chinese neighbours of the empire was arrogant, aggressive, short-sighted and untrustworthy. When such people were brought under control, notably in the south and the west, they were oppressed and exploited by the Chinese government and its citizens, and on the northern frontier, imperial governments sought only to force the aliens into their tribute system. There was no concept of independence, let alone equality of esteem, treaties were seldom made and never kept, and trade was regarded as a means of control rather than as the sensible exchange of goods for value. It was consistent policy that any large grouping should be divided and destroyed, even though the result, often enough, left the frontier vulnerable to a multitude of petty, troublesome war-leaders.[62]

Unattractive though it may have been, that policy was successful for much of the Han period. At the end of the first century AD, however, the great victory of Dou Xian over the Northern Xiongnu destroyed the political

[62] I have presented my arguments for these general statements in my work *Northern frontier* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1984), where I discuss such matters as the policy of Wang Mang 王莽 towards the Xiongnu and the Wuhuan, the great campaigns of Dou Xian 竇憲, and the oppression of the Qiang 羌 people in the region of present-day Gansu. In particular, in Chapter 10, I observe the contrast in policies between China and Rome: the Romans were prepared to establish a comparatively peaceful and stable relationship with client states on their eastern frontiers, and they were prepared to grant citizenship to alien peoples.

equilibrium in the north, and the second century saw an enfeebled Chinese government faced with a multitude of disparate threats, from the rebellions of the Qiang people in the west to the rise of aggressive Xianbi tribes which came to replace the federations of the Xiongnu. In the time of Emperor Ling 靈, the Xianbi war-leader Tanshihuai 檀石槐 acquired general control over his people, destroyed a major Chinese army, and sent raiding parties year after year against the frontier.[63]

By good fortune for the Chinese, the successors of Tanshihuai lacked his authority, and the pirate kingdom fell into disarray after his death in the early 180s. For a few years at the end of Han the Xianbi leader Kebineng 軻比能 restored some semblance of Tanshihuai's dominion, and was given title as ally by Cao Pi, but Chinese diplomacy aided his enemies, and when Kebineng was murdered in 235 the new federation also collapsed.[64]

Elsewhere, in the north-east Cao Cao had destroyed the Wuhuan alliance under Tadun 蹋頓 in 207, and he brought the Wei river valley under control at the battle of Huayin 華陰 in 211. In 216 he settled the remnant Xiongnu in five divisions in the present-day provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi, with a formal capital under Chinese supervision at Pingyang 平陽 on the Fen river, and hostages at Ye city to procure their good behaviour.[65] Thereafter, in the region of Manchuria the campaigns of Guanqiu Jian 郭欽 in 244–5 broke the kingdom of Koguryŏ, and in the west the Qiang and Di 氐 peoples of the Wei valley and present-day Gansu were generally held under control by the contending forces of Wei and Shu-Han. When Sima Yan took his imperial title in 265, the non-Chinese people along the northern borders were disordered and divided.

Figure 4
Herding horses: painting on brick from a third-century tomb at Jiayuguan

The general strategic position, however, was far less satisfactory than it had been before. At its greatest extent, the territory of Later Han had included all the northern loop of the Yellow river beyond the Ordos, and the north of present-day Shanxi and Hebei, but during the second century, disturbances amongst the Xiongnu and the Qiang, and the attacks of the Xianbi, removed great areas from the control of the imperial government.[66] Cao Cao

63 de Crespigny, *Northern frontier*, pp.329–42, and K.H.J. Gardiner and R.R.C. de Crespigny, "T'an-shih-huai and the Hsien-pi tribes of the second century AD," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 15 (1977): 1–44.

64 *SGZ* 30/Wei 30, 838–9.

65 *HHS* 89/79, 2965–6; *SGZ* 1/Wei 1, 47; *JS* 97, 2548; de Crespigny, *Northern frontier*, pp.352–4; and Peter A. Boodberg, "Two notes on the history of the Chinese frontier," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1 (1936): 283–307.

66 Even before the trouble with Tanshihuai, there had been a marked withdrawal of Chinese administration from the north-west in the early 140s, after rebellions by the Qiang and the Xiongnu and troubles in Liang province from 184 on destroyed the position of the Han government in the north-west: de Crespigny, *Northern frontier*, pp.123, 309–12, 146–62; also Gustav Haloun, "The Liang-chou rebellion, 184–221 AD," *Asia Major* 1, n.s. (1949–50): 119–38.

and his successors could do no more than stabilize the situation, and as a result, under Wei and Jin, present-day Shanxi as far south as Taiyuan and the Fen river was occupied by groups of Xiongnu, while the Xianbi were established in the Sanggan valley and the region of present-day Huhehot. In the Wei valley, during the late 260s and the 270s, the Xianbi Jifu Shujineng and the Xiongnu Liu Meng presented some embarrassment to the new dynasty,[67] and there was further trouble in 294 after Sima Lun, as Area Commander, sought to establish tighter control. The rebellion spread from the Xiongnu to the Qiang and the Di, with the Di leader Qi Wannian 齊萬年 claiming an imperial title in 296, and the trouble was not suppressed until 299.[68]

The dangers from the non-Chinese occupation of the north and northwest had not gone unnoticed. In 280, after the suppression of Liu Meng and the defeat of Wu, the censorial official Guo Qin 郭欽 urged that the Xiongnu should be expelled to the north,[69] and in 299 the junior officer Jiang Tong 江統 presented his "Essay on Shifting the Western Barbarians" 徙戎論, arguing along traditional lines that the Land Within the Passes was the heart of the nation and the Qiang and Di should be resettled elsewhere.[70] There was, in fact, some attempt to drive the non-Chinese people south into present-day Sichuan, but in practical terms such a solution was impossible: Chinese settlement in the Wei valley had long been in decline, the economic use of the country had changed from peasant farming to mixed agriculture and pasture, and the government was by no means strong enough to enforce such a mass migration. Within a year, moreover, the turmoil at court was bringing all into ruin.

At first, the quarrels of the imperial clan had been limited to the territory about Luoyang and Chang'an. In 304, however, when Sima Ying held the Emperor hostage at Ye, the situation changed. Wang Jun's attack from the north was mounted with the support of Wuhuan and Xianbi, who acquired their first taste for the plunder and slaughter of a major Chinese city. As the invaders drew near, moreover, Sima Ying released the Xiongnu hostage prince Liu Yuan, hoping that he would rally his people and return to the rescue. Liu Yuan did collect an army, but he was too late to help Sima Ying and instead he raised his own claim to imperial power. From a base in the Fen river valley, and relying upon his lineage from the Shanyu 單于 of the Xiongnu on one side and from a princess of Han on the other, he declared himself first King then Emperor of Han.[71]

Sima Teng 司馬騰, younger brother of Sima Yue, had been responsible for Bing 并 province,[72] but in fear of Liu Yuan he abandoned his position and left it to the Inspector Liu Kun 劉琨.[73] Sima Teng sought to maintain himself at Ye, but in June 307 the city was sacked and Sima Teng was killed by the bandit Ji Sang 汲桑 and his associate Shi Le 石勒, a man from the Jie 羯 tribe of the Xiongnu.[74] Sima Yue's forces drove the invaders back a few weeks later, and Ji Sang was killed, but Shi Le transferred his allegiance to Liu Yuan, and by 309 their armies threatened all north China. Though Liu Yuan died in 310, his son Liu Cong 劉聰 maintained the offensive,[75] and the

67 See p.145 above.

68 See, for example, *JS* 4, 94–5; also *ZZTJ* 82, 2616 and 83, 2623.

69 *JS* 97, 2549, also *ZZTJ* 81, 2575.

70 The *Xironglun* appears in the biography of Jiang Tong (d.311) in *JS* 56, 1529–34; it is discussed and rendered in part by de Crespigny, *Northern frontier*, pp.170–2.

71 The biography of Liu Yuan (d.310) is in the Parallel Annals *(zaiji)*, *JS* 101. He took the title of 'king' in 304 and that of 'emperor' in 308.

The personal name of Liu Yuan was the same as that of the first emperor of the Tang dynasty: to avoid the taboo, *JS* describes him by his style, Yuanhai 元海.

72 The biography of Sima Teng (d.307) is in *JS* 37.

73 The biography of Liu Kun (271–318) is in *JS* 62. A recognized poet, he had been a member of the literary circle surrounding Jia Mi in the 290s. His memorial describing the miseries of Bing province at the time he arrived is in *JS* 62, 1680–1.

74 The biography of Shi Le (274–333) is in the Parallel Annals, *JS* 104–5.

75 The biography of Liu Cong (d.318) is in the Parallel Annals, *JS* 102.

death of Sima Yue early in 311 only added to the confusion within the government of Jin. On 13 July, after a massive defeat of the defending army, Shi Le stormed Luoyang, sacked the city, and took Sima Zhi, Emperor Huai, as a prisoner to Liu Cong's capital at Pingyang.[76]

With this catastrophe, the central power of Jin was ended. In the west, Chang'an also fell to the Xiongnu but was recaptured by loyalist forces with Qiang and Di auxiliaries. Sima Ye 司馬鄴, the eleven-year-old nephew of Sima Zhi, was proclaimed Heir Apparent, and in 313, after Sima Zhi had been put to death in captivity, he ascended the throne.[77] For a few more years, with local support from the west and north-west of the empire, and intervention by the loyal Liu Kun from Bing province, the court at Chang'an maintained a tenuous existence, but the city was steadily encircled by the forces of Liu Cong, and the defenders were starved into submission at the end of 316. Sima Ye was also taken into exile, and was killed a few months later.

Elsewhere in the empire, the waning power of Jin was restricted to Bing and You provinces in the far north, and to Jianye with the lands south of the Yangzi, former territory of Wu. Sima Rui 司馬睿, Prince of Langye 琅邪 and a great-grandson of Sima Yi, had held command at Jianye since 307. He was attacked by Shi Le in 312, but the invaders, hampered by three months of rain, could make no headway south of the Huai. So Jianye became a place of refuge from the ruin of the north, and Sima Rui took title as King of Jin 晉 in 317. The following year, after the death of Sima Ye, he proclaimed himself Emperor, and the dynasty, now known as Eastern Jin, was thus revived.[78]

In Bing province, from his base at Jinyang 晉陽 near present-day Taiyuan, Liu Kun obtained the aid of the Tuoba 禿髮 group of the Xianbi, traditional enemies of the Xiongnu, who occupied the northern part of present-day Shanxi and the region of Huhehot.[79] His own position, however, was weak. In 310 he was compelled to send his son as hostage in order to obtain troops from his allies, and he depended increasingly upon his relationship with the chieftain Tuoba Yilu 禿髮猗盧. In 314 the two leaders mounted a sortie to

76 *JS* 5, 123; Arthur Waley, "The fall of Loyang," *History Today* 1.4 (April 1951): 7–10.

77 The annals of Sima Ye (300–317), Emperor Xiaomin 孝愍 of Jin, are in *JS* 5. See also n.59 above.

78 The annals of Sima Rui (272–322), founding Emperor Yuan 元 of Eastern Jin, are in *JS* 6.

79 The history of this period is told also in the first chapter of the standard history, *Wei shu*, compiled by Wei Shou (506–572) and others, 104 + 26 chapters (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974); Jennifer Holmgren, *Annals of Tai: early T'o-pa history according to the first chapter of the* Wei-shu (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982), esp. pp.35–8, 60–4.

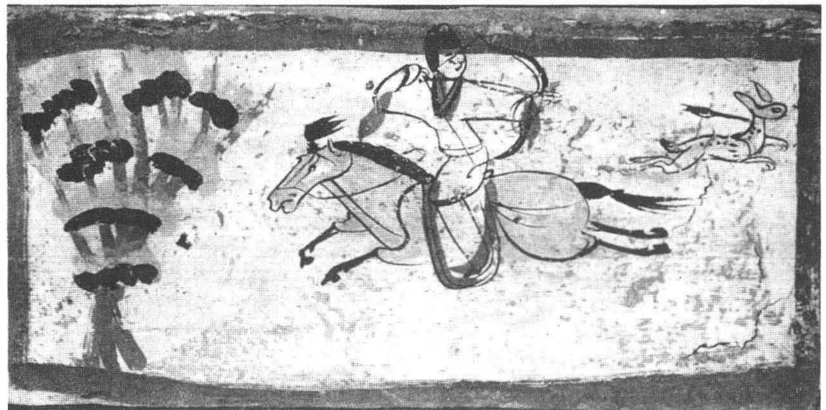


Figure 5
Hunting scene: painting on brick from a third-century tomb at Jiayuguan, north-west China

relieve Chang'an, and Tuoba Yilu was awarded the title of King of Dai 代王. Two years later, however, as Shi Le extended his power across the North China plain, Tuoba Yilu was assassinated and his clansmen rejected the alliance with Jin. Liu Kun fled north-east to the Duan 段 group of the Xianbi, but was killed there in 318.

In somewhat similar fashion, Wang Jun in You province maintained an alliance with the Murong 慕容 group of the Xianbi, who had risen to power in Manchuria after the defeat of Koguryŏ by Guanqiu Jian in the middle of the third century, and consolidated their position through marriage alliances with the Duan and a successful aggressive policy towards their neighbours, the Puyŏ 扶餘 and the Yuwen 宇文 Xianbi.[80] Disconcertingly, however, the government of Murong Hui 慕容廆, who had held power among his people since 285 and had created an orderly government with numerous Chinese advisers and officials, was more attractive to refugees from central China than the regime of Wang Jun. Wang Jun had sought to act as patron and overlord to Murong Hui, but he was deserted by his own people and his allies, and he was taken and killed by Shi Le in 314. By contrast, in 317, Murong Hui established contact with the Jin court at Jianye, and was awarded the title of general and the rank of duke.

This last sad failure exemplifies the critical weakness of the empire: that Chinese people should prefer an alien frontier state to the protection of their own administrator. The destruction of the capitals and the ruin of Western Jin was not just a matter of powerful barbarian forces pressing against the empire; it came essentially from the irresponsible feuding that had bedevilled the imperial family since the death of Sima Yan more than twenty years before. Where people had looked for stability and competence their rulers had shown them futile selfishness and cruelty. Such a succession of disorders would cut to the heart of any government, and as they were robbed of their faith and their confidence the former subjects of the empire turned away from those who had betrayed them.

[80] The biography of Murong Hui (268–333) is in the Parallel Annals, *JS* 108, and is discussed by Gerhard Schreiber, "The history of the Former Yen dynasty (285–370)" *Monumenta Serica* 14 (1949–55): 374–480, at 391–424. [The second part of Schrieber's article was published in *Monumenta Serica* 15 (1956): 1–141.]

Patterns of the Third Century

Looking overall at the period from the collapse of Later Han at the end of the second century AD to the ruin of Western Jin at the beginning of the fourth century, one may observe two major developments of lasting importance for the history of China: the first is the development of the Chinese position south of the Yangzi; the second is the changing economic and social structure of the Chinese world, and the devastating effect this had upon the basic loyalties which had supported the traditional imperial state.

The impetus which the state of Wu gave to Chinese control over the lands of the south has already been discussed. The situation at the end of the second century permitted the initial establishment of a local regime independent of the north, and then the energy of the Sun family and their

[81] See, for example, 3K&WJ I, pp.19–20. The history of Eastern Jin, however, is beyond the scope of the present work.

[82] See, for example, 3K&WJ I, pp.18–19, 23–4, 27–8; also de Crespigny, *Generals of the south*, pp.515–24.

associates developed the resources of the region by colonizing areas formerly untouched by the government of Han. Though the rulers of Wu could not in the end withstand the united power of the north and the west, it was through their achievement that a base was found for the survival of a truncated Chinese state after the fall of Western Jin.[81]

On the second matter, while it is easy to criticize the political weakness of Wei and the appalling instability of Western Jin, we should recognize the degree to which the old regime of Han had been destroyed in the first years of civil war. The warlords who struggled for power at the beginning of the third century held their forces together by loose bonds of personal loyalty, and even as the three new regional states developed some formal political structures, the real network of power was based upon family and local self-interest.[82] In such circumstances, one should rather admire the achievement of Cao Cao, his rivals, and his successors, in creating workable institutions from a situation of internecine chaos, than criticize them for the weaknesses of their constructions.

In the end, however, as the state of Western Jin fell into ruin, anecdotes of two men, the aesthete Wang Yan 王衍 and the statesman Zhang Hua, may be presented as examples of the moral weakness that lay at the heart of the state.

Wang Yan was one of the most brilliant men of his time, skilled in the sophistries of pure conversation, a scholar both of diplomacy and of *xuanxue* 玄學.[83] At Luoyang in 311 he was captured by Shi Le, who asked him about the failure of Jin. Wang Yan's answers were clear and elegant, and Shi Le spoke with him for several days. But Wang Yan also sought to explain how he had held himself aloof from such meanness, and that those errors and failures were no concern of his. Shi Le replied, "Your fame extends over all the four seas, and since your youth you have occupied high positions. . . . How can you claim to have taken no part in the affairs of the world? Indeed it is your fault that the empire is defeated and destroyed!"[84] And so he killed him.

In similar fashion, Zhang Hua wrote an essay of warning about consort families, but he later served the government of the Empress Jia. In 300 he was arrested and sentenced to death by Sima Lun. On the eve of execution he sought to justify himself to one of his captors, but he was asked to explain why he had not protested earlier, even to death, at the deposition of the Heir Apparent Sima Yu. Zhang Hua replied that he had spoken against the project in open council. "And when your objections were ignored," came the reply, "why did you not resign your office?" Zhang Hua could make no answer.[85]

Even if one considers the nature of their rulers, from the cruelty of the Empress Jia to the murderous rivalries of the Eight Princes, the conduct of these officials and their colleagues fell far short of the model displayed by the proscribed partisans a hundred years earlier, who went voluntarily to their deaths for the principles they believed in,[86] and they match poorly the

[83] On *xuanxue* 'The Study of the Mysteries', see Balazs, "Nihilistic revolt"; also 3K&WJ I, p.33 and n.106.

[84] The biography of Wang Yan (256–311) is in *JS* 43. This incident is described at 1238, and is cited by Balazs, "Nihilistic revolt," pp.248-9.

[85] *JS* 36, 1074; Straughair, *Chang Hua*, pp.56–7.

[86] On the Proscribed Party *(danggu* 黨錮*)* of Later Han, see, for example, *ZZTJ* 56, 1820–3; de Crespigny, *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* I, 110–17; and on the particular praise of those men by Sima Guang see *ZZTJ* 68, 2173–4, and de Crespigny, *Emperor Huan and Emperor Ling* I, pp.xvi–xvii.

[87] Western scholars who have written recently on the question of social structure during the whole Period of Division include Patricia Ebrey, particularly *The aristocratic families of early imperial China: a case study of the Po-ling Ts'ui family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); David Johnson, *The medieval Chinese oligarchy: a study of the great families in their social, political, and ideological setting* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977); Robert M. Somers, "The society of early imperial China: three recent studies," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.38, no.1 (November 1978): 127–43 [review article on Ch'ü, *Han social structure* (see n.87 below), Johnson, *Medieval oligarchy*, and Ebrey, *Aristocratic families*]; and Denis Grafflin, "The great family in medieval South China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41 (1981): 65–74. As Grafflin observes (p.65), much of the debate has been a reflection of the position taken by the Japanese scholar Naitō Konan, his disciples such as Miyakawa Hisayuki, and other theorists such as Tanigawa Michio and Kawakatsu Yoshio. A survey of that debate may be found in Joshua A. Fogel's Translator's Introduction to Tanigawa's *Medieval society and the local 'community'* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

personal loyalty that other men had given their chieftains in the years of the Three Kingdoms. The problem at the heart of Western Jin, however, was more than the limited responsibility shown by individuals at the court, for their attitude represented the culmination of a process of political withdrawal, a separation between the ruler and the chiefs of his subjects, which had been developing since the time of Han and which was displayed very clearly when the illusion of unity was restored by Jin.

In writing this paper, I have largely avoided such terms as 'feudalism' and 'aristocracy', for such general descriptions, unless carefully defined, carry too many implications and allow too much room for misunderstanding. The nature of Chinese society and politics in the period between the fall of Han and the rise of Sui and Tang has in recent years been the subject of considerable debate and two particular problems have appeared in the course of that discussion: there is uncertainty and disagreement about terminology; and there is a question whether the four centuries of this period of division can be properly treated as a whole.[87] Such a complex matter can be dealt with only briefly here, but I suggest that in the time of Wei and Western Jin the political and intellectual structure of imperial China was faced with a crisis that arose from an economic and social situation was already developing during Han.[88]

Two separate, contradictory factors were in play. Firstly, from the time of Later Han and increasingly during the disturbances which accompanied its fall, by a process of commendation well recognized in the history of Western feudalism, powerful local families gathered about them increasing numbers of tenants and clients who sought the protection of their leadership, and who in turn gave support to their power. Secondly, however, because the imperial state continued to operate on the philosophical basis of a direct relationship between the ruler and each of his subjects, that private system of commendation was not extended into a public hierarchy of feudalism. The very fact that the emperor claimed ultimate authority over all the land, while every subject in theory owed a general duty of service and taxation, prevented the development of any system which relied upon individual and hereditary contracts of fiefdom.

From the time of Later Han, the decline of central authority brought a fragmentation of the political and economic structure of the empire, while the power of great families came from their own resources and organization, not from any dispensation of the imperial government. It is true that the governments of Han, Wei and Jin awarded titles of nobility such as king or prince, duke and marquis, but these reflected political relationships and favour, and they did not create political power.[89] In contrast, the families which held real authority in the empire owned no such relationship with their ruler as did medieval feudatories in the West: there was no system of sub-infeudation, no contract to exchange land for service, no legal argument about contending rights and obligations, and no alternative authority to whom a subject might appeal.[90] In this respect, the political and

[88] Besides the chapters on Former and Later Han economy and society by Patricia Ebrey and Nishijima Sadao in *CC* 1, the work of Ch'ü T'ung-tsu, *Han social structure*, ed. Jack L. Dull (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972) is an important contribution to the field. As several reviewers have pointed out, however, Ch'ü's work gives little indication of changes and development during Han: see, for example, Somers, "Early Imperial China," p.130, and the review by A.F.P. Hulsewé in *T'oung Pao* 62 (1974): 330–7. By contrast, Etienne Balazs, "Nihilistic revolt," Ch'en Ch'i-yün, *Hsün Yüeh and the mind of late Han China*, and Donald Holzman, "Les sept sages de la forêt des bambous et la société de leur temps," *T'oung Pao* 44 (1956): 317–346; *La vie et la pensée de Hi Kang (223-262 ap. J.C.)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957); and *Poetry and politics: The life and works of Juan Chi, AD 210–263* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), have studied different aspects of the period from the end of Han to Wei.

[89] Under Jin, as under Later Han and Wei, the fact that a man was enfeoffed as a prince or other lesser title gave him no more than a pension. His real authority depended upon his position in the imperial administration, whether as minister, military officer or area commander. (There was, however, as we have observed at p.144 above, a substantial difference in policy: whereas Han and Wei had deliberately excluded princes of the imperial clan from any executive post, the government of Jin allowed and encouraged them to hold such positions.)

[90] In the medieval West, when the Angevin King of England was also Duke of Normandy, a discontented baron could seek support from the Pope or from the King of France, and the quarrel was rapidly enmeshed in a complex web of suzerain relationships; in China, there was no way short of treason and exile to avoid a direct confrontation. Similarly, in early modern times, Eugene of Savoy could quit the court of Louis XIV to command the Hapsburg armies against France; even in the confusions of the Three Kingdoms period there is no Chinese parallel to such a successful and accepted transfer of allegiance.

social status of those leading families may best be compared, not to that of the great feudatories of medieval times, but to the English gentry or the French *noblesse* of early modern Europe, and even then it must be observed that privileges granted by the throne of China did not compare to those held by the *noblesse* in France, as, for example, exemption from taxation by the *taille*.

A number of terms have been used to describe these families, whether they were 'aristocratic' or 'élite', an 'oligarchy' or a 'nobility'. One difficulty in analysis arises from the bias of the official Chinese histories, which emphasize the holding of an official position, rank or title as a sign of social status, and pay chief attention to those individuals or kinship groups which acquire such recognition. Naturally enough, given the records available, modern scholarship has concentrated on families such as the Cui 崔 and the Xie 謝, who occupied positions at court and whose lineage may be traced through the whole period of division.[91] Nevertheless, though these 'super-élite' clans are of interest in their own right, the attention shown them by scholars has tended to distract attention from the broader group which I prefer to describe as 'gentry'. At the upper levels of this 'gentry' one may identify the 'nobility' who received titles from the ruler, and an 'aristocracy' of those few powerful clans which wielded influence at provincial or national level.[92] Across the empire as a whole, however, the 'gentry' were a broader class, including all those lineage groups, down to village level, which held authority through their control and influence over lands, tenants, serfs and retainers.[93]

At a local level, power was based upon concepts which could be identified as 'feudal' in the West. As the gentry families enlarged their position, however, traditional Chinese theories of political structure could provide no means for the national government to negotiate an effective link with this important group of leadership in the whole community: it was quite inappropriate that the sovereign should enter into a feudal contract, with reciprocal rights and duties. The gentry of China were readily identified among the people but, unless they happened to hold some official position, they had no formal and particular connection with the emperor and he, for his part, had no machinery to interfere with the patron-client relationship from which they drew their power.

As a result, without rights or duties on either side, the imperial regime was faced with a simple withdrawal of interest and support by its most powerful subjects. One faction or another might struggle for power at court, and dynasty succeed dynasty through intrigue and abdication, but there was no obligation upon the gentry to concern themselves with the matter, and no reason but self-interest when they chose to do so.

For the dynasty of Western Jin, in particular, the withdrawal of commitment by leading clans and individuals brought a crippling loss of confidence and authority, as the weakening of the bonds of loyalty and

[91] One should note, however, Grafflin's conclusion ("Great families," p.74) that "Famous names of the Chin dynasty were in circulation during the T'ang, not because their bearers had dominated the intervening centuries, but because the Sino-foreign hybrid aristocracy, developing out of the Northern Wei, had to look back to the Chin in order to claim Chinese ancestry for an upper-class society significantly alien in derivation."

[92] In this I follow Ebrey, *Aristocratic families*, p.10, who compares the 'nobility', those families which gained wealth and prestige from association with the imperial throne, with the 'aristocracy', or super-élite families which had sufficient independent power to survive the withdrawal of imperial patronage.

[93] As above, and *mutatis mutandis*, I suggest a parallel with the English gentry or French *noblesse* of early modern Europe. One may observe that for the *noblesse* of the *ancien régime*, and in the traditional conception of the British gentleman, it was membership of the class that was important, rather than any formality of ranks within it.

responsibility limited the moral force of the dynasty, denied the government access to a high proportion of the economic resources which it theoretically controlled, and rendered the whole imperial state vulnerable and unstable. At the same time, however, the changes in society and politics brought forward a new and exciting debate on the proper relationship of the individual with the family, with the state, with the community, and with the world at large.

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