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A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations

by Ying-shih Yü

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As the first long-lasting bureaucratic empire, the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) served for many centuries as the classical model of Imperial rule in East Asia. In China Han institutions were studied for their historical lessons by continuous generations of rulers and literati-officials, not only under the Chinese dynasties but also under the alien dynasties. The Han imperial order exerted a notable influence, too, on neighboring countries, especially Korea, Japan, and Viet Nam (Annam), both directly and through its modified T’ang model.

The major reason for the paramount influence of Han institutions was the success of their judicious amalgamation of various apparently contradictory elements in their legacy from pre-Han China. For instance, the conscious combination of Confucianism and Legalism in theory and practice allowed a wide range of variation and vibration between idealism and realism. The same reconciliation was applied to militarism and pacifism, laissez-faire and state control, and other conflicting forces. The whole imperial network was comparable to a large wine bottle, which, although filled with old wine most of the time, was able to accommodate some new wine and strong enough to tolerate further fermentation.

Dr. Ying-shih Yü’s book discusses several sectors of this imperial network, centering around the theme of trade and expansion. Foreign relations between the Han Chinese and the other peoples are examined from various angles, based on thorough research of written documents as well as of archaeological materials. Economic and military problems faced by the Han dynasty are reviewed
against the broad historical and cultural background. The result is a comprehensive picture, illustrated with concrete examples and illuminated with perceptive comments. Its scope and depth make this book the first full-scale study of the subject in any language, and it constitutes a substantial contribution to the understanding of Chinese history.

In a time of great cultural upheaval, the value of history may become extremely dubious. On the other hand, since what is present today will become past tomorrow, it is obviously futile for a nation or a people to deny all connection or continuity with the past. The ugly face reflected in the historical mirror may belong to our ancestor, but unfortunately it bears a resemblance to our face too. The Chinese people have been known for their historical-mindedness. It is unlikely that such a deep-rooted cultural trait can be totally erased in a generation or two, even with state coercion. As is said in a line by the T'ang poet, Li Po, "Sword may be drawn to cut the stream, but the stream will continue to flow."

Lien-sheng Yang

Cambridge, Massachusetts
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I have tried in this book to give a systematic account of Sino-barbarian economic relations in Han times, making the interplay between trade and expansion the central theme. The undertaking can be justified on several grounds.

In the first place, we have available today a great deal of source material to which even Ssu-ma Ch’ien and Pan Ku, the two great Han historians, had no access. I refer particularly to the many recent archaeological finds. In the second place, although almost every aspect of the subject has been critically examined by modern scholars in the East as well as in the West, the findings of modern historical research yet require consolidation in terms of an interpretive scheme so that their significance can be more readily recognized.

Finally, there is a growing need for a better understanding of the traditional Chinese world order. Much has been written in recent years about the inadequacies of the Chinese tributary system in coping with the Western challenge to the Manchu dynasty. That the system collapsed beyond repair in the face of a new world order is well known; but it should be remembered that the Chinese tributary system has a long prior history. Any just evaluation of it must, I believe, take into account not only its decline and fall but also its establishment and growth. Since the system began to take shape in the Han dynasty period, I have undertaken to analyze its development against the background of the economic and political realities of the time.

In working out the general framework of the book, I
have relied primarily on accounts in the dynastic histories, where basic facts are reported in their chronological context. As my notes indicate, this work is deeply indebted to modern historical scholarship, without which no synthesis (even one as limited as this) can hope to succeed.

Archaeological finds have been used mainly to verify historical records. However, in the reconstruction of the trading relations, especially the silk trade, between Han China and the western countries the archaeological evidence plays a major role. Special mention should be made of the Han documents on wood, discovered at Tun-huang and Edsin Gol, which are sources no student of the period can afford to overlook; they were extremely helpful to me in clarifying, on a number of occasions, the institutional background of frontier trade.

Every book is a symbol of intellectual debt which its author owes to his teachers and friends. Mine is no exception. I must first mention Dr. Ch’ien Mu, who, during my undergraduate years at New Asia College, Hong Kong, initiated me into the field of Chinese studies and, at the same time, taught me to love Chinese history. I am particularly grateful to Professor Lien-sheng Yang, Harvard University, who not only guided the writing of the book at every stage but also honors it with his Foreword. My thanks are also due to Professors John K. Fairbank of Harvard University, Ping-ti Ho of the University of Chicago, and Lao Kan of the University of California at Los Angeles, who kindly read the first draft of my manuscript, in whole or in part, and generously offered suggestions for improvement.

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and Russian archaeological sources into my study. To the Director of the Center, Professor Albert Feuerwerker, my friend and colleague, I am especially indebted for his constant encouragement. Without the enthusiasm of members of the staff of the University of California Press, the transformation of this manuscript into a book would have been much delayed.

Ying-shih Yu

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