RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN: HAN DYNASTY II
REVISED EDITION

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A Renditions – Columbia University Press Book
Hong Kong New York
water of various rivers in the region; in Ru’an and Jiujiang water was drawn off from the Huai River; the Donghui from the marsh of Juding; and at the foot of Mt. Tai from the Wen River. In all these places canals were dug to water the fields, providing irrigation for over 10,000 qing of land in each area. In addition, many other small canals and waterways through the mountains were opened up, but they are too numerous to describe here. Of all these exploits, however, the most outstanding was the closing of the break in the Yellow River at Xuanfang.

The Grand Historian remarks: I have climbed Mt. Lu in the south to observe the courses which Emperor Yu opened up for the nine tributaries of the Yangtze. From there I journeyed to Kuiji and Taihuang and, ascending the heights of Guou, looked out over the Five Lakes. In the east I have visited the confluence of the Yellow and Luo rivers, Dapei, and the Backward-flowing River, and have travelled along the waterways of the Huai, Si, Ji, Ta, and Luo rivers. In the west I have seen Mr. Min and the Li Escarpment in the province of Shu, and I have journeyed through the north from Longmen to Shuofang. How tremendous are the benefits brought by these bodies of water, and how terrible the damages! I was among those who carried bundles of brushwood on their backs to stem the break at Xuanfang and, deeply moved by the song of Huzi, I made this treatise on the Yellow River and the Canals.

SHI JI 30: THE TREATISE ON THE BALANCED STANDARD

The purpose of currency is to provide a medium of exchange between farmers and merchants, but in extreme cases it is subject to all kinds of clever manipulation. As a result, the great landholders increase their power and men compete for the opportunity to turn a neat profit, abandoning the pursuit of agriculture, which is basic, to follow the secondary occupations of commerce. Thus I made “The Treatise on the Balanced Standard”, showing how these changes come about.

When the Han dynasty came to power, it inherited the evils left by the Qin. The able-bodied men were all away with the army, while the old and underaged busily transported supplies for them. There was much hard work and little wealth. The Son of Heaven himself could not find four horses of the same color to draw his carriage, many of his generals and ministers were reduced to riding about in ox carts, and the common people had nothing to lay away in their storehouses.

Because the currency of the Qin was heavy and cumbersome to use, the Han ordered the people to mint new coins. The unit for gold was one catty. The laws and prohibitions of the Qin having been simplified or done away with, people who were intent upon making a profit by underhanded means began to hoard their wealth, buying up the commodities on the market, so that the price of goods shot up. Grain put up for sale brought as much as 10,000 cash¹ a picul, and a horse fetched 100 catties of gold.

After peace had been restored to the empire, Guou issued an order forbidding merchants to wear silk or ride in carriages, and increased the taxes that they were obliged to pay in order to hamper and humiliate them.² During the reigns of Emperor Hui and Empress Lu, because the empire had only just

¹Ten thousand copper coins were equal in value to one catty of gold.
²The traditional Chinese practice of making life difficult for the merchants in order to encourage agriculture.
begun to recover from the period of war and confusion, the laws concerning the merchants were relaxed, though the sons and grandsons of merchant families were prohibited from holding government office.

The salaries of officials and the costs of the administration were estimated, and the necessary funds collected from the people in the form of a poll tax. Revenues from the natural resources of mountains, rivers, parks, and lakes, as well as those from the government market places and from other kinds of taxes, were all used for the private maintenance of the Son of Heaven or the feudal lords and princesses from whose lands they were collected, and were not entered in the budget for the empire as a whole. The amount of grain transported from east of the mountains each year to supply the officials of the capital did not exceed 200,000 or 300,000 piculs.

In the time of Emperor Wen, because the "elm-rod" coins, minted earlier, had grown too numerous and light in weight, new coins were cast weighing four shu and inscribed with the words banliang or "half-tael". The people were allowed to mint them at will. As a result the king of Wu, though only a feudal lord, was able, by extracting ore from the mountains in his domain and minting coins, to rival the wealth of the Son of Heaven. It was this wealth which he eventually used to start his revolt. Similarly, Deng Tong, who was only a high official, succeeded in becoming richer than a vassal king by minting coins. The coins of the king of Wu and Deng Tong were soon circulating all over the empire, and as a result the private minting of coinage was finally prohibited.

At this time the Xiongnu were making frequent raids across the northern border, and farming garrisons had to be set up along the frontier to stop them. The grain produced by these garrisons alone, however, was not sufficient to feed all the border troops. The government then called upon the people to supply grain, offering honorary ranks to those who were prepared to send grain to the frontier. The ranks varied with the amount of grain but reached as high as the eighteenth rank, called dashuhashang. Later, during Emperor Jing's reign, because of the drought which prevailed in Shang Province and the west, the order concerning the sale of ranks was revived, but the price of the ranks was reduced in order to attract more people. In addition men who had been condemned to duty on the frontier for a year, together with the women of their families who served sentences to menial service in the government workshops, were permitted to buy off their sentences by transporting grain to the government. More pastures for raising horses were opened up in order to supply the needs of the nation, and the number of palaces and pleasure towers, carriages and horses at the disposal of the emperor was increased.

By the time the present emperor had been on the throne a few years, a period of over seventy years had passed since the founding of the Han. During that time the nation had met with no major disturbances so that, except in times of flood or drought, every person was well supplied and every family had enough to get along on. The granaries in the cities and the countryside were full and the government treasuries were running over with wealth. In the capital the strings of cash had been stacked up by the hundreds of millions until the cords that bound them had rotted away and they could no longer be counted. In the central granary of the government, new grain was heaped on top of the old until the building was full and the grain overflowed and piled up outside, where it spoiled and became unfit to eat. Horses were to be seen even in the streets and lanes of the common people or plodding in great numbers along the paths between the fields, and anyone so poor as to have to ride a mare was disdained by his neighbors and not allowed to join the gatherings of the villagers. Even the keepers of the community gates ate fine grain and meat. The local officials remained at the same posts long enough to see their sons and grandsons grow to manhood, and the higher officials occupied the same positions so long that they adopted their official titles as surnames. As a result, men had a sense of self-respect and regarded it as a serious matter to break the law. Their first concern was to act in accordance with what was right and to avoid shame and dishonour.

At this time, however, because the net of the law was slack and the people were rich, it was possible for men to use their wealth to exploit others and to accumulate huge fortunes. Some, such as the great landowners and powerful families, were able to do anything they pleased in the countryside, while the members of the imperial house and the nobility, the high officials and the lesser government officers, strove to outdo each other in luxurious living; there was no limit to how far each would go in aping the houses, carriages, and dress of his social superiors.

But it has ever been the law of change that when things reach their period of greatest flourishing, they must begin to decay. Shortly after this time Zhuang Zhu, Zhu Maichen, and others invited the people of the region of Eastern Ou to move to China, intervening in the war between the two kingdoms of Yue, and
the area between the Huai and Yangtze rivers, to which they were transferred, was put to great trouble and expense. Tang Meng and Sima Xiangru opened up a road to the land of the barbarians in the southwest, cutting a passage over 1,000 li long through the mountains in order to broaden the provinces of Ba and Shu, but the undertaking exhausted the people of these regions. Peng Wu established relations with the peoples of Weimo and Chaoshan and set up the province of Changhui on the Korean Peninsula, but the move caused great unrest among the inhabitants of the neighboring states of Yan and Qi.\footnote{Following the reading in Han shu 24B. Detailed accounts of these events will be found in the chapters dealing with foreign peoples later on in this volume.}

After Wang Hui made his unsuccessful attempt to ambush the Xiongnu at Mayi, peaceful relations with the Xiongnu came to an end and they began to invade and plunder the northern border. Armies had to be dispatched time and again and could not be disbanded, causing extreme hardship to the empire. As the conflicts became fiercer day by day, men set off to war carrying their packs of provisions, while those left behind at home had to send more and more goods to keep them supplied. Those at home and those on the frontier were kept busy guarding the empire and supplying rations until the common people were exhausted and began to look for some clever way to evade the laws. The funds of the government were soon used up and, in order to supply the deficiencies, it was agreed that men who presented goods would be appointed to official positions, and those who made appropriate contributions would be pardoned for their crimes. The old system of selecting officials on the basis of merit fell into disuse, and modesty and a sense of shame became rare qualities. Military achievement was now the key to advancement. The law were made stricter and more detailed, and officials whose main job was to make a profit for the government for the first time appeared in office.

After this the Han generals every year led forces of 20,000 or 30,000 cavalry in attacks on the barbarians and the general of carriage and cavalry Wei Qing seized the region south of the bend of the Yellow River from the Xiongnu and fortified Shuofang.

At the same time the Han government was building the road through the region of the southwestern barbarians, employing a force of 20,000 or 30,000 labourers. Provisions for them had to be carried for a distance of 1,000 li, and of ten or more zhong sent out, only one picul, or less than one tenth of the original amount, reached its destination. In addition gifts of money were distributed to

the inhabitants of Qiong and Po in order to win their support. Several years passed, however, and the road was still not completed. In the meantime, the barbarians several times attacked the labourers, and the Han officials were forced to call out troops to control them. All the taxes from the region of Ba and Shu were insufficient to cover the expenses of the road, and it was decided to invite wealthy families to open up farms in the region of the southern barbarians; for any grain which they turned over to the government, they would be reimbursed in cash by the financial officers of the ministry of agriculture in the capital. Again, when the road was opened up to the province of Changhui in the east, the expenditures for labourers were just as great. In addition, a force of over 100,000 men was conscripted to build the fortifications at Shuofang and guard them. Provisions for all these undertakings had to be transported great distances over land and water, and the burden fell upon all the regions east of the mountains. Expenditures ran from two to three to ten billions of cash and the government treasuries became emptier than ever. An order was issued allowing those who presented male or female slaves to the government to be exempted from military and labour services for lifetime or, if the donor was already a palace attendant and therefore exempt, to receive an advancement in rank. It even reached the point where men were made palace attendants because of donations of sheep!

Four years later (124 BC) the general in chief Wei Qing, commanding six generals and an army of over 100,000, attacked the Xiongnu leader known as the Wise King of the Right, beheading or capturing 15,000 of the enemy. The following year Wei Qing again led six generals in another attack on the barbarians, beheading or capturing 19,000 men. Those who had beheaded or captured enemy soldiers were presented with gifts totalling over 200,000 catties of gold. Generous gifts were also given to the tens of thousands of enemy captives, and food and clothing were supplied to them by the government. The men and horses killed on the Han side amounted to over 100,000. In addition, there were the expenses for weapons and the cost of provisions transported to the armies.

By this time the reserves of cash stored up by the ministry of agriculture from earlier years had been exhausted and the revenue from taxes had likewise been used up, so that there was not enough money left to support the troops. When the officials reported this fact to the emperor, he replied, "I have been told that the Five Emperors of antiquity did not necessarily follow the same policies, and yet they all achieved good government; that the rulers Yu and Tang
did not necessarily use the same kind of laws, though they were both worthy kings. The roads they followed were different, but all led to the same ultimate goal of establishing virtue. Now peace has not yet been restored to the northern frontier, a fact which grieves me deeply. Recently the general in chief attacked the Xiongnu and beheaded or captured 19,000 of the enemy, and yet the rewards and supplies due him and his men are held back and they have not yet received them. Let deliberations begin on a law to allow the people to purchase honorary ranks and to buy mitigations of punishments or freedom from prohibitions against holding office.7

The officials responded by requesting the establishment of honorary official positions, to be known as “ranks of military merit.” One grade of the rank was to be priced at 170,000 cash, the total value of the sale amounting to over 300,000 catties of gold. Among the purchasers of “ranks of military merit,” those of the gaoshou or fifth grade or above were to be accorded the same privileges as regular government officials of the fifth lord class. Those guilty of some crime were to have two grades deducted from the ranks they purchased, but were to be allowed to purchase as high as liuping, the eighth grade. The purpose of this was to honour military achievements, but where such achievements were particularly numerous, the awards exceeded the limits set for the various grades, so that those with the most distinguished records were enfeoffed as marquises or appointed as high government officials. As a result, so many avenues to official position were opened and such confusion reigned that the whole system of government offices broke down in chaos.

After Gongsun Hong secured the post of chancellor because of his recommendations for correcting the conduct of ministers according to the principles of the Spring and Autumn Annals, and after Zhang Tong was made commandant of justice because of his enforcement of decisions on the basis of severe laws, the legal principle that anyone who allows a criminal act to go unreported is as guilty as the criminal himself came into being, and the law officials were busily engaged in conducting investigations of officials who ignored, impeded, or criticized the orders of the government.

The following year (122 BC) the plans for revolt laid by the kings of Huainan, Hengshan, and Jianghu came to light. The high ministers conducted a thorough investigation of everyone connected with the affair and ferreted out all the conspirators. Twenty or thirty thousand persons were tried and executed.

7The sentence is obscure, and commentators differ widely in their interpretations.

The government authorities became increasingly cruel and exacting and the laws more precise and detailed than ever.

At this time the emperor had sent out a call for men of unusual character and learning to take positions in the government, and some of them had reached the highest offices. Among them Gongsun Hong, who became chancellor, made a point of using coarse bedding and refusing to eat highly spiced food, hoping to set an example for the empire. His efforts, however, had no effect upon the customs of the time and men only devoted themselves with greater energy to the pursuit of reward and gain.

The following year the general of swift cavalry Hao Qubing led another attack on the Xiongnu, returning with 40,000 enemy heads. In the fall the Huayu king, leading 30,000 or 40,000 of his barbarian subjects, came to surrender to the Han. The Han dispatched 20,000 carriages to fetch them, and when they arrived in the capital, gifts and rewards were bestowed upon them, as well as upon the Han soldiers who had distinguished themselves. This year the total expenditures amounted to over ten billion cash.

Some ten or more years previous to this the Yellow River had broken its banks in the region of Guan, and during the years that followed, the regions of Liang and Chu suffered repeatedly from floods. The provinces bordering the river would no sooner repair the embankments then the water would break through again, so that an incalculable amount of money was spent in vain.

Some time after this Pan Xi, hoping to avoid the difficulties involved in transporting grain past Mt. Dizhu, on the Yellow River, began work on irrigation canals from the Yellow and Fen rivers which were intended to open up the region between the two rivers for farming, a project requiring a labour force of 20,000 or 30,000 men. Zheng Dangshi, considering the transport of grain via the Wei River to be too lengthy and circuitous, began work on a canal running directly from Chang'an to Huayin, a project which required a similar number of labourers. Still other canals were under construction at Shaofang, requiring the same number of labourers. Each of these projects had been in progress for two or three years without reaching completion and each necessitated expenditures ranging into billions of cash.

The emperor also turned his attention to the large-scale raising of horses for use in campaigns against the barbarians. Twenty or thirty thousand horses were brought to the region of Chang'an to be pastured, but as there were not enough conscripts in the area within the Pass to train and take care of them, more men were recruited from the neighbouring provinces. The Xiongnu barbarians
who had surrendered were all supposed to be fed and clothed by the government, but funds in the government offices proved insufficient, and the emperor was obliged to reduce the expenses of his own table, dispense with his carriage drawn by four horses of matched colour, and pay out money from his private reserves in order to make up the deficiency.

The next year (120 BC) the lands east of the mountains were troubled by floods and many of the people were reduced to starvation. The emperor dispatched envoys to the provinces and kingdoms to empty the granaries and relieve the sufferings of the poor, but there was not enough food to go around. He then called upon wealthy families to make loans to the needy, but even this did not remedy the situation. At last he ordered some 700,000 of the poor to emigrate and resettle in the lands west of the Pass and the region of New Qin south of Shouchang. Food and clothing were to be supplied to them for the first few years by the government officials, who were also instructed to lend them what they needed to start a livelihood. Envoys sent to supervise the various groups of emigrants poured out of the capital in such numbers that their carts and carriage covers were constantly in sight of each other on the roads. The expenses of the move were estimated in the billions, the final sum reaching incalculable proportions.

By this time the funds of the government officials were completely exhausted. The rich merchants and big traders, however, were busy accumulating wealth and forcing the poor into their hire, transporting goods back and forth in hundreds of carts, buying up surplus commodities and hoarding them in the villages; even the feudal lords were forced to go to them with bowed heads and beg for what they needed. Others who were engaged in smelting iron and extracting salt from sea water accumulated fortunes amounting to tens of thousands of catties of gold, and yet they did nothing to help the distress of the nation, and the common people were plunged deeper and deeper into misery.

With this the emperor consulted his high ministers on plans to change the coinage and issue a new currency in order to provide for the expenses of the state and to suppress the idle and unscrupulous landlords who were acquiring such huge estates. At this time there were white deer in the imperial park, while the privy treasury was in possession of a considerable amount of silver and tin. It had been over forty years since Emperor Wen changed over to the four-shu copper coins. From the beginning of Emperor Wu’s reign, because revenue in coin had been rather scarce, the government officials had from time to time extracted copper from the mountains in their areas and minted new coins, while

among the common people there was a good deal of illegal minting of coins, until the number in circulation had grown beyond estimate. As the coins became more numerous and of poorer quality, goods became scarcer and higher in price. The officials therefore advised the emperor, saying, "In ancient times, currency made of hides was used by the feudal lords for gifts and presentations. At present there are three types of metal in use: gold, which is the most precious; silver, which ranks second; and copper, which is third. The ‘half-tael’ coins now in use are supposed by law to weigh four shu, but people have tampered with them to such an extent, illegally filing off bits of copper from the reverse side, that they have become increasingly light and thin and the price of goods has accordingly risen. Such currency is extremely troublesome and expensive to use, especially in distant regions."

The white deer in the imperial park were accordingly killed and their hides cut into one-foot squares, embroidered at the borders with silk thread of different colours, and made into hide currency. Each square was valued at 400,000 cash. When members of the imperial house and the nobility appeared at court in the spring and autumn and offered their gifts to the throne, they were required to present their jade insignia upon one of these deer-skin squares before they were allowed to proceed with the ceremony.

In addition, “white metal” coins were made from an alloy of silver and tin. Since the dragon is most useful in the heavens, the horse most useful on earth, and the tortoise most useful to mankind, the coins were made in three grades. The first was inscribed “weight eight taels” and was round, with a picture of a dragon on it. It was called a “white sun,” and was valued at 3,000 cash. The second was inscribed “less in weight,” was square, and bore a picture of a horse. It was worth 500 cash. The third was inscribed “still less in weight,” was oval in shape, and bore a picture of a tortoise. It was valued at 300 cash. Orders were sent to the government officials to melt down the old “half-tael” coins and mint new three-shu coins, inscribed with their weight. Orders were also given that all persons found guilty of illegally minting any of the new silver or copper coins should be put to death. In spite of this, however, any number of persons in the government and among the people were apprehended for illegally minting silver coins.

At this time Dongguo Xianyang and Kong Jin were appointed assistants to

Because its shell may be used for divination.
the ministry of agriculture and put in charge of the control of salt and iron, while Sang Hongyang, because of his experience in money matters, was given a post in the palace. Dongguo Xianyang was a leading salt manufacturer of Qi, and Kong Jin a great iron smelter of Nanyang; both of them had accumulated fortunes amounting to 100,000 catties of gold and for that reason had been recommended for office by Zhong Dangshi. Sang Hongyang was the son of a merchant of Luoyang who, because of his ability to work sums in his head, had been made a palace attendant at the age of thirteen. When it came to a question of how to make a profit, therefore, the three of them knew their business down to the smallest detail.

By this time the laws had been made much stricter, and many of the lesser officials had been dismissed from office as a result. Military expeditions were frequent, but since many people had bought exemption from military service, purchasing ranks as high as the equivalent of fifth foed, there were fewer and fewer men left who could be called into service. The government therefore decided to demote men of the qianfu or fifth rank to the level of petty officials, making them subject to conscription; anyone who wished to avoid service was then obliged to present a horse to the government. The petty officials who had been dismissed were punished by being made to cut underbrush in the Shanglin Park or work on the construction of the Kunming Lake.

The following year (119 BC) the general in chief Wei Qing and the general of swift cavalry Huo Qubing marched in great force to attack the Xiongnu, capturing or killing 80,000 or 90,000 of the barbarians. Rewards handed out for the expedition amounted to 500,000 catties of gold. The Han armies lost over 100,000 horses. In addition, there were the usual costs for transporting provisions and for carriages and weapons. At this time the government treasuries were so depleted that the fighting men received hardly any of their pay.

The officials, complaining that the three-shu coins were too light and easy to tamper with, proposed that the provinces and feudal kingdoms be ordered to mint five-shu coins with rims around the edge of the reverse side so that it would be impossible to file them down without detection.

The minister of agriculture also brought to the emperor’s attention a proposal of his assistants in charge of salt and iron, Kong Jin and Dongguo Xianyang, which read:

1The lake was used to practice naval tactics in preparation for an attack on the region of southwest China known at this time as Kunming, hence its name.

Mountains and seas are the storehouses of heaven and earth, and it is proper that any revenue from them should go to the privy treasury of the Son of Heaven. Your Majesty, however, being of an unselfish nature, has turned over the control of these natural resources to the ministry of agriculture to supplement the income from taxes. We propose, therefore, that the manufacture of salt be permitted to any of the common people who are willing to supply their own capital and agree to use implements furnished by the government. Evaporating pans will be rented to them by the officials. At present there are people with no fixed residence or occupation who attempt without authority to gain control of the resources of the mountains and seas, accumulating enormous fortunes and exploiting the poor. Countless proposals have already been made on ways to prevent this situation. We suggest that anyone who dares to cast his own iron vessels and engage in the evaporation of salt be condemned to wear fetters on his left foot, and that his vessels and other equipment be confiscated by the government. In provinces which do not produce iron, subofficials for the control of iron goods should be set up, subject for convenience’s sake to the jurisdiction of the district in which they are located.

As a result of this proposal, Kong Jin and Dongguo Xianyang were sent by post carriage to travel about the empire and put into effect their scheme for salt and iron monopolies, establishing the necessary government bureaus. Wealthy men who had previously been engaged in the salt and iron industries were appointed as officials in the bureaus so that the way to official position became even more confused, depending less and less upon the older methods of selection, and many merchants actually got to be government officials.

The merchants, taking advantage of the frequent changes in currency, had been hoarding goods in order to make a profit. The high officials therefore announced to the emperor:

The provinces and kingdoms have suffered from repeated disasters and many of the poorest people who had no means of livelihood have been moved to broader and more fertile lands. To effect this, Your Majesty has economized on food and other expenses and paid out funds from the privy treasury to relieve the sufferings of your subjects, liberalizing the terms of loans and taxes. And yet there are still some who do not turn to the work of the fields, while merchants grow more
nervous than ever. The poor have no stores of provisions left and must look to the government for support.

Formerly graded taxes were levied on small carts and on the strings of cash in the possession of merchants. We request that these taxes be levied again in the same way as before. All merchants and those engaged in secondary occupations, all those who lend money for interest, who buy up goods and hoard them in the villages, and who travel about in search of profit, although their names are not listed on the market registers, should be required to make a declaration of their possessions and should be taxed at the rate of one suan (120 cash) on each 2,000 cash. For all craftsmen and founders who have already paid a tax to carry on their occupation, the rate should be one suan on each 4,000 cash. All those who are not equal in rank to petty officials, or who are not “elders” or soldiers engaged in the defense of the northern frontier, should be required to pay one suan for each cart, but for merchants the rate should be two suans per cart. Boats five zhang or more in length should be taxed one suan. Anyone hiding his possessions and failing to report them, or failing to make a complete report, should be sent to a frontier post to serve for a year and his wealth should be confiscated. Anyone who can produce evidence that a false report has been made should receive half of the wealth confiscated as a result. Merchants who are enrolled in the market registers, as well as the members of their families, should be forbidden to register any farm lands in their names. The purpose of this would be to benefit the farmers. Anyone found guilty of violating this law should have his lands and field labourers confiscated.

The emperor, impressed by the words of a man named Bu Shi, summoned him to court and made him a palace attendant, giving him the honourary rank of zishouzhang and presenting him with ten qing of land. These rewards were announced throughout the empire so that everyone might know of Bu Shi’s example.

1Distinguished men over fifty chosen from among the common people to act as consultants to government officials.

As in the case of the proposal above for the mining of three-stone iron, the text gives only the suggestion of the officials and does not say what action was taken on it. In both cases, however, the proposals were put into effect.

Bu Shi was a native of Henan, where his family made a living by farming and animal raising. When his parents died, Bu Shi left home, handing over the house, the lands, and all the family wealth to his younger brother, who by this time was full grown. For his own share he took only 100 or so of the sheep they had been raising, which he led off into the mountains to pasture. In the course of 10 years or so, Bu Shi’s sheep had increased to over 1,000 and he had bought his own house and fields. His younger brother in the meantime had failed completely in the management of the farm, but Bu Shi promptly handed over to him a share of his own wealth. This happened several times. Just at that time the Han was sending its generals at frequent intervals to attack the Xiongnu. Bu Shi journeyed to the capital and submitted a letter to the throne, offering to turn over half of his wealth to the government to help in the defence of the border. The emperor dispatched an envoy to ask if Bu Shi wanted a post in the government.

“From the time I was a child,” Bu Shi replied, “I have been an animal raiser. I have had no experience at government service and would certainly not want such a position.”

“Perhaps then your family has suffered some injustice that you would like to report?” inquired the envoy.

But Bu Shi answered, “I have never in my life had a quarrel with anyone. If there are poor men in my village, I lend them what they need, and if there are men who do not behave properly, I guide and counsel them. Where I live, everyone does as I say. Why should I suffer any injustice from others? There is nothing I want to report!”

“If that is the case,” said the envoy, “then what is your objective in making this offer?”

Bu Shi replied, “The Son of Heaven has set out to punish the Xiongnu. In my humble opinion, every worthy man should be willing to fight to the death to defend the borders, and every person with wealth ought to contribute to the expense. If this were done, then the Xiongnu could be wiped out!”

The envoy made a complete record of Bu Shi’s words and reported them to the emperor. The emperor discussed the matter with the chancellor Gonggum Hong, but the latter said, “The proposal is simply not in accord with human nature! Such eccentric people are of no use in guiding the populace, but only throw the laws into confusion. I beg Your Majesty not to accept his offer!”

For this reason the emperor put off answering Bu Shi for a long time, and finally, after several years had passed, turned down the offer, whereupon Bu Shi
went back to his fields and pastures.

A year or so later the armies marched off on several more expeditions, and the Han rulers and his people surrendered to the Han. As a result the expenditures of the government increased greatly and the granaries and treasuries were soon empty. The following year a number of poor people were transferred to other regions, all of them depending upon the government for their support, and there were not enough supplies to go around. At this point Bu Shi took 200,000 cash of his own and turned the sum over to the governor of Huan to assist the people who were emigrating to other regions. A list of the wealthy men of Huan who had contributed to the aid of the poor was sent to the emperor and he recognized Bu Shi’s name. “This is the same man who once offered half his wealth to aid in the defence of the border!” he exclaimed, and presented Bu Shi with a sum of money equivalent to the amount necessary to buy off 400 men from military duty. Bu Shi once more turned the entire sum over to the government. At this time the rich families were all scrambling to hide their wealth; only Bu Shi, unlike the others, had offered to contribute to the expenses of the government. The emperor decided that Bu Shi was really a man of exceptional worth after all, and therefore bestowed upon him the honours mentioned above in order to hint to the people that they might well follow his example.

At first Bu Shi was unwilling to become a palace attendant, but the emperor told him, “I have some sheep in the Shanglin Park which I would like you to take care of.” Bu Shi then accepted the post of palace attendant and, wearing a coarse robe and straw sandals, went off to tend the sheep. After a year or so, the sheep had grown fat and were reproducing at a fine rate. The emperor, when he visited the park and saw the flocks, commended Bu Shi on his work. “It is not only with sheep,” Bu Shi commented. “Governing people is the same way. Get them up at the right time, let them rest at the right time, and if there are any bad ones, pull them out once before they have a chance to spoil the flock!”

The emperor, struck by his words, decided to give him a trial as magistrate of the district of Goushi. When his administration proved beneficial to the people of Goushi, the emperor transferred him to the post of magistrate of Chengao and put him in charge of the transportation of supplies, where his

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X. Men were allowed to purchase exemption from military service on the border for 300 cash. According to the interpretation I have followed, therefore, the emperor returned to Bu Shi the sum of 120,000 cash, though there are other interpretations of the sentence.

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X. These were government offices which bought up goods that were cheap in one part of the country and transported them to regions where they were scarce or rare. The purpose was ostensibly to provide better distribution of goods throughout the nation, though it would seem that the actual object was to make money for the government.

X. The text of this passage appears to be corrupt and the translation is highly tentative.
integrity, he was gradually promoted in office until he became one of the six highest ministers. After the emperor and Zhang Tong had made the "show
money" out of the hides of the white deer, the emperor questioned Yan Yi on
his opinion of the move. Yan Yi replied, "When the kings and marquises come
to court to offer their congratulations, they are expected to present their insignia
of green jade, which are worth several thousand cash apiece. Now, however,
they will be required to present the insignia on deer hides worth 400,000 cash.
There seems to be a certain lack of balance between the basic elements of the
ceremony and those that are only secondary." The emperor was not at all pleased
by these words.

In addition, Yan Yi was on bad terms with Zhang Tong. When someone
brought an accusation against Yan Yi for some other affair, the matter was
referred to Zhang Tong for investigation. Earlier Yan Yi had been talking with
one of his guests, when the guest remarked that some new law that had just been
put into effect did not seem very practical. Yan Yi had made no answer, but
given only a subtle frown of his lips. Zhang Tong sent a memorial to the
throne relating this affair and stating, "Yan Yi, one of the nine highest ministers,
having seen that the law was impractical, did not state his opinion to the emperor,
but nevertheless disapproved of it in his heart. For this offence he is deserving
dei death!" From this time on, the crime known as "disapproval at heart" became
a part of the law, and most of the high ministers and officials resorted to this
phrase in order to stay in the good graces of the emperor.

The emperor had already issued the order for levies on strings of cash and
had also heaped honours on Bu Shi, but it was soon found that no other private
citizens were willing to imitate Bu Shi's example by donating wealth to the
government officials. The emperor therefore began to listen to as many accusa-
tions as could be brought forward against persons attempting to hide their wealth
in order to avoid the levy.

In the provinces and kingdoms there was so much illegal minting going on
that the cash had become extremely numerous and light in weight. The high
officials therefore asked that the officials in the capital who were in charge of
casting metal be ordered to mint coins with red rims, each of which would be
worth five of the five-shu cash presently in circulation. No taxes or other
payments to the government were to be accepted unless made in these coins.
The silver coins had likewise little by little become debased in value until the
people no longer regarded them as worth using. The government attempted to
halt this tendency by laws, but these had no effect and by the time a year or so

had passed, the silver coins had gone completely out of circulation.

This same year (116 BC) Zhang Tong died, an occurrence which grieved
the common people not at all.

Two years later, the red-rimmed coins had become worthless, the people
having managed to use them while cleverly evading the intention of the law.
They were declared impractical and withdrawn from circulation.

With this an order was issued forbidding any further minting of coins in the
provinces and feudal kingdoms. All minting was to be done by three offices set
up in the Shanglin Park. Since there were already a number of offices in
 circulation, it was ordered that no cash other than those minted by the three
offices should be accepted as legal tender anywhere in the empire. All copper
coins previously minted in the provinces and kingdoms were withdrawn from
circulation and melted down, the copper being turned over to the three offices.
After this there were fewer and fewer people who attempted to mint their own
cash, since the cost of making a passable imitation did not repay the effort. Only
highly skilled professional criminals continued to produce counterfeit coins.

Bu Shi was transferred to the post of prime minister of Qi. At the instigation
of Yang Ke, charges were brought forward all over the empire against men who
attempted to conceal their wealth from the levy, practically every family of
middling means or over found itself under accusation. Du Zhou was put in
charge of the investigations and, of those brought to trial, very few got off with
a light sentence. The emperor dispatched parties of assistants under the imperial
secretary and the commandant of justice to go to the various provinces and
kangions and examine the charges of concealed wealth. The wealth confiscated
from the people as a result of their investigations was calculated in the billions
of cash, with male and female slaves numbering in the thousands; the confis-
cated fields amounted to several hundred qing in the larger districts, and over
100 qing in the smaller ones, with a proportionate number of houses. Practically
all the merchants of middling or better means were ruined and the people,
declining that they had better indulge in tasty food and fine clothing while they
still had the opportunity, made no effort to lay away any wealth for the future.
The government officials for their part found themselves with more and more
funds at their disposal, due to the salt and iron monopolies and the confiscations
of wealth.

The customs barrier at the Hangs Pass was moved east to enlarge the area
within the Pass, and the left and right districts of the capital were established.
Originally the minister of agriculture had charge of the salt and iron
monopolies, but the number of government offices and the expenses involved proved so large that an official called the director of waterworks was set up to take charge of the salt and iron monopolies. Later, when the confiscation of concealed wealth was initiated by Yang Ke, the goods and funds stored in the Shanglin Park became so numerous that the director of waterworks was ordered to take charge of the park. The treasures of the park were already full by this time and had to be continually enlarged.

At this time the kingdom of Southern Yue was preparing to use its ships to assault and drive out the Han forces in its territory. For this reason extensive alterations were made on the Kunming Lake, rows of observation towers built along its borders, and ships constructed with superstructures rising ten zhang or more and topped with banners and flags, forming a most impressive spectacle. The emperor was so stirred by the sight that he ordered the construction of the Terrace of Cypress Beams, which measured twenty or thirty zhang in breadth. From this time on the building of imperial palaces proceeded on a more lavish scale day by day.

The wealth confiscated as a result of the accusations was divided among the director of waterworks, the privy treasurer, the minister of agriculture, and the minister of carriage. Each of these appointed agricultural officials who travelled from time to time about the provinces and directed the cultivation of the confiscated fields as soon as they were taken over from their former owners. The male and female slaves who had been seized were assigned to the imperial parks to raise dogs, horses, other animals, and birds, or were sent to the various government offices for employment. The government offices became increasingly confused in function and were set up in greater and greater number, while the number of slaves moved from the provinces to the capital was so large that only by transporting 40,000,000 piculs of grain up from the lower reaches of the Yellow River, and adding it to the grain bought up by the officials, was the capital able to keep itself adequately supplied.

When Suo Zhong informed the emperor that among the sons of the old established families and the rich merchants there were many who engaged in cock fighting, horse racing, hunting, and gambling, thereby setting a bad example for the common people, the emperor ordered the officials to arrest such persons for violation of the laws and regulations. By getting one suspect to implicate his associates as well, they managed to drag in several thousand persons, who were called "rooted-out convicts". If those arrested were willing to pay a sufficient price to the government, however, they were pardoned and even appointed as palace attendants. This marked the ruin of the old system of selecting palace attendants on the basis of merit.

At this time the lands east of the mountains were suffering from floods caused by the Yellow River, and for several years the harvests had been poor. Within an area of 1,000 or 2,000 li square the distress was so great that people were reduced at times to cannibalism. The emperor, taking pity upon the plight of the people, issued an edict which read: "In the region of the Yangtze they burn their fields before ploughing and flood them before hoering. Let the famine victims now be permitted to leave their homes and emigrate to the area between the Huai and the Yangtze rivers in search of food, and if they wish to settle there, let them do so." He dispatched a veritable stream of officials along the roads to look out for the people and had grain sent down from Ba and Shu to relieve the crisis.

The following year (114 BC) the emperor for the first time made a tour of the provinces and kingdoms, travelling east across the Yellow River. The governor of Hedong Province east of the river, not expecting the emperor to visit his territory, had made no preparations. He committed suicide. In the following year) the emperor travelled west, crossing the Long Mountains. The imperial entourage arrived so suddenly that the governor of Longxi was unable to provide food for all of the emperor’s attendants, and he too committed suicide. The emperor then journeyed north through the Xiao Pass and, accompanied by 20,000 or 30,000 cavalry, hunted in the region of New Qin, where he inspected the disposition of the troops along the border before returning to the capital. He discovered that in New Qin stretches of land measuring as much as 1,000 li or more were being left wide open without guards or patrol posts. To remedy the situation he executed the governor of Beidai and his subordinates, who were responsible for this state of affairs, and gave orders that the people were to be allowed to raise horses in the districts along the border. Mares were lent out by the government officials for a period of three years, after which they were to be returned with an interest of one foal for every ten mares. The people of the region were also exempted from the reports and levies on wealth, so that the region of New Qin was soon filled with immigrants.

By this time the precious cauldron had been found and altars set up to the Earth Lord and the Great Unity, and the high officials were debating on plans for the performance of the Peng and Shan sacrifices. Throughout the empire the provinces and feudal kingdoms were all busy repairing roads and bridges and putting the old palaces in order, while in the various districts along the imperial
highway the district officials laid in provisions and prepared their tableware in anticipation of the imperial visit.

The next year (112 BC) the kingdom of Southern Yue rebelled and the Qiang barbarians of the west invaded the border, pillaging and murdering. Because the region east of the mountains was still suffering from a lack of food, the emperor declared a general amnesty to the empire. With the prisoners thereby released, and the men trained in the south for service on the two warships — a force of over 200,000 in all — an attack was launched on Southern Yue. At the same time 20,000 or 30,000 cavalry men from the provinces of Heng, Hedong, and Honan were sent west to attack the Qiang barbarians. Another 20,000 or 30,000 were sent across the Yellow River to fortify the western border at Lingju. The provinces of Zhangye and Jiouquan were set up, and in the provinces of Shang, Shuofang, Xihe, and Hexi, officials in charge of the opening of new lands, as well as soldiers designated to garrison the lands along the border, numbering 600,000 men, were set to working the lands at garrison farms. Roads were repaired and provisions sent to the forces from the central part of the empire. All of the men were dependent upon the ministry of agriculture for their supplies, although the distance over which supplies had to be transported was anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 li.

Since there were not enough arms to supply the men on the border, weapons were dispatched from the imperial armory and workshops to make up the deficiency. There was also a serious lack of horses for carriages and cavalry and, since the government officials had no little money, they found it difficult to buy up enough to keep the troops supplied. The government therefore issued an order to everyone, from the feudal lords down to officials of the 300 rank class, commanding them to donate a specified number of stallions to the government, depending upon their rank. At village posts throughout the empire men were sent to breeding colts, for which they received a certain interest each year.

Bu Shi, at this time the prime minister of Qi, sent a letter to the throne saying, "I have always heard that the distresses of the sovereign are a source of shame to his subjects. Now that the kingdom of Southern Yue has revolted, I beg that my sons and I be allowed to join the men of Qi who are skilled in naval warfare to go and die in battle!"

The emperor responded with an edict saying, "Although Bu Shi in person ploughed the fields and pastured his animals, he did not work for private gain. If he had any surplus, he immediately turned it over to the government officials to aid in the expenses of government. Now unhappily the empire faces this threat from abroad, and Bu Shi, roused to action, has volunteered to go with his sons to die in battle. Although he has not actually taken part in combat, it is obvious that he bears in his heart a true sense of duty!" The emperor therefore presented Bu Shi with the rank of marquis in the area within the Pass, along with sixty catties of gold and ten qing of farmland. He had the action widely publicized throughout the empire, but no one responded to the hint. Among all the hundreds of marquises, there was not one who volunteered to join the armies in attacking the Qiang and Yue barbarians.

In the eighth month, when the feudal lords came to present new wine in the ancestral temples of the dynasty, the officials of the privy treasury made a close examination of the tributes of gold which they brought with them. As a result, over 100 marquises were tried on charges of having presented insufficient or faulty gold and were deprived of their titles.

Following this, Bu Shi was appointed to the post of imperial secretary. After he took over this position, he discovered that in the provinces and kingdoms the system of government salt and iron monopolies was working to great disadvantage. The utensils supplied by the government were poor in quality and high in price, and yet at times the people were actually being forced by the officials to buy them. In addition, because of the tax on boats, traders had diminished in number and the price of goods gone up. He therefore asked Kong Jin to speak on his behalf to the emperor, recommending the abolition of the boat tax. From this time on the emperor began to dislike Bu Shi.

After three years of continuous fighting, the Han forces managed to suppress the Qiang barbarians and wipe out the kingdom of Southern Yue. On the southern border, from Panyu" on the coast to the south of Shu, seventeen new provinces were set up. These were governed in accordance with the old customs of the inhabitants and were not required to pay taxes. The provinces of Nanyang, Hanzhong, and those further on, were ordered to supply food and money to the officials and soldiers of the new provinces which adjourned their respective borders, as well as horses and equipment for the relay service. From time to time, however, there were minor uprisings in the new provinces in which Han officials were murdered, so that the central government was obliged to dispatch troops recruited from the south to punish the rebels. In the space of a

13The region of the present city of Canton. The line of new provinces ran from here west to present-day Sichuan Province.
year over 10,000 men had been dispatched and the expenses for all of this had to be borne by the ministry of agriculture. Because of its system of cultivating transport and its levies on salt and iron, which it used to supplement the revenue from taxes, the ministry of agriculture was able to meet these expenses. In the districts through which the troops passed, however, the officials, concerned only that they should have enough funds to supply the armies without turning short, did not dare to complain of the inordinate tax burden placed upon them.

The following year, the first year of the era yuanfeng (110 BC), Bu Shi was degraded to the post of grand tutor to the heir apparent. Sang Hongyang was made secretary in charge of grain and put in control of the ministry of agriculture, as well as taking over from Kong Jiu complete supervision of the salt and iron monopolies throughout the empire. Sang Hongyang believed that the reason prices had risen so sharply was that the various government officials were engaging in trade and competing against each other. Furthermore, when goods were transported to the capital as payment for taxes from various parts of the empire, the value of gold did not equal the cost of transportation. He therefore proposed that some twenty or thirty assistants be appointed to the ministry of agriculture who would be sent out to supervise the various provinces and kingdoms, where they would travel about and set up the necessary transport offices for equalizing prices, as well as salt and iron offices. In the case of distant regions, orders were to be given that local products commanding a high price, such as would ordinarily be carted away and sold by the traders in other regions, should be transported to the capital in lieu of taxes. In the capital a balanced standard office was to be set up which would receive and store these goods brought in from various parts of the empire. The government artisans were to be ordered to make carriages and other equipment needed to put the system into effect. All expenses would be borne by the ministry of agriculture, whose officials would then have complete control over all the goods in the empire, selling when prices were high and buying when they were low. In this way the wealthy merchants and large-scale traders, deprived of any prospect of making big profits, would go back to farming, and it would become impossible for any commodity to rise sharply in price. Because the price of goods would thereby be controlled throughout the empire, the system was to be called the “balanced standard”.

The emperor agreed with this idea and gave permission for it to be put into effect. Following this, the emperor travelled north as far as Shunfang; from there he proceeded to Mt. Tai, journeyed along the seacoast and the northern border, and returned to the capital. He handed out gifts and awards to the places he visited along the way, doling out over 1,000,000 rolls of silk as well as cash and gold in the hundreds of millions, all of which the ministry of agriculture was able to supply.

Sang Hongyang proposed that petty officials be allowed to buy office by presenting grains to the government, and that men accused of crimes be permitted to purchase their ransom in the same way. He also suggested that the common people be allowed to present varying quantities of grain to the granaries at Sweet Springs in exchange for lifetime exemption from military service and guarantees that they would not be subject to accusations leading to confiscation of their wealth.

Areas that were in need were immediately supplied by shipments of grain from other provinces, and the various officials of the ministry of agriculture all drew grain from east of the mountains, so that the amount transported to the capital increased to 6,000,000 piculs annually. Within a year the granaries at Taishang in the capital and that at Sweet Springs had been filled, the frontiers enjoyed a surplus of grain and other goods, and the transportation offices had 5,000,000 rolls of silk. Though taxes on the people had not been increased, there was now more than enough to cover the expenditures of the empire. As a result Sang Hongyang was rewarded with the rank of zhouchuchang and once more presented with 100 catties of gold.

This year there was a minor drought and the emperor ordered the officials to pray for rain. Bu Shi remarked to the emperor, “The government officials are supposed to collect what taxes they need for their food and clothing, and that is all! Now Sang Hongyang has them sitting in the market stalls buying and selling goods and scrambling for a profit. If Your Majesty were to boil Sang Hongyang alive, then I think Heaven might send us rain!”

The Grand Historian remarks: When the farmers, the artisans, and the merchants first began to exchange articles among themselves, that was when currency came into being—porcelain shells and sea shells, gold and copper coins, knife-shaped money and spade-shaped money. Thus its origin is very old. Concerning the time of Emperor Ku14 and the ages before him we can say nothing, for they are too far away. The Book of Documents, however, tells us

14The third of the legendary “Five Emperors” of antiquity.
within the four seas under a single rule.

The currency of the times of Emperor Shun and the Xia dynasty consisted of three types of metal: gold, silver, and copper; while in Zhou times there was copper cash, knife-shaped money, cloth-shaped money, and money made of tortoise shells or sea shells. When the Qin united the world, only two kinds of currency were used throughout the nation. The more valuable was that made of gold in denominations of twenty taels. The less valuable was the copper cash, inscribed with the words “half-tael” and weighing that amount. (Pears, jade, tortoise shells, sea shells, silver, tin, and similar materials, though used for ornaments or stored away as treasures, were not employed as currency.) The currency, however, fluctuated according to the times, having no fixed value. At this time the ruler was busy driving back the barbarians from the borders of the empire, while within the empire he was carrying out various construction works and projects, so that although the men who remained at home worked the fields, they could not supply enough to eat, and though the women were and spun, they could not produce enough clothing. And so we see that in antiquity there was once a time when the entire wealth and resources of the nation were exhausted in the service of the ruler, and yet he found them insufficient. There was but one reason for this: the stream of circumstances flowed so violently at that time that it made such a situation inevitable. Surely there is nothing strange about this.

A section of the Book of Documents. Emperor Yu was the founder of the Xia dynasty.

— Most texts erroneously read “three”.

— This list is of course a rolled stack on Emperor Wu, whose foreign wars and various other expansive undertakings—“stream of circumstances,” as Sima Qian euphemistically calls them—brought the empire to the same state of exhaustion as that which prevailed under the First Emperor of the Qin.