

Part A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

A.1 Research Question

Was the Rebellion of the Seven States a result of Emperor Jing of Han's policies or a historical trend towards centralization?

A.2 Academic Sources

The Rebellion of the Seven States was the largest military uprising the Western Han Dynasty would ever face. Though none doubt the historical significance of the event, different perspectives exist regarding its underlying causes.

Some sources suggest that policies implemented by Emperor Jing of Han tensions to the point of armed conflict¹. This theory is also supported by examining works of Chao Cuo who had great influence over the emperor². In general, evidence from primary sources suggest that the emperor's policies played a critical role in escalating tensions³.

However, evidence from sources detached from the event suggest that the Rebellion of the Seven States was merely a part of a larger trend towards the centralization of power. This is evident in Public Security Policy by Jia Yi⁴, who warned of the previous emperor of mass rebellion from regional kings decades before the event. This view is also supported by researchers who examine the rebellion in the larger context of the Western Han Dynasty's policy transformation across generations⁵.

¹Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biographies Of Yuan Ang and Chao Cuo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

² Cuo, Chao. *Recommendation Of The Reduction Of Regional Power*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 155 BC.

³ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Liu Bi King Of Wu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

⁴ Yi, Jia. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

⁵ Xing Yue, Chi. *Put Rebellions Of The Seven States Down And Implementation Of The Western Han Empire Rule Policy Transformation*. Translated by Julien Liang. University of Inner Mongolia: School of History and Cultural Tourism, 2014.

A.3 Analysis and Evaluation of Sources

Primary Source: Qian, Si Ma. Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biographies Of Yuan Ang and Chao Cuo. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

The origin of the Ranked Biographies of Yuan Ang and Chao Cuo is from the Records of the Grand Historian by Si Ma Qian who published the work in 91 BC. As a historical record, the purpose of the work is to provide a detailed documentation of all the notable aspects and accomplishments of Chao Cuo. Regarding the life of Chao Cuo, the content consists of a description of his personality, notable actions, and death at the end of the emperor. The first value of the source is due to its origins within the Records of the Grand Historian, one of the few surviving historical records of the era which provides crucial insight that would otherwise be lost in history. Another value is the purpose of the work as an unbiased record of events, allowing readers to draw relatively accurate conclusions from a set of facts. However, the source is limited by its origin as the author was writing about a past emperor's actions while his successor was still in power. As such, it is possible that the author accounted for political pressure and adjusted his writing accordingly. Another limitation is the possible skewing of content due to personal biases of Si Ma Qian, who was castrated upon the order of Emperor Wu of Han, the son of Emperor Jing of Han. The author's personal grievances could have caused selective editing of historical facts.⁶

Primary Source: Yi, Jia. Public Security Policy. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

The origin of the article is from several decades prior to the Rebellion of the Seven States from Jia Yi to Emperor Wen of Han, Emperor Jing of Han's father. The purpose of the article is to warn the emperor of the inherent danger powerful regional kings posed. The

⁶ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Yuan Ang And Chao Cuo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

content of the article consists of Jia Yi analyzing past rebellions and concluding that should no fundamental change to the current system be made, regional kings would inevitably rebel against the central authority. The first value of the source is its content which demonstrates how those with the greater picture in mind foresaw what was to come. Another value of the source comes from its origin as Jia Yi was trusted by the emperor and privy to private conversations. As such, his writing may be indicative of the beliefs of central authority behind closed doors. However, the source is limited by its origin, being written several decades prior to the rebellion. During this time, the social and political atmosphere changed noticeably, resulting in certain parts of the article no longer being applicable. Another limitation comes from the content. As Jia Yi was a scholar, his view of the political situation is theoretical in nature and does not account for challenges that come with governing an empire as large and complex as China, likely resulting in him overlooking practical complications that are underrepresented in the article.⁷

A.4 Structure and Organization

The scope of the investigation will be from the beginning of the Western Han dynasty to the reign of Emperor Wu of Han. The investigation will consist of three topics: the trend towards centralization of power and decline of feudalism in Chinese history, the inherent threat regional kings posed to central authority, and the policies of Emperor Jing of Han regarding regional kings. It can be concluded that although widespread and coordinated armed rebellion to the size and scale of the Rebellion of the Seven States was impacted by policies of the emperor, the conflict between regional and central authority was part of a larger trend in history.

⁷ Yi, Jia. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

Part B: Investigation

B.1 The trend towards centralization of power

For the first two thousand years of Chinese dynastical history, ruling dynasties operated on the basis of regional rulers and vassal states who all recognized the authority of the highest ruler, the son of heaven.⁸ This was abruptly ended by the Qin dynasty who enforced a system of provinces and counties which were all directly controlled by the central government⁹. Though the Western Han Dynasty initially rolled back the Qin system in eastern parts of the empire due to practical concerns, the gradual trend towards centralization of power remained.

Historians tend to agree that the centralization of power was not only inevitable but crucial in holding the nation together¹⁰. Prior to Emperor Jing of Han's rule, his predecessors Emperor Gao Zu of Han¹¹ and Emperor Wen of Han¹² both suppressed various regional rebellions during their reign. Each time, a rebellion would either be foiled beforehand or suppressed by armed conflict. However, every rebellion was a threat to national security that had devastating political and economic implications. Looking beyond Emperor Jing of Han's rule, his successor continued to forward the centralization of power¹³. First, the national ideology was changed to Confucianism. Then, the central government nationalized key resources such as iron and salt. Finally, an imperial edict, mandating that land of regional

⁸ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Zhou*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

⁹ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Qin Shi Huang*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹⁰ Xing Yue, Chi. *Put Rebellions Of The Seven States Down And Implementation Of The Western Han Empire Rule Policy Transformation*. Translated by Julien Liang. University of Inner Mongolia: School of History and Cultural Tourism, 2014.

¹¹ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Gao Zu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹² Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Xiao Wen*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹³ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Xiao Wu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

kings be split evenly amongst all his sons rather than just one,¹⁴ ensured that every regional power would fade into obscurity. Looking to the actions of emperors before and after Emperor Han of Jing, many feel as though centralization of power was nothing but an inevitable trend that ultimately benefited the populace.

However, when examining the process, certain historians have also pointed out the increasingly unequal contract between ruler and subject. During the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history, Duke Jing of Qi once asked Confucius about governance, to which Confucius responded “A ruler shall fulfill the duties of a ruler. A subject that of a subject.”¹⁵ Here, the social contract is evident: if a ruler does not fulfill his duties, the subject no longer has an obligation towards that ruler. The anecdote demonstrates the belief of Confucianists and many other intellectuals of time of the mutual relation between subject and ruler. However, several thousand years later under the regime of Emperor Yong Zheng of Qing, one witnesses a completely different dynamic. In a memorial to the throne, minister Tian Wen Jing once wrote “the blessings of the ruler are so great, there is no way in which one can return the favour.” The emperor responded in scolding, proclaiming that a subject was to only fulfill their duties and not concern themselves with the actions of the ruler¹⁶. Contrasting Confucius to Yong Zheng, it is evident that the power dynamic has shifted unfairly towards the ruler.

While centralization did have its flaws as demonstrated by the power imbalance between subject and ruler, it was crucial in holding together the Chinese nation for thousands of years. Had China remained feudalistic, one cannot help but wonder whether the nation would have fractured and divided like other empires of the past. Though periods of chaos and

¹⁴ Che, Liu (Emperor Wu of Han). *Imperial Edict To Extend The Grace Of The Emperor*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 127 BC.

¹⁵ Confucius and disciples. *Analects Of Confucius, Chapter 20 Yan Yuan*. Translated by Julien Liang. Spring and Autumn Period, China: 475 BC.

¹⁶ Yin Zhen, Ai Xin Jue Luo (Emperor Yong Zheng of Qing). *Criticism of Tian Wen Jing's Memorial to the Throne*. Translated by Julien Liang. June 15, Seventh year of Yong Zheng.

divide did still occur, the firm belief in a strong and united central authority always resulted in the nation reuniting once again.

B.2 The inherent threat of regional kings

Regional rulers, though usually recognizing central authority, had massive autonomy over their own lands. They enjoyed varying degrees of autonomy based on their power and location, at times even directly contradicting central authority. Even when not in direct conflict, their mere existence alone often felt threatening to the emperor.

When examining the existence of regional kings, some historians view the threat of regional kings through the lense those who truly intended to revolt. For example, the King of Wu was preparing to overthrow the emperor for over forty years¹⁷. Prior to the Rebellion of the Seven States, the king hid wanted criminals from law enforcement, forged his own currency, raised his own military, and refused to pay homage to the emperor.

Another interpretation of the threat of regional kings is rooted in the examination of past rebellions by those such as King Ying Bu of Huai Nan¹⁸, the King of Ji Bei¹⁹, and the King of Huai Nan under the reign of Emperor Wen of Han²⁰. Given the frequency of past rebellions from regional kings, many of whom did not want to overthrow the central government but rather saw it as their only path to survival, the mere existence of regional powers can be a threat²¹.

When regional powers became too powerful they were destined to revolt either by choice or forces of political pressure. Oftentimes regional kings challenge central authority

¹⁷ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Liu Bi King Of Wu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹⁸ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Ji Bu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹⁹ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Gao Zu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

²⁰ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Xiao Wen*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

²¹ Yi, Jia. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

unwillingly as their only possible path of survival. As such, it can be concluded that the only way to prevent such a situation while allowing for the existence of regional powers would be for the emperor to have many regional kings that are all too weak to become a threat, hence eliminating the fears of both parties involved.

B.3 The policies of the emperor regarding regional kings

Chao Cuo, the emperor's most prominent minister and teacher since childhood, was a strong advocate for the reduction of regional power and heavily influenced the early policies of the emperor. When examined out of context, the evidence would suggest that it was specific policies that resulted in mass rebellion, as the moment the imperial edict to return the provinces of Kuai Ji and Yu Zhang to the central government was announced, the King of Wu started the rebellion.

Many argue that the emperor's policies were heavily influenced by Chao Cuo, citing the actions of Chao Cuo in his ranked biography²² as evidence. Being a fierce advocate for centralization, Chao Cuo advised the emperor on numerous occasions to address the threat of regional kings and to take specific actions in reducing their power²³. The emperor, having known Chao Cuo for most of his life, trusted his advice greatly and was under his influence.

Other historians believe that Emperor Jing of Han's policies were a direct continuation of the will of previous emperors. During the reign of his father, Emperor Wen of Han, regional kings were too powerful to be dealt with directly. As such, he chose to either weaken a regional king politically and economically or bait them into committing an act so egregious that it would be wrong for the emperor not to punish the regional ruler²⁴. Emperor

²² Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Yuan Ang And Chao Cuo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

²³ Cuo, Chao. *Recommendation Of The Reduction Of Regional Power*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 155 BC.

²⁴ Qian, Si Ma. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Xiao Wen*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

Wen of Han's actions were a continuation of even earlier policy as well, as was indicated by intellectuals of the time²⁵. Given the political situation of the time, these historians argue that with or without Chao Cuo, Emperor Jing of Han would have pursued a policy of weakening regional powers for the sake of his own rule anyways.

The doctrine of reducing regional power was one that was set decades before Emperor Jing of Han was even born and as a ruler it became infused as a part of his personal will. That being said, Chao Cuo may have influenced him to pursue more strong handed measures compared to those of his predecessors.

B.4 Conclusion

The historical trend of Chinese history was one towards the centralization of power. Though not without flaws, it likely contributed to the continuation of the Chinese civilization throughout history. Additionally, regional powers would inevitably challenge central authority when they became too powerful. Consequently, the only viable solution for their existence was for there to be many of them but all too weak to become a threat. The specific policies of Emperor Jing of Han in the reduction of regional power were a direct continuation of the will of his predecessors, though specific measures may likely have been influenced by Chao Cuo. It can thus be concluded that though specific policies of the emperor certainly had an effect on the immediate size and scale of the rebellion, the inherent nature of powerful regional kings and the historical trend of Chinese history rendered an armed conflict between central authority and regional powers inevitable.

²⁵ Yi, Jia. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.