

Independent Work: IB History HL Internal Assessment

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Part A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

A.1 Research Question

Was the Rebellion of the Seven States principally the result of Emperor Jing of Han's policies or a longer-term trend towards centralization?

A.2 Academic Sources

The Rebellion of the Seven States was the largest military uprising in the Western Han Dynasty. Though none doubt its historical significance, different perspectives exist regarding its causes. Some sources suggest that policies implemented by Emperor Jing of Han escalated tensions¹ to the point of armed conflict². This theory is also supported when examining the works of Chao Cuo³, a fierce advocate for centralization.

However, sources detached from the event suggest that the Rebellion of the Seven States was merely part of an ongoing resistance to the general trend towards the centralization of power within China.⁴ This can be inferred from the writings of Jia Yi⁵, who warned of the previous emperor of mass rebellion decades before it occurred. This view is also supported by

¹ Si Ma, Qian. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Liu Bi King Of Wu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

² Si Ma, Qian. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Yuan Ang and Chao Cuo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

³ Chao, Cuo. *Recommendation Of The Reduction Of Regional Power*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 155 BC.

⁴ Liu, Xin Ran. *The Ascension of Emperor Wen of Han to the Throne and the Second Generation Crisis*. Translated by Julien Liang. Central China Normal University: School of Chinese History, May 2012.

⁵ Jia, Yi. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

researchers who examine the rebellion in the larger context of the Western Han Dynasty's policy transformation across generations⁶.

A.3 Analysis and Evaluation of Sources

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

The origin of the source is from the Records of the Grand Historian by Si Ma Qian who published the work in 91 BC with the purpose of documenting the life of Chao Cuo. The content consists of his personality, notable actions, and death. The first value of the source comes from it being from one of few surviving historical records of the era, providing specific information on what would otherwise be lost to the past. Another value is the fact that the work provides a relatively detailed factual record of events, allowing readers to make conclusions based on a reliable set of facts. However, the source is limited as the author was writing about a dynasty still in power and may have been influenced by political pressure. Another limitation may come from selective editing due to the personal grievances of the author who was castrated upon orders of the emperor at the time.

⁶ Chi, Xing Yue. *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.

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

The article was written several decades prior to the Rebellion of the Seven States from Jia Yi to Emperor Wen of Han with the purpose of illustrating the inherent danger of regional kings. The content of the article consists of an analysis of past rebellions, concluding that should no fundamental change occur in time, regional kings would rebel. The source is valuable as it demonstrates how intellectuals already foresaw what was to come. Another value is due to Jia Yi being trusted by and close to the emperor; his writing could be indicative of the thoughts of the emperor. However, the source is limited as it was written several decades prior to the rebellion. During this time, social and political atmospheres changed noticeably, resulting in the incorrectness or inapplicability of certain parts. Another limitation comes from Jia Yi being a scholar, whose view of the situation does not account for practical challenges that are likely 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 two topics: the trend towards centralization of power in Chinese history and the policies of Emperor Jing of Han. 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.

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

Part B: Investigation

B.1 The trend in Chinese history 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 The Qin dynasty abruptly ended this practice, enforcing 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 in Chinese history 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 centralize power¹³. First, the national ideology was changed to Confucianism. Then, the central government nationalized key resources such as iron and salt.

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

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

¹⁰ Chi, Xing Yue. *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 Si Ma, Qian. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Annals Of Gao Zu*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

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

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

Finally, an imperial edict mandating that land of regional kings be split evenly amongst all his sons rather than just one¹⁴ 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 in Chinese history 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 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. The sharp contrast between Confucius and Yong Zheng’s responses shows the substantial shift in the power dynamic in favour of 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.

¹⁴ Liu, Che (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 Ai Xin Jue Luo, Yin Zhen (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.

Had China remained a decentralized feudalistic state, one cannot help but wonder whether the nation would have fractured and divided like other empires of the past. Though periods of chaos and divide did still occur, the firm belief in a strong and united central authority always resulted in the nation uniting once again.

B.2 The policies of the emperor regarding regional kings

Influenced by his advisors, Emperor Jing of Han was determined to take power away from regional kings by any means necessary. The moment the emperor ordered the King of Wu to cede two of his provinces he launched the rebellion with other regional kings. When examined away from its historical context, what one witnesses is the aggressive approach towards regional kings by the emperor.

Many argue that the emperor's policies were heavily influenced by Chao Cuo, citing the actions of Chao Cuo¹⁷ 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 power¹⁸. The emperor, having known Chao Cuo for most of his life, trusted his advice and was under his influence. As such, one can conclude that it was the ideology of Chao Cuo that caused the emperor to pursue policies in the manner which he did.

Other historians believe that the emperor's policies were but a continuation of his predecessors. During the reign of his father, Emperor Wen of Han, regional kings were either indirectly weakened or baited into committing acts so egregious the reduction of their power was

¹⁷ Si Ma, Qian. *Records Of The Grand Historian, Ranked Biography Of Yuan Ang And Chao Cuo*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 91 BC.

¹⁸ Chao, Cuo. *Recommendation Of The Reduction Of Regional Power*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 155 BC.

unanimously supported¹⁹. For example, the emperor purposely ignored treasonous acts of the King of Huai Nan, eventually resulting in him launching a rebellion that was anticipated and easily suppressed. As noted by intellectuals of the time, even these actions were a continuation of earlier policy²⁰. Given the pre-established doctrine, it can be argued that with or without Chao Cuo the emperor would still have pursued similar policies.

Reducing regional power was a ruling doctrine set generations before Emperor Jing of Han was even born. That being said, Chao Cuo may have influenced him to pursue more strong handed measures compared to those of his predecessors. However, as an emperor one's decisions are no longer a personal matter but rather one of national policy. As such, with or without individuals like Chao Cuo, the emperor would most likely have abided by the doctrine of his predecessors and forwarded similar policies in reducing the power of regional kings.

B.3 Conclusion

The historical trend of Chinese history was one towards the centralization of power. Though not without flaws, it likely contributed to the survival of the Chinese civilization throughout history. More specifically, the policies of Emperor Jing of Han in the reduction of regional power were a direct continuation of the will of his predecessors though the degree may have been influenced by Chao Cuo. It can thus be concluded that although specific policies of the emperor certainly had an effect on the immediate size and scale of the rebellion, the historical trend of Chinese history rendered an armed conflict between central authority and regional powers inevitable.

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

²⁰ Jia, Yi. *Public Security Policy*. Translated by Julien Liang. Western Han Dynasty, China: 173 BC.

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