THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF LATER HAN

This summary of the government organisation of Later Han is designed to provide background and context for the official careers and activities of the men and women discussed in the biographies.

Some fragments of contemporary sources on the government of Later Han survive, notably the now anonymous *Hanguan* or *Hanguan mulu* 漢官目錄, the *Xiaoxue Hanguan pian* 小學漢官篇 by Wang Long with commentary by Hu Guang, *Hanguan dianzhi yishi xuanyong* 漢官典職儀式選用 and other works by Cai Zhi, and *Hanguan yi* 漢官儀 and other works by Ying Shao. Most material, however, is found in the Treatise on the Bureaucracy 百官志, *HHS* 114/24-118/28, taken over from the *Xu Han shu* by Sima Biao of the third century. MBeck 90:197-226 criticises Sima Biao's compilation for many omissions and a number of misinterpretations, and for presenting "essentially fluid subject-matter in static, somewhat impracticable terms." As he points out, the Treatise must be expanded and interpreted in the light of information from the annals and biographies of *Hou Han shu* and other texts.

In his comprehensive account of *The Bureaucracy of Han Times* [Bn 80], Bielenstein renders official titles according to the system established by Dubs, and I have followed the same formula in earlier publications. For the present work, however, partly due to a need for brevity, but also for the sake of clarity, I have made changes to that pattern. In the discussion which follows, I give Bielenstein's renderings in brackets, and I attach a table of cross-references based upon the transcription of Chinese titles.¹

THE IMPERIAL POWER

The Emperor (皇帝 huángdì) held supreme power in the state and was the sacral intermediary between the forces of Heaven and Earth and the world of men. During Later Han, his authority was all but absolute: the ruler might consult with his ministers or hold a full court conference, but his final decision was accepted without question. Most notably in time of crisis, documents prepared by the Imperial Secretariat and endorsed by the emperor were normally sufficient to remove even the highest and most powerful ministers from their positions.²

In contrast to many other royal and imperial states, formal arrangements for succession to the throne of Later Han were clear and generally accepted.³ During his lifetime, the ruler could name any of his sons as Heir (太子 taizì; Heir-Apparent), and the ceremony of accession was held as soon as he died and in the presence of the late sovereign's corpse. If an emperor died without naming an Heir, his Empress (皇后 huánghou), now Dowager (皇太后 huáng tàihou; Empress Dowager) could choose any of his sons or any male member of the imperial clan.⁴ In

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¹ One particular change is that I refer to the head of a commandery, 太守 tai shū, as the Administrator rather than the Grand Administrator; there was no significance to the prefix in Later Han. In similar fashion I normally omit the prefix "Chief" in rendering the title 都尉 dūwèi, which Bielenstein and Dubs cite as Chief Commandant; it was now likewise of marginal importance. [I do include it in rendering some titles awarded to non-Chinese leaders.]

² Notable examples of the exercise of imperial authority in this fashion are the overthrow of Dou Xian by Emperor He in 92, and the destruction of Liang Ji by Emperor Huan in 159. In 168 Dou Wu attempted to oppose the imperial orders issued at the behest of the palace eunuchs, but failed. In 189, after the eunuchs had killed the General-in-Chief He Jin, they again attempted to use the imperial authority: the orders were ignored and the eunuchs were slaughtered, but the event marked the end of organised government.

³ The succession procedures of the Xiongnu were complex, causing confusion, disagreement and division over several generations: see, for example, the biography of the Southern Shanyu Bi. In India, the death of any ruler frequently produced major conflict between his sons, whether or not he had designated an heir.

⁴ The right of the Dowager to determine the succession had been established during Former Han, when in 74 the Lady Shangguan 上官, Dowager of Emperor Zhao, deposed the emperor-elect Liu He 劉賀. Though the fifteen-year-old Dowager was acting under the influence of her grandfather Huo Guang 惠光, her formal authority was critical to the process [QHX: 465].

The Dowager's authority was confirmed for Later Han by the actions of the Dowager Deng Sui of Emperor He in 106, when she passed over one imperial son and chose a kinsman, Liu You, Emperor An. The authority was abused by the Lady Yan Ji, Dowager of Emperor An, in 125.
carrying out this responsibility, the Dowager had no obligation to consult with or take the advice of any particular official, no matter how high: the decision was frequently taken within the private apartments 定策禁中.

Should a new ruler be under age, the Dowager became regent for the duration of his minority.\(^5\) She took part in the affairs of court (臨朝 lin zhao), ruling with the same authority as an emperor.\(^6\) In practice, a regent Dowager commonly involved a senior female member of her family, father or brother, in the government, frequently with title as General-in-Chief (大將軍 da jiangjun). The General-in-Chief and some other senior officials could have “control of the Imperial Secretariat” (錄尚書事 lu shangshu shi), which gave administrative command of government, but the regent Dowager had ultimate power, and could defy her male kinsmen.\(^7\)

THE IMPERIAL HAREM, THE PRIVATE APARTMENTS AND THE EUNUCHS

Where Former Han reached a total of ten grades of imperial concubines, Later Han had only three ranks below the Empress: Honoured Lady (貴人 guìrén; Honourable Lady), Beauty (美人 meiren; Beautiful Lady) and Chosen Woman (采女 cǎinǚ; Chosen Lady). This did not indicate any restriction on the number of women who could be engaged, and it is said that during the 160s Emperor Huan had more than six thousand.\(^8\)

There was a general selection for the harem in the eighth month of each year, when palace officials, including a eunuch and a physiognomist, were sent about the region of the capital to review virgins of respectable family\(^9\) between the ages of thirteen and twenty sui [twelve to nineteen by Western count]. Candidates were graded on a scale of nine according to their physical attractions and their character, and were then placed at one or another rank in the harem. Women of leading families, or those who were well-connected, could also be recommended and accepted, and any concubine could be promoted by the emperor's wish or by other influence. It was generally expected that the Empress would be chosen from among women of high family, though this was not always the case, and in such a highly political matter the emperor had rather less power of decision.\(^10\)

Within the harem, known as the Lateral Courts (掖庭 yìtíng), the separate apartments of the Empress were designated as the Palace of Prolonged Autumn (長秋宮 Changqiu gōng); those of the Dowager were known as the Changle Palace 長樂宮, the Palace of Prolonged Joy, and on occasions when the emperor was brought to the throne from outside and his natural mother came to the capital, her apartments were styled the Yongle Palace 永樂宮, of Perpetual Joy. The head of the Empress's household, known as the Grand Prolonger of Autumn (大長秋 da changqiu), was a eunuch\(^11\) with rank/salary of 2000 shì.\(^12\) He commanded a large staff of officials, servants and slaves, responsible for all such matters as provisions, clothing and furnishing, horses and carriages, and secretaries for records and correspondence. A corps of bodyguards was commanded by the Supervisor of the Retinue of the Empress (中宮黃門侍從僕射 zhōnggōng huángmén róngcóng pùyè; Supervisor of the Extra Retinue of the Attendants of the Yellow Gates of the Empress).

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\(^5\) The Dowager Deng Sui actually ruled until her death in 121, though her protégé Emperor An had taken the cap of manhood several years before that.

\(^6\) The Duhan of Cai Yong, cited by HHS 10B:436 TC, describes how when an emperor is a minor the Dowager attends court 臨朝. She sits on the dais looking to the east, while the emperor faces her. Submissions from members of the court are presented in two copies, one to each.

\(^7\) In 168, the regent Dowager Dou refused permission to her father Dou Wu, when he wanted to purge the palace eunuchs. In 189 the regent Dowager He rejected a similar request from her brother He Jin.

At Bn 80:151-154, Bielenstein discusses the position of the Dowager and her male relatives. His description is quite correct, but I believe that he confuses the terminology by identifying all men who held title as General-in-Chief as being Regents; I reserve the term regent for the Dowager. Bielenstein also describes the authority to control the affairs of the Secretariat [录 ling shangshu shi during Former Han] as an official title: Intendant of the Affairs of the Masters of Writing; I interpret it rather as descriptive.

\(^8\) Bn 80:74 notes that some former titles of concubines were restored about 170, possibly reflecting the increase under Emperor Huan.

\(^9\) A "respectable family (良家 liángjiā; blameless family) was defined as one whose members had not been convicted of a crime, and were not involved in medicine 醫, magic 魔, trade 商 or any handicraft manufacture 百工 [HS 28B:1644 commentary quoting Ru Shun 如淳 of the third century]. The category was used for a number of selection processes, including recruitment to the army [see Feathered Forest guards below] and, in some circumstances, for an official career [see Wang Lie].

\(^10\) Examples of women of humble family include the Empress Yan of Emperor Shun and the Empress He of Emperor Ling. Both the Empress Liang of Emperor Shun and the Empress Dou of Emperor Huan were chosen specifically on account of their excellent family background.

\(^11\) The chief assistant to the Grand Prolonger of Autumn could be either a eunuch or a full man: see sub Liang He and Wu Kaiming.

\(^12\) On ranks and salaries measured by shì, see below.