

Minority as the Protagonists

Revisiting *Ru* 儒 (Confucians) and Their Colleagues under Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) of the Han¹

Students of Chinese history probably are all familiar with a well-known narrative, easily summarized as “the victory of *ru*” in the Han. In this narrative, the Warring States period, when the Hundred Schools flourished, has usually been depicted as the distant background, while the short-lived Qin 秦 dynasty (221–207 BCE), which is said to have cruelly oppressed scholars and their teachings, has played the overture. The early Han court, commonly described as dominated by Huang-Lao 黃老 thought, has become a proscenium. Through dramatizing the struggles between followers of Huang-Lao thought, represented by Empress Dowager Dou 竇太后, and supporters of *ru* learning, represented by Emperor Wu, this thesis portrayed the elevation of *ru* as a theater piece.

Over the past decades the occasional voice has openly challenged the idea that Han *ru* routed their court rivals.² For example, some scholars contend that Emperor Wu failed to promote pure *ru* learning—he too embraced Huang-Lao doctrines and Legalist teachings.³ Some recognized that few of Emperor Wu’s political policies—economic, military, even religious—bore the stamp of Confucianism.⁴ Recently, Michael Nylan and Nicolas Zufferey have demonstrated that in the Han there was no distinctive group called Confucians with a distinguished ideology. Instead, those who called themselves *ru* in Han times were a heterogeneous group with varying intellectual orientations; some were not even followers of Confucius.⁵

But if we cannot define *ru* according to a shared doctrine or moral code, why did Sima Qian classify some of his contemporaries into one group, call them *ru*, and define them as the followers of Confucius, and thereby set them apart from the rest of the officials of the day? What was the implication of such a category in social terms?

In order to answer these questions, I will look beyond the contentions between different intellectual discourses, beyond the materials strictly relevant to *ru*. This chapter will investigate the social origins and intellectual orientations of eminent officials during Emperor Wu's reign to assess the positions those called *ru* occupied in the power hierarchy. It will demonstrate that *ru*, the protagonists in the dominant narrative, were in fact a small minority on the political stage during Emperor Wu's rule. Based on these observations, I will proceed to ask why the conventional wisdom has habitually devoted full attention to these few *ru*, who occupied a tiny fraction of the high-level posts, and therefore mistakenly claimed the triumph of *ru*. I will further demonstrate that traditional perception and representation of Emperor Wu's reign are profoundly shaped by two chapters of the *Grand Scribe's Records* (*Shi ji* 史記): namely, the displaced chapter "The Basic Annals of Emperor Wu" (*Xiaowu benji* 孝武本紀) and "The Collective Biographies of *Ru*" (*Ru lin lie zhuan* 儒林列傳).⁶

RU, A MINORITY GROUP

Several famous stories are often cited by scholars dealing with the political and intellectual history of Western Han. For example, Dowager Empress Dou, a faithful follower of Huang-Lao thought, tried to punish Yuan Gu 轅固, a *ru*, because she disliked the *ru* learning. Emperor Wu employed Zhao Wan 趙綰 and Wang Zang 王臧, two *ru*, to implement certain ritual practice, and promoted Gongsun Hong 公孫弘, an expert on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) (hereafter, *Annals*) from humble circumstances to prominence. Rather than looking only at the activities of these *ru* officials, I would like to ask who were the colleagues of Gongsun Hong, Zhao Wan, and Wang Zang; what features characterized the high officials who directed the state apparatus; what factors contributed to their success in the officialdom.

In "A Chronological Table of Famous High Civil and Military Officials since the Founding of the Han" (*Han xing yilai jiangxiang mingchen nianbiao* 漢興以來將相名臣年表) of *The Grand Scribe's Records*, appear the names, terms of appointment, and dates of death or dismissal of the Chancellors (*Chengxiang* 丞相), Commanders-in-chief (Taiwei 太尉; later the title was changed to *Dasima* 大司馬), and Grandee Secretaries (*Yushi dafu* 御史大夫), known collectively as the Three Dukes (*Sangong* 三公). The latter were employed between the establishment of the Han dynasty (206 BCE) and the middle of the reign of Emperor Yuan 元帝 (20 BCE).⁷ This information is supplemented by the chapter "A Table of the Hundred Officials and Dukes" (*Baiguan gongqing biao* 百官公卿表) of *The History of Western Han* (*Han shu* 漢書), which provides, in addition to information regarding the Three Dukes, the names and dates of the appointments and deaths or dismissals of the Nine Ministers of the State (*Jiuqing* 九卿), noted generals, and senior officials of the metropolitan area.⁸

With power second only to the emperor's, the Three Dukes occupied the apex of the Han bureaucracy. The Nine Ministers constituted the second highest stratum.⁹ The senior officials of the metropolitan area, as the candidates for the positions of the Nine Ministers, enjoyed status equal to or slightly lower than the Nine Ministers.¹⁰ In addition to their administrative titles, officials in the Han court were also ranked in terms of bushels of grain, ranging from 10,000 bushels to 100 bushels. It is said that the Three Dukes were ranked ten thousand bushels, while the Nine Ministers and senior officials of the metropolitan area fully two thousand bushels. These three groups comprised the most eminent officials of the imperial bureaucracy.¹¹

During the fifty-four years of Emperor Wu's rule, 141 people reached these eminent positions. Collecting information scattered throughout *The Grand Scribe's Records* and *The History of Western Han*, it is possible to identify seventy-seven people's social origins, career patterns, intellectual orientations, and social networks; these are illustrated in table 1.1 (see also chart 1.1).¹² An analysis of the above information provides us a clear picture of who was operating the state apparatus on a daily basis.¹³

BACKGROUNDS OF EMINENT OFFICIALS

Under Emperor Wu there were twelve chancellors. Among them, three belonged to empresses' families or the imperial family proper; six were descendants of high officials.¹⁴ Of the latter six, four were either the sons or grandsons of men who helped establish the Han and four were ennobled because of their military accomplishments. The remaining three men were Li Cai 李蔡, Tian Qianqiu 田千秋, and a famous paragon of *ru*, Gongsun Hong. Li Cai came from a military family: one of his ancestors had served as a general in the Qin state, and one of his cousins was the famous general Li Guang 李廣. Tian Qianqiu had been a Gentleman-attendant serving at Emperor Gao's shrine (*Gaomiao qinlang* 高廟寢郎)—his social origin is not clear.

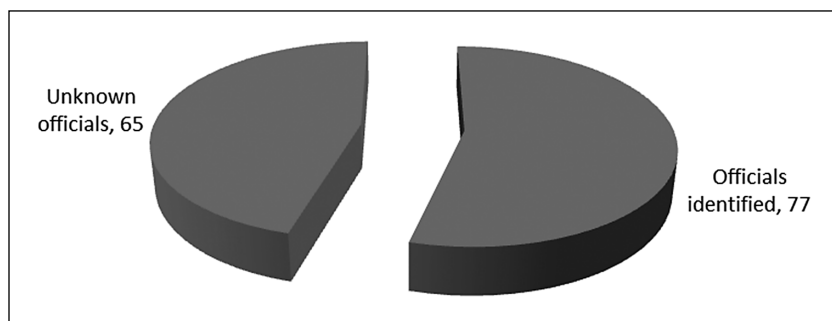


Chart 1.1 Unknown and Identifiable High Officials under Emperor Wu

Table 1.1. High Officials under Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) 武帝 (公元前 141–87) 一朝三公九卿統計

Officials that can be identified: N. 77						
From powerful families: N. 45			From obscure /unknown backgrounds: N. 32			
From imperial/consort family	From official families	From distinguished local families	From clerkship	From recommendation system / Imperial Academy	From Gentleman-attendants and other avenues	Through military achievements
竇嬰 (140), 田蚡 (135), 劉屈氂 (91)	許昌 (139), 薛舉 (131), 莊青翟 (118), 趙周 (115), 石慶 (112), 公孫賀 (103)	李蔡 (121)		公孫弘 (124)	田千秋 (89)	
N.3	N.6	N.1		N.1	N.1	
劉受 (119), 衛青 (119), 霍去病 (119), 王信 (116), 李廣利 (104)	張敖 (131), 石建 (139), 灌夫 (140), 汲黯 (135), 孔臧 (127), 張敖居 (124), 周平 (123), 司馬安 (122), 李信成 (119), 李敢 (118), 樂賁 (117), 任越人 (115), 周仲居 (114), 張廣國 (113), 周德德 (112), 杜相 (112), 蕭壽成 (107), 韓延年 (106), 張昌 (104), 公孫敬聲 (103), 石德 (102), 唯滄光 (94), 靳石 (93), 韓說 (91), 酈終根 (89)	鄭當時 (137), 李廣 (134), 卜式 (111), 孔僅 (115), 桑弘羊 (87)	張湯 (120), [兒寬], 杜周 (98), 趙禹 (129), 顏異 (119), 王舒溫 (119), 楊僕 (119), 義縱 (119), 尹齊 (114), 滅[滅] (114), 王宣 (110), 王訢 (89), 朱買臣 (122), 李壽 (90), 魏不害 (87)	兒寬 (110)	韓安國 (135), 暴勝之 (94), 商丘成 (91), 王臧 (140), 甯成 (140), 江充 (94), 金日磾 (87), 上官桀 (87), 田廣明 (89), 王恢 (136), 趙綰 (139), 霍光 (89), [張養 (120)]	蘇健 (127), 徐自為 (117), 張養 (120), 趙弟 (99), [李廣 (134)]
N.5	N.25	N.5	N.13	N.1	N.12	N.4
Chancellors: 12						
Grandee Secretaries, Commanders-in-Chief, Nine Ministers, and the senior officials of the Metropolitan area: 65						

Notes: 1. Numbers in parentheses, e.g., (122), refer to the year the man achieved a position among Three Dukes, Nine Ministers, or senior officials of the metropolitan area.

2. Names in square brackets, e.g., [李廣 (134)], refer to officials counted in other categories.

Compared with the chancellors whose families had occupied a place near the top of the power pyramid for decades, Li Cai's and Tian Qianqiu's backgrounds were modest. But compared with Gongsun Hong, they stood high. According to Sima Qian, Gongsun Hong had been dismissed from a clerkship he had held in a prison at Xue (*Xue yuli* 薛獄吏); so poor was he in his youth that he had herded pigs.

By and large, family background dictated one's future in Han China, and this was especially true of high officials. We know little about how Chancellor Liu Qumao 劉屈氂 climbed to the top of the imperial bureaucracy; the record tells us only that he was the son of Liu Sheng 劉勝, a half brother of Emperor Wu. Chancellor Tian Qianqiu's path to glory must have struck his colleagues as eccentric. Pleased by a one-sentence memorial from a Gentleman-attendant at Emperor Gao's shrine, the seventy-year-old emperor promoted Tian Qianqiu from his lowly post to the office of Grand Herald (*Dahong lu* 大鴻臚)—thereby making him one of the Nine Ministers. A few months later Wu appointed Tian Chancellor. Ban Gu reported that on hearing this story, the leader of Xiongnu 匈奴, entitled Chanyu 單于, derided the Han court for not employing a worthy fellow.¹⁵

Seven of the men who served as Chancellor had held illustrious positions and exerted considerable influence in court long before Emperor Wu succeeded the throne. Xu Chang 許昌, Xue Ze 薛澤, and Zhuang Qingdi 莊青翟 had all inherited their grandfathers' noble status during the reign of Emperor Wen 文帝 in the early 160s BCE. Dou Ying 竇嬰, Tian Fen 田蚡, Li Cai, and Shi Qing had ascended to official positions ranked two thousand bushels, the second-highest rank, during the reign of Emperor Jing 景帝. Because his father had served the throne with distinction, Zhao Zhou 趙周 had been ennobled in 148 BCE. Gongsun He 公孫賀, whose father was once ennobled as marquis of Pingqu 平曲 because of military achievement, served as a retainer of Emperor Wu when the emperor was still a crown prince and was appointed Grand Coachman, one of the Nine Ministers, in 135 BCE.

Not expected to have outstanding performance, innocent descendants of meritorious officials of previous courts, especially of the founding father, naturally served as candidates for Chancellor. This practice had been followed by Emperor Wu, as Sima Qian said,

... in the reign of our present emperor [Emperor Wu], Xu Chang, marquis of Bozhi; Xue Zhe, marquis of Pingji; Zhuang Qingdi, marquis of Wuqiang; Zhao Zhou, marquis of Gaoling and others have been Chancellor. All were men who succeeded to their noble titles by birth, being of impeccable demeanor and sterling integrity, serving as the reserve men for chancellor position. That was all. None of them proved capable of making any brilliant contributions to the government or doing anything to distinguish his name in the eyes of his contemporaries.

及今上時，柏至侯許昌、平棘侯薛澤、武彊侯莊青翟、高陵侯趙周等為丞相。皆以列侯繼嗣，妮妮廉謹，為丞相備員而已，無所能發明功名有著於當世者。¹⁶

Presenting a sharp contrast to his fellow chancellors, who enjoyed privileged official positions for decades, Gongsun Hong, the only *ru* Chancellor, did not step onto the political stage until 140 BCE. At that time he was already sixty years old and had served only as an Erudite (*Boshi* 博士), a position that did not assume any administrative duties and from which he soon was dismissed. Thanks to his longevity, eleven years later, in 130 BCE, at the age of seventy, Gongsun Hong was appointed an Erudite again. Within two years, he had been promoted to the position of Metropolitan Superintendent of the Left, ranked two-thousand bushels. He served in 126 BCE as Grandee Secretary and as Chancellor from 124 BCE until his death in 121 BCE. Rising from the office of Erudite, a low position in central court, to Chancellor, at the very crown of the bureaucracy, took him only seven years. Gongsun Hong's meteoric rise differed sharply from the career pattern of other chancellors.

Furthermore, among the twelve Chancellors appointed by Emperor Wu over fifty-four years, only Gongsun Hong was identified by his contemporaries as a *ru*. His membership in *ru* community was defined by his expertise in the *Annals*. Among the twelve Chancellors, only Gongsun Hong entered officialdom through the recommendation system.¹⁷

Did Gongsun Hong's exceptional experience indicate that a new pattern of advancement to high levels of officialdom had been established, a revolutionary reform resulting from Emperor Wu's promotion of *ru* and *ru* learning? The answer is complex. Gongsun Hong was Emperor Wu's fifth chancellor, appointed in the seventeenth year of his reign. Over the ensuing thirty-five years, seven chancellors followed him, none of whom were identified as *ru*, and none of whom entered officialdom through the recommendation system. With the exception of Tian Qianqiu, the social origins and patterns of advancement of the chancellors who followed Gongsun Hong resembled those of the chancellors before him: all had occupied eminent positions for decades, and all came from powerful families that had enjoyed privileged social status for generations.

If Gongsun Hong was merely an atypical case, whose meteoric rise was more determined by the emperor's will than by the established career patterns in his day, how has his experience long been celebrated as the symbolic success of *ru* in political realm?¹⁸ Who was responsible for this misrepresentation?

Before we try to answer the above questions, let us take a look at the social origins, intellectual orientations, and career patterns of the Grandee Secretaries, the Commanders-in-Chief, the Nine Ministers, and the senior officials of the metropolitan area.

According to the *The Grand Scribe's Records* and *The History of Western Han*, during the period in question 130 people achieved those positions. By

combing available sources, one may identify sixty-five persons out of these 130 (see table 1.1). Though one would like to be able to account for every individual, the following examination faithfully reconstructs the picture of the upper level of officialdom of the time presented by *The Grand Scribe's Records* and *The History of Western Han*.

Social origins and career patterns clearly distinguish the officials into three groups: descendants of powerful official families, descendants of distinguished local families, and people from obscure and unknown background.

Among these sixty-five eminent officials, five came from the imperial family or from consorts' families and twenty-five were descendants of high officials who served under previous emperors.¹⁹ Of these twenty-five, fifteen were the direct descendants of meritorious ministers who helped Liu Bang found the Han dynasty.²⁰ Ties of kinship among Emperor Wu's eminent officials constituted a complicated network. For example, Shi De 石德 was appointed as one of the Nine Ministers immediately after his father, who was Chancellor, died in office; Gongsun Jingsheng 公孫敬聲 was appointed as one of the Nine Ministers during his father's tenure as Chancellor.²¹ Sima An 司馬安 and Ji An 汲黯, who were cousins, both served at positions ranked two thousand bushels or above throughout their lives. Zhang Chang 張昌 was the son of Zhang Guangguo 張廣國; the father was appointed Grand Master of Ceremonies in 113 BCE and the son took the same post in 104 BCE. Li Gan 李敢 was the son of Li Guang 李廣; the son served as Gentleman-of-the-Palace from 118 BCE on and the father held a number of positions ranked 2000 bushels or above for forty years. Li Guang was also the cousin of Li Cai, who served as Chancellor from 121 to 118 BCE.

In short, aside from the chancellors, among sixty-five eminent officials during Emperor Wu's fifty-four-year rule, thirty came from powerful official families. This suggests that powerful official families reproduced themselves in high office.

Local celebrated families without traceable official history also successfully positioned their descendants in the upper bureaucracy: five of the sixty-five eminent officials had such backgrounds. Zheng Dangshi 鄭當時 and Li Guang came from local military families, while Bu Shi 卜式, Kong Jin 孔僅, and Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 were from merchant families. Li Guang climbed to the top of the power hierarchy primarily through his military achievements. Bu Shi obtained his first official post through generous donations to the government. Sang Hongyang began his official career as a Gentleman-attendant at court and Zheng Dangshi began as a member of the crown prince's court.²² They obtained these positions either by virtue of their family privilege or by donating money to the government.

Sima Qian launched furious attacks against the rampant recruitment of merchants and the selling of offices during Emperor Wu's reign. He noted that Kong Jin and Dongguo Xianyang 東郭咸陽 "employed people as clerks who enriched themselves by [dealing in] salt or iron. The channels to official

positions have become increasingly heterogeneous: there is no [real] process of selection, and many merchants [get in]” 除故鹽鐵家富者為吏。吏道益雜，不選，而多賈人矣。²³ Furthermore, Sima Qian contended that “the people who donate money are able to become Gentleman-attendants. This has led to a decline in [the standards of] selection” 入財者得補郎，郎選衰矣。²⁴ Rich families with no record of government service penetrated the elite sphere of officialdom by securing their younger members positions as the Gentleman-attendants or by buying them low-ranking official positions.

Of sixty-five eminent officials, thirteen started their careers as lowly clerks at the bottom of the bureaucracy and eventually climbed to the apex of the power pyramid. None of them came from powerful families.²⁵ Rather, as Sima Qian and Ban Gu emphasized, several rose from very humble circumstances.²⁶ For example, Zhang Tang’s father, a clerk in the Chang’an government (*Chang’an cheng* 長安丞), is said to have beaten the young Zhang Tang because a rat stole a piece of meat while the boy was minding the house.²⁷ When Du Zhou was first employed as a clerk of the Commandant of Justice (*Tingwei shi* 廷尉史), he owned only one horse and it was lame at that.²⁸

Three of these thirteen men were actually upstarts, promoted directly from clerkships to official positions ranked two thousand bushels or above by Emperor Wu. At a time when Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 was starving at Chang’an, he was suddenly appointed as Grand Minister of the Palace (*Zhong dafu* 中大夫) thanks to his knowledge of the *Annals* and *The Songs of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭), which pleased Emperor Wu. So began his illustrious career.²⁹ Both Li Shou 李壽, a magistrate’s clerk of the magistrate of Xin’an (*Xin’an lingshi* 新安令史) and Wei Buhai 魏不害, Defender of the Yu county (*Yu shouwei* 圉守衛), were ennobled and soon after employed as two of the Nine Ministers because of their fortuitous contributions to suppressing a coup d’état and a rebellion, respectively.³⁰

In contrast to the sudden rise of these three men, the other ten climbed the ladder of success step by step from the lowest level of the bureaucracy. Promoted primarily because of their administrative ability, all were competent in handling criminal cases, in controlling local magnates and bandits, and in collecting taxes. Another attribute they shared was special ties with current dignitaries, which permitted them to weave complicated social networks that boosted their careers. For example, as a clerk at Chang’an, Zhang Tang was introduced to many eminent persons by Tian Sheng 田勝, the half brother of Emperor Wu’s dowager mother, surnamed Wang. When Ning Cheng 寧成 served as Governor of the capital, Zhang Tang was his clerk and was made Defender of Maoling (*Maoling wei* 茂陵尉) thanks to Ning’s recommendation. Wang Shuwen 王舒溫, Yin Qi 尹齊, Du Zhou 杜周, and Ni Kuan 兒寬 all served under Zhang Tang at one time or another, and his recommendations helped them ascend from lowly offices to the posts of Three Dukes or Nine Ministers.

Besides those who rose from clerkship, we have another sixteen identifiable officials, none of whom seems to have any blood or marital relatives among the

high-level officials (see table 1.1). But they probably did not come from humble circumstances either. Not a single one of them ever worked at the bottom of the bureaucracy like those with obscure family background did. Instead, several of them entered officialdom by serving as Gentleman-attendants or as Grand Minister of the Palace (*Zhongdafu*) in the kingdom.³¹ In addition, their first-mentioned administrative appointments were either Magistrate or Commandant (*Xiaowei* 校尉) in the military or Defender (*Duwei* 都尉) in a Commandery. Therefore, their career pattern resembled that of those who came from local prestigious families, like Li Guang and Zheng Dangshi.

PRINCIPLES OF HIERARCHY

I have analyzed some fundamental characteristics of Emperor Wu’s seventy-seven high officials: forty-five, or about 58 percent, were from imperial/consort families or from families that had occupied prominent positions in the bureaucracy for generations, or came from local powerful families; and thirteen of them, or 17 percent, came from obscure backgrounds and started out as clerks (see table 1.1 and charts 1.2 & 1.3). These groups of officials exhibited distinguished career patterns. Through assessing these patterns, I will investigate what kind of competence was evaluated in the political arena and will show how the quantitative analysis of the high-level officials revise our understanding of the Han recruitment system and its impact on elite learning.

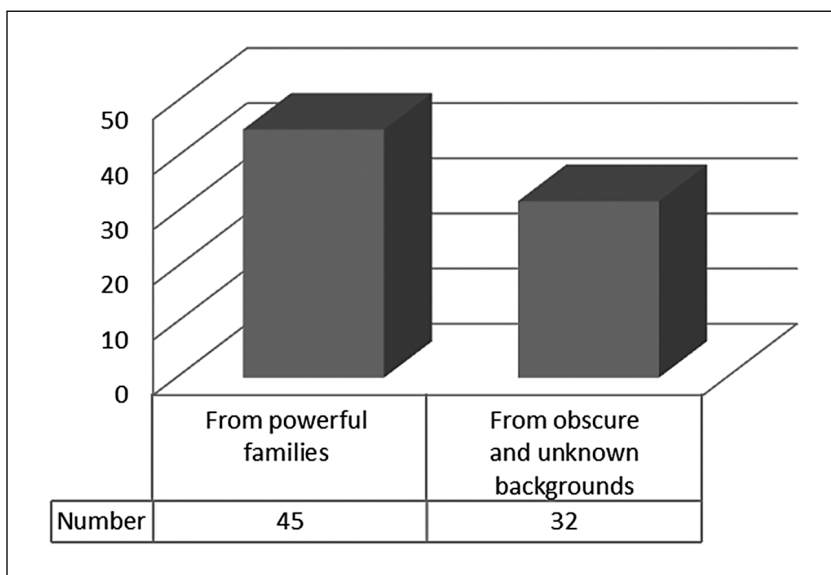


Chart 1.2. Backgrounds of High Officials under Emperor Wu

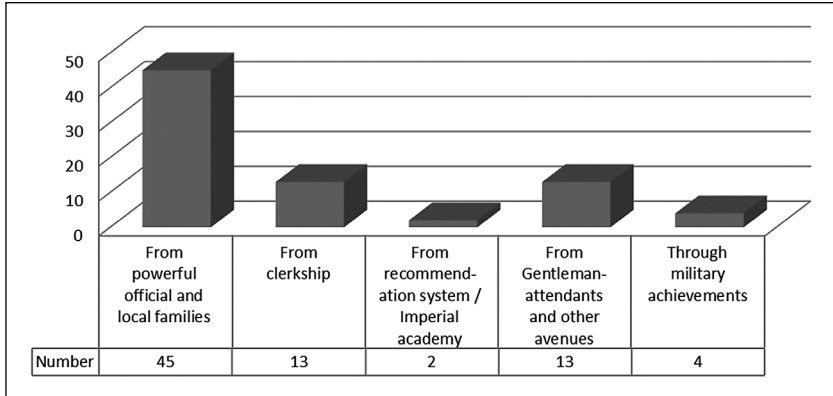


Chart 1.3. Career Patterns of High Officials under Emperor Wu

As the most dominant force of the bureaucracy, descendants of powerful official families were distinguished by their prestigious career paths. The luckiest ones directly inherited the noble status from their fathers, and thereby became the candidates for the high official positions. Less lucky ones usually served as Gentleman-attendants in the court or in the crown prince's palace, an entry-level position without much power, but that provided them with great opportunities to establish a social network with the most influential officials and even to develop personal relations with the emperor or the crown princes.³²

High officials had the right to appoint their sons and, sometimes, their brothers and nephews, as Gentleman-attendants, thereby transforming their family members into candidates for administrative positions. This institutionalized practice is well known as “hereditary privilege” (*yinren* 陰任). Contrary to the conventional view that Emperor Wu regularized the recommendation system as the major recruitment means, it was during his reign that the number of people who entered the bureaucracy via the hereditary privilege noticeably increased. As Gao Min 高敏 has pointed out, at this moment, officials with noble titles and fiefs decreased, which means that their descendants could no longer enjoy the political and social prestige through inheriting the noble status. Therefore, they fully explored the policy of “hereditary privilege,” a practice that turned into the most important avenue for descendants of powerful families to penetrate the officialdom.³³

Moreover, as Gentleman-attendants with prestigious backgrounds, those officials' descendants had a bright future. Our sources show that none of the descendants from high official families ever worked at the county level, let alone served as clerks at the bottom of the bureaucracy. Instead, their first formal positions were usually ranked in the middle level of the bureaucracy. Sima

Qian recorded that Ji An, whose family members had been eminent officials for seven generations, was appointed magistrate of Yingyang (*Yingyang ling* 滎陽令); feeling ashamed, he resigned and returned to his family estate. Hearing this, Emperor Wu asked Ji An back to court and appointed him Grand Master of the Palace (*Zhong dafu* 中大夫), ranked two thousand bushels.³⁴

The phenomenon that the descendants of high official families were born to high position is not only illustrated by the numerical data but was commented on by Sima Qian:

When [Shi] Qing was Chancellor, his sons and grandsons served as officials and thirteen of them rose to positions ranked two thousand bushels.

慶方為丞相，諸子孫為吏更至二千石者十三人。³⁵

When [Ji An] died, the emperor, in recognition of his service, promoted his brother Ji Ren to serve as one of the Nine Ministers. His son, Ji Yan, advanced to the position of Prime Minister of one of the marquises. Sima An, the son of Ji An's father's elder sister, had served in his youth as the prince's Forerunner along with Ji An. Sima An served as one of the nine ministers four times. When he died he was serving as the governor of Henan. Thanks to Sima An, ten of his brothers concurrently held posts ranked two thousand bushels.

(汲黯) 卒後，上以黯故，官其弟汲仁至九卿，子汲偃至諸侯相。黯姑姊子司馬安亦少與黯為太子洗馬。安...官四至九卿，以河南太守卒。昆弟以安故，同時至二千石者十人。³⁶

As distinct from the descendants of high officials who did not need to prove themselves before assuming important positions, the remaining officials climbed to the top of the bureaucracy by virtue of both the network they wove with the dignitaries and by their achievements. But what kind of competence or what kind of knowledge was set as index of a bureaucrat's rank in the official hierarchy?

First, distinction in battle was closely correlated with promotion to prominent civil posts. Nineteen of the seventy-seven eminent civilian officials of Emperor Wu's time had participated in military campaigns, and at least seven of them were promoted to important positions primarily because of their success in the battlefield.³⁷ Their social origins varied: some came from powerful families and some from unknown backgrounds. Those who were the relatives of favorite consorts were directly promoted as generals, despite not having much experience in the military. Sima Qian pointed out that a considerable number of civilian positions were filled by military veterans, saying, "[Huo Qubing's] officers and soldiers were appointed as officials and presented with

enormous rewards”軍吏卒為官，賞賜甚多。³⁸ *The History of Western Han* records that in 110 BCE,

among the military officers who served under General Li Guangli 李廣利, three were promoted to the positions of Nine Ministers, more than one hundred became either the minister of a state, or a governor, or an official ranked at 2000 bushels, and more than 1,000 were promoted to lesser but still desirable positions ranked under 1000 bushels. Men who fought bravely were rewarded with official positions higher than they expected, while men who fought to atone for their crimes were all exempted from penal servitude

軍官吏為九卿者三人，諸侯相，郡守，二千石百餘人，千石以下千餘人。奮行者官過其望，以適過行者皆黜其勞。³⁹

In fact, as studies on both traditional sources and archeologically excavated manuscripts have demonstrated, accumulating services in the army was a significant avenue toward a career in bureaucracy.⁴⁰

Second, a successful embassy to foreign countries helped one establish reputation and obtain important positions. Trips to the hostile Xiongnu and other countries were hard and dangerous. To fulfill the diplomatic duties and manage to safely return required both fine negotiation skills and enormous courage. Zhang Qian 張騫 and Jiang Chong 江充, Gentleman-attendants without illustrious backgrounds, voluntarily chose to assume this responsibility and their exceptional experience won them important posts.⁴¹

Third, financial knowledge was valued by Emperor Wu. Dongguo Xianyang 東郭咸陽, Kong Jin 孔僅, and Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 all came from wealthy merchant families and were promoted to high positions especially for their expertise in economics. The famous policy of imperial monopoly of the production of salt and iron was designed by them, which greatly increased government revenue. In order to solve the immense deficit caused by years of military campaigns and natural disasters, Emperor Wu issued new currency made of the skin of white deer and that of alloy of silver and tin. With an excessive growth of the money supply, the new currency caused inflation and thereby efficiently transferred the wealth of rich people to the government.⁴² Furthermore, commerce was identified as one of the stable sources of government revenue, and a heavy tax was imposed on merchants and craftsmen. Sang Hongyang also set up offices to control the prices in the market through transporting goods nationwide, thereby preventing powerful merchants from making staggering profits.⁴³ Employing economists and incorporating commerce into government's fiscal strategies were of remarkable significance in the Han when the merchants were generally despised and pursuing profit was seen as not morally justified.⁴⁴ Sima Qian commented that “it is since this

time [under Emperor Wu] that officials who promote profits emerge” 興利之臣自此始也。⁴⁵

Fourth, administrative abilities, including handling criminal cases, controlling local magnates and bandits, and collecting taxes, were crucial credentials for one to ascend to top of the bureaucracy. Among the thirty-two officials with obscure and unknown background, twelve ascended to high-level posts primarily because of their administrative achievements.⁴⁶ Starting their careers as clerks or officials at the county level, these men were identified as *Daobi li* 刀筆吏 (brush-and-scrapers) by Sima Qian and were distinguished by their expertise in current laws and regulations.⁴⁷

WHERE WERE THE *RU*, THE HUANG-LAO FOLLOWERS, AND THE LEGALISTS?

The career patterns of the seventy-seven identifiable prominent officials under Emperor Wu show that the main principles that structured the hierarchy in the officialdom were high hereditary status, military achievement, fiscal knowledge, and administrative competence. But how about *ru* learning? How many of the seventy-seven high officials were identified by their contemporaries as *ru*, Huang-Lao followers, or Legalists? What kind of role did the expertise in Five Classics play in one's success in the officialdom?

Sima Qian placed most of his biographies of officials who started out as clerks in a chapter of *The Grand Scribe's Records* entitled “The Collective Biographies of Harsh Officials” (*Kuli liezhuan* 酷吏列傳).⁴⁸ Because many of these men spent their time chasing bandits and other criminals, can we identify them as representatives of Legalism, a school of thought radically opposed to *ru* learning?⁴⁹ Some scholars have inferred the intellectual orientations of officials from their depositions and conduct, labeling them with one of the categories of thought—*ru* learning, Legalist, Huang-Lao—listed in *The Grand Scribe's Records* or *The History of Western Han*. For example, some scholars divide almost all of the officials active in early Western Han courts, even the generals, into either the Huang-Lao camp or the *ru* (Confucian) camp. They claim that one should identify an official as a member of the Huang-Lao School if he performed certain actions such as opposing the military campaigns in the north.⁵⁰

But this treatment of Han history is not justified. Scholars have questioned the validity of applying the rubrics of those schools of thought to early China. Terms such as Daoism and Legalism were created by Sima Tan (d. 110 BCE) and later reworked by Liu Xiang (79–8 BCE) retrospectively. Kidder Smith convincingly illustrates that Sima Tan coined “*Mingjia*” (schools of names), “*Fajia*” (legalism), etcetera, not because he attempted to objectively describe the intellectual history of the pre-Han period but because he intended to present his political thought to the emperor.⁵¹ Echoing this view, Csikszentmihalyi and Nylan contend that the concept *jia* 家 in Sima Tan's “Essential Tenets of

Six Jia” (*liujia zhi yaozhi* 六家之要旨), does not refer to schools of thought but means expertise in certain fields.⁵²

Furthermore, the political world is not simply an extension of the intellectual world, nor can struggles at court be uncritically interpreted as competition among different schools of thought. None of the officials in “The Collective Biographies of Harsh Officials” were designated followers of Legalism by their contemporaries. The biographies of officials known to have studied Legalism, such as Han Anguo 韓安國 and Zhang Ou 張歐, appear elsewhere. Sima Qian did not have in mind a chapter devoted to “The Collective Biographies of Legalist Officials” when he grouped together the biographies that appear in “The Collective Biographies of Harsh Officials.” Likewise, while Dou Ying and Tian Fen were famous for their advocacy of *ru* techniques (*rushu* 儒術), neither of them was said to be an expert in the *ru* classics, nor were they called *ru* by their contemporaries.

These examples imply that in both *The Grand Scribe’s Records* and *The History of Western Han* membership in a certain school of thought was based not on a man’s personality but on his intellectual investments. In fact, Sima Qian did not believe that a man’s disposition and conduct necessarily reflected his intellectual orientation, let alone his familiarity with a specific school of thought. For example, Zhang Ou is said to have studied Legalism, yet Sima Qian praised him: “Since Ou became an official, he has never brought accusations because of words, always acting as a sincere senior official” 自歐為吏, 未嘗言案人, 專以誠長者處官. In Sima Qian’s description, Zhang Ou behaved quite differently from the officials he described in “The Collective Biographies of Harsh Officials,” who were adept at abusing the law.⁵³ By the same token, Gongsun Hong was depicted as an insidious and vengeful individual. His disreputable character did not affect his membership in the *ru* community, which was exclusively defined by his knowledge of the *Annals*.⁵⁴

If the officials recorded in the “The Collective Biographies of Harsh Officials” cannot be labeled as alleged Legalists as the conventional wisdom believes, then let’s move our attention to *ru*. Our discovery will be an astonishing shock: *ru* officials, the most familiar protagonists in the political history of early Chinese empire, were in fact a tiny minority in the bureaucracy.

Among the seventy-seven eminent officials discussed above, only four were identified by Sima Qian as *ru*—Gongsun Hong, Zhao Wan, Wang Zang, and Ni Kuan. All were experts in one or several of the Five Classics. We can add two more to the list: Zhu Maichen 朱買臣 is said to have studied the *Annals* and is described by Ban Gu as “a wide sash *ru*” (*jinshen zhiru* 縉紳之儒 literally means “a *ru* with a wide sash that holds a wooden-tablet notebook”).⁵⁵ And the literary productions of Kong Zang 孔臧 were assigned to the School of *ru* (*rujia* 儒家) in *The History of Western Han*’s “The Treatise on Literature and the Arts” (*Yiwen zhi* 藝文志). Although Kong was not explicitly identified as a *ru* by Sima Qian, presumably their contemporaries thought of him as such.⁵⁶

It turns out that only six of seventy-seven eminent officials, namely 7.8 percent, throughout the fifty-four-year rule of Emperor Wu were called *ru* by Sima Qian and Ban Gu (see chart 1.4). Clearly, *ru* were the odd men out in the upper stratum of the power pyramid. This discovery obliges us to ask whether Emperor Wu’s alleged promotion of *ru* learning has any basis in fact.

The *ru* were not the only minorities. Two of the seventy-seven eminent officials—Ji An 汲黯 and Zheng Dangshi 鄭當時—were called followers of Huang-Lao thought, and two others—Han Anguo and Zhang Ou—followers of Legalism.⁵⁷ It turns out that when we consider what Sima Qian and Ban Gu wrote, few of the high officials of the day had strong commitments to any formal school of thought.

Projecting the contentions between different intellectual schools onto the political world, the conventional narrative labels the politics of the Qin dynasty Legalism, the politics of the early Western Han Huang-Lao thought, and the politics of Emperor Wu and all who followed *ru* learning. According to the dominant narrative, Chancellor Wei Wan’s appeal to Emperor Wu to ban Legalism, which he made in 141 BCE, signaled the beginning of the promotion of *ru* learning;⁵⁸ Dong Zhongshu’s memorial that advocated abandoning the hundred schools to honor *ru* learning alone forecast the moment when *ru* learning became the state orthodoxy.⁵⁹

However, it was only shortly after these events that, first, Han Anguo and, immediately thereafter, Zhang Ou, assumed the post of Grandee Secretary—both were known for their espousal of Legalism.⁶⁰ The memorials of Wei Wan and Dong Zhongshu did not affect the advancement or Zheng Dangshi and

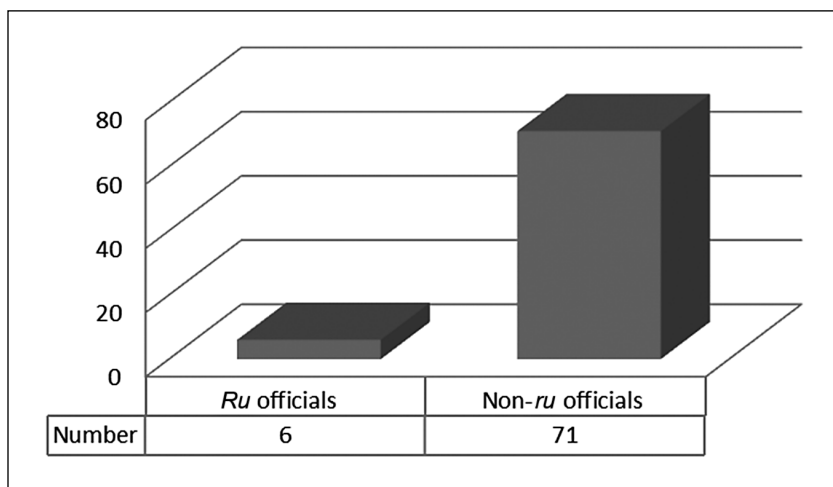


Chart 1.4. *Ru* and Non-*ru* Officials under Emperor Wu

Ji An, two adherents of Huang-Lao thought, to powerful posts either. Zheng served as one of the Nine Ministers from 137 to 120 BCE, though at one point he was briefly demoted to Supervisor of the Household (*Zhanshi* 詹事), ranked two thousand bushels. Ji was promoted to serve as one of the Nine Ministers in 135 BCE, and over the next twenty years he was appointed to various other positions, all ranked two thousand bushels or higher. The famous memorials do not appear to have dramatically changed the complexion of the empire's administration; they probably expressed personal statements rather than public policies.

If the political world of Emperor Wu is seen solely in terms of the struggles among adherents of Huang-Lao thought, *ru*, and Legalists, we would distort the real picture. Empress Dowager Dou, an adherent of Huang-Lao thought, did engineer the impeachment of two *ru* officials appointed by Emperor Wu because she disliked *ru* teachings. But this is the only recorded conflict between Huang-Lao followers and *ru* that can be identified during the half century of Emperor Wu's reign.

In an attempt to detect more conflict, scholars have argued that the friction between Ji An, an adherent of Huang-Lao thought, and Gongsun Hong, a *ru*, was caused by their different intellectual orientations.⁶¹ But Ji An openly reprehended whomever he disliked, and even Emperor Wu feared his criticism. Gongsun Hong locked horns not only with Ji but also with a number of other high officials, including some *ru*. The six *ru* high officials never formed an interest group, and neither did the two followers of Huang-Lao thought.⁶² At the root of Ji An's unhappiness with Gongsun Hong was an awareness of radically different social origins. Ji An, scion of a powerful family, had enjoyed his privileged position for decades, while Gongsun Hong started his career as a lowly clerk. Ji An was mortified to watch the arriviste rise to a position above his own; as Sima Qian pointed out, Ji An mocked the emperor, saying, "Your majesty appoints officials the way people stack firewood—whatever comes to hand last is piled on top."⁶³

Furthermore, even if followers of Huang-Lao thought, *ru*, and Legalists did have sharply different opinions on some important policies, these could never have led to great political struggles. Adding together the numbers of *ru*, Legalists, and followers of Huang-Lao thought, we get only ten men, a small portion of the high officials active in Emperor Wu's reign. The struggles among so few could not shake a political world composed of hundreds of eminent officials. Indeed, the dynamics that affected Han politics did not result from the tensions between followers of different schools of thought—they emerged from utterly different factors, an observation that leads us to Sima Qian's classification of his contemporary officials.

SIMA QIAN'S CLASSIFICATION OF HIS CONTEMPORARY OFFICIALS

According to our sources, only a few high officials specialized in the Five Classics and were identified as *ru* by their contemporaries. One cannot help

wondering whether Sima Qian and Ban Gu's classification of the officialdom was valid. Were the descendants of powerful families and the clerks on the lower rungs of the bureaucracy not educated? Is it possible that they too were trained in the Five Classics? Might even the term *ru* be fairly applied to some of them? I will answer these questions from two different perspectives.

First, applying taxonomies to people is a meaningful performance. No matter how loosely the rubric *ru* was used, Sima Qian and Ban Gu only called certain officials *ru*. No matter whether or not it represents the common understanding, this public act of naming reflects the author's own definition of the *ru* group. Thus, we should respect Sima Qian's explicit classification—a classification followed by Ban Gu—and observe his schemes to divide up officialdom. In this way, we can not only better understand the true situation but explore the messages Sima Qian inserted into his work through the ordering and grouping of biographies.⁶⁴

Second, I shall examine the available sources to see what we can learn about the education of high officials and their descendants. Records show that *ru*, that is, scholars who specialized in the Five Classics, served as teachers to descendants of the imperial family. For example, in *The Grand Scribe's Records* is the story of Liu Ying 劉嬰, the nephew of Emperor Gao, who shared a teacher with Mr. Shen; later, when Liu Ying became king of Chu 楚王, he invited Mr. Shen, an expert on the *Book of Songs*, to serve as the teacher of his son Wu 戊.⁶⁵ Wang Zang 王臧, a disciple of Mr. Shen, served as Junior Tutor to Crown Prince (*Taizi shaofu* 太子少傅) during Emperor Jing's reign, meaning that he taught Liu Che 劉徹, later Emperor Wu.⁶⁶ Han Ying 韓嬰 was the Grand Tutor (*Taifu* 太傅) of the king of Changshan 常山王, and Yuan Gu was the Grand Tutor of the king of Qinghe 清河王 during the reign of Emperor Jing.⁶⁷

Although it is never mentioned in *The Grand Scribe's Records*, *The History of Western Han* records that Emperor Wu ordered the crown prince, Liu Ju 劉據, to study the Gongyang tradition of the *Annals* (*Gongyang chun qiu* 公羊春秋) and the Guliang tradition of the *Annals* (*Guliang chun qiu* 穀梁春秋) under Master Jiang of Xiaqiu 瑕丘江公.⁶⁸ *The History of Western Han* also preserves a decree of Emperor Zhao 昭帝, Emperor Wu's son, which said, "I, the emperor, . . . am familiar with commentaries on the 'Nursing and Tutoring the Crown Prince,' the *Classic of Filiality*, *Analects*, and the *Book of Documents*, but I never say that I am enlightened" 朕 . . . 通保傳傳, 孝經, 論語, 尚書, 未云有明.⁶⁹

Furthermore, *The History of Western Han* records that Wen Weng 文翁, the governor of Shu 蜀郡守 during Emperor Jing's reign, sent more than ten of his clerks to the capital to study with the Erudites or to study the laws and edicts (*lüling* 律令). It is said that Wen Weng established the official academy in Chengdu and appointed its most distinguished graduates as clerks in the governments of commanderies and counties. Since Ban Gu noted that Wen had the students who combined personal dignity with a good understanding of the Five Classics accompany him in inspection tours, it is likely that the

Five Classics were taught at the academy. Ban Gu also said that Emperor Wu ordered the commanderies and vassal states to establish academies in accordance with the model established by Wen.⁷⁰

I have presented all that the available sources have to say about the education of the ruling class at the end of Emperor Wu's reign. Some of these stories are often cited by scholars to argue for the victory of *ru* under Emperor Wu—I am less certain. Although the Five Classics were certainly part of the curriculum under some teachers and at some schools, it is not evident that the Han ruling class was generally schooled in the Five Classics.

All four cases of *ru* employed as teachers by imperial families appeared in one chapter of *The Grand Scribe's Records*: "The Collective Biographies of *Ru*," the chapter in which *ru* were presented as the most legitimate candidates for government posts. The official careers of *ru* were traced and their important positions listed. When cases of *ru* acting as teachers to princes at the court or in vassal states were lumped together, it suggested to readers that this educational arrangement had become the rule rather than the exception. However, these four examples in fact are all individual cases and lack any statistical significance. We know of three other persons besides Wang Zang who served as Junior Tutors to Crown Prince and at least eleven who served as Grand Tutors to Crown Prince early in the Han.⁷¹ Among those, Wang Zang and Shusun Tong were experts on the Five Classics and called *ru*, while the others were not identified as *ru* by their contemporaries. Wei Wan started his career as a Gentleman-assistant because of his skill as a carriage driver, Bu Shi was a rich merchant, and Shi Fen had no knowledge of literature (*wu wenxue* 無文學).⁷² Shi Qing was the son of Shi Fen, and Shi De was probably the son of Shi Qing.⁷³ Sima Qian noted that Dowager Dou held that the members of the Shi family sincerely followed a moral code without preaching (不言而躬行; presumably "without preaching any elaborate teachings") and countered the *ru* group, who had numerous teachings but little sincerity (文多質少).

Among these twelve tutors of crown princes in four different courts, eight came from powerful families that had helped Liu Bang establish the Han dynasty.⁷⁴ Therefore, *ru* did ascend to prestigious positions. This does not mean that all members of the upper class were educated in the Five Classics: much as in the examples of *ru* holding high positions that were discussed above, these cases do not show that all officials of the Han were *ru*.

Those who argue that all Han officials studied the *ru* canon often cite Liu Ju and Liu Fuling 劉弗陵 (later Emperor Zhao), two of the sons of Emperor Wu, who had studied the Five Classics. It is plausible that Emperor Zhao did, as he himself claimed in the passage cited earlier, know something about these works. But Emperor Zhao was only thirteen years old or perhaps even younger when he issued that decree.⁷⁵ He mentioned his knowledge of these classics as a rhetorical device in a decree calling on high officials to recommend official candidates. After mentioning that he was familiar with commentaries

on “Nursing and Tutoring the Crown Prince,” and so forth, he immediately shifted his tone, claiming that he was not yet enlightened. This naturally introduces the order requiring high officials to recommend worthy men (*xianliang* 賢良) and outstanding literati (*wenxue gaodi* 文學高第).

The reference to Liu Ju studying both *Gongyang* and *Guliang* traditions of the *Annals* is suspicious. Sima Qian was a contemporary of Liu’s and mentioned Master Jiang of Xiaqiu as a teacher of the *Guliang* tradition in “The Collective Biographies of *Ru*.” But he never mentioned that Liu Ju, the crown prince at that time, studied the *Gongyang* commentary, let alone that Master Jiang of Xiaqiu was his *Guliang* teacher. Liu’s studies of the *Annals* are mentioned in *The History of Western Han*, a book written one hundred years later.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the *Gongyang* tradition of the *Annals* was a more influential tradition than *Guliang* when Liu Ju was active (i.e., Emperor Wu’s reign). Both Sima Qian and Ban Gu preserved more names of *Gongyang* teachers than of *Guliang* teachers. Interestingly, the record in *The History of Western Han* does not specify who taught the *Gongyang* to Liu Ju, but identifies Master Jiang of Xiaqiu—the most important transmitter of the *Guliang* tradition, defeated by the *Gongyang* expert Dong Zhongshu in a court debate—as his *Guliang* teacher.⁷⁷ It is possible that the followers of the *Guliang* tradition tried to embellish their history at the end of Western Han, once they had established supremacy over their rivals, inventing the story about the crown prince.⁷⁸

Furthermore, regarding Wen Weng’s story, Yu Qiding 俞啓定 convincingly demonstrated that it may have been an edict on paper only that Emperor Wu ordered to establish local or regional academies after Wen Weng. The central government lacked the resources to support one imperial academy, let alone the local ones. Even in the early years of the Eastern Han dynasty, the local academies were unevenly developed. In addition, Wen Weng’s story was not recorded until more than one hundred years later when Ban Gu wrote the Western Han history. Wen Weng’s contemporary Sima Qian never mentioned him. Nor can such edicts regarding the establishment of local academies be found under Emperor Wu in our available sources.⁷⁹

Therefore, not a single case in the sources indicates that Han officials were trained in the Five Classics. Instead, it is apparent that high officials during Emperor Wu’s reign generally lack knowledge of the Five Classics. For example, Sima Qian pointed out that because Grandee Secretary Zhang Tang was not familiar with the Five Classics, he was not able to reply to Xu Yan, who defended himself by citing the *Annals*. As mentioned before, an interest group formed around Zhang Tang, members of which promoted each other. However, when Zhang Tang tried to use ancient cases recorded in the Five Classics as legal precedents to justify his verdicts on important and complex lawsuits, he had to go outside his circle to find officials who had studied the *Documents* and the *Annals* as his clerks.⁸⁰ *The Grand Scribe’s Records* also records that Gongsun Hong distinguished himself among eminent officials

precisely by employing *ru* techniques (*rushu*) to embellish the legal and bureaucratic affairs.⁸¹

Knowledge of Five Classics thus had not yet become a necessary credential to one's success in officialdom even by the end of Western Han dynasty. Nor had it been regarded as an essential part of elite education.

Not only Sima Qian but the contemporaries of the Western Han in general explicitly distinguished officials who specialized in the Five Classics from their colleagues. Ouyang Diyu 歐陽地餘, the Privy Treasurer under Emperor Yuan, called himself a *ru* official among Nine Ministers (*Jiuqing ruzhe* 九卿儒者), and instructed his descendants to distinguish their conduct from that of other officials.⁸² Under Emperor Ai, when the Imperial Secretaries impeached Shen Xian 申咸 and Gui Qin 袂欽, two Erudites serving as Palace Steward, he designated them as *ru* officials (*ruguan* 儒官), saying that “[you are] lucky to be selected as confidants of the emperor in the name of *ru* officials” 幸得以儒官選擇備腹心.⁸³

Finally, officials who knew little of Five Classics successfully ascended to eminent positions throughout the Western Han dynasty. Bing Ji 丙吉, Huang Ba 黃霸, and Yu Dingguo 于定國 were all legal specialists. While Bing and Yu started their careers as jailers, Huang entered officialdom through buying the position of Gentleman-attendant. They achieved Chancellor position one after another under Emperor Xuan primarily by virtue of administrative achievements or networking. Ban Gu noted that they did not start to learn Five Classics until they were already established in officialdom.⁸⁴ Wang Mang, the usurper of the Western Han, was well known for his frenetic reforms according to *ru* classics. But like Emperor Wu, he employed merchants to implement his economic reforms simply because those men were experts on money matters.⁸⁵

In fact, the domination of officialdom by descendants of powerful families and the frustrating experiences scholars specializing in the Five Classics encountered were serious problems constantly pointed out by important *ru* officials under Emperor Wu. Dong Zhongshu raised this problem in his memorial presented in 134 BCE, pointing out that “In general, senior officials are drawn from among the Gentlemen of the Palace [*Langzhong* 郎中] and the Inner-Gentlemen [中郎]. Gentleman-attendants (*Lang* 郎) either buy their positions or are chosen from the descendants of officials ranked two thousand bushels or above. These people are not necessarily worthy” 夫長吏多出於郎中, 中郎, 吏二千石子弟選郎吏, 又以富訾, 未必賢也. Dong Zhongshu therefore requested the emperor to routinize the recommendation system and establish an Imperial Academy.⁸⁶

Ten years later, in 124 BCE, Gongsun Hong reminded the emperor of this issue. In his memorial, he criticized an ironic phenomenon: those in power were too ignorant to explain edicts and laws to the people; those who had literary knowledge and had mastered ritual matters did not have opportunities