

Power Changes Inside and Outside the Palace with the Power of the Emperor Balance in the Middle and late Western Han Dynasty

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Abstract: *In the early Western Han Dynasty, the prime minister had a great influence in the upper bureaucratic system because of the respect for his position and the broad authority. At this time, the emperor's measures were easily restricted by the prime minister. In order to strengthen the imperial power, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty set up the inner court to distinguish and balance the outer court represented by the prime minister. The division of internal and external dynasties appeared for the first time in the upper bureaucratic system of the empire. At the beginning of the establishment of the inner dynasty, it was always located in the center of the upper power. Correspondingly, the prime minister gradually evolved into an executive body, losing the power to participate in decision-making. With the replacement of the emperors in the middle and late Western Han Dynasty, the power distribution between the internal and external dynasties was not fixed, and the overall trend was that the internal dynasty was strong and the external dynasty was weak. Only after the destruction of the Huo's group, the long-weakened foreign dynasty was restored to some extent. At this time, the powerful eunuch became a third-party force that restricted the internal and external dynasties. The secondary combination of the foreign relatives and the internal dynasties made the distribution of power in the upper class of the empire usher in a new turning point. The emergence of these new forces and new changes is the embodiment of the imperial power balance. The emperor manipulated the multi-party forces of the upper class of the empire to achieve a relative balance of power.*

Keywords: Western Han Dynasty, Internal and external, Changes in power, Imperial checks and balances.

1. The Constraints of the Prime Minister's Power and the Formation of the Internal and External Dynasties During the Period of Emperor Wudi

In the early years of the Western Han Dynasty, as the first of the three prime ministers, the weight of the prime minister was mostly held by the founding meritorious officials, which limited the exercise of the emperor's power. In order to strengthen the imperial power, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty selected some loyal attendants such as Shangshu and Changshi to form the decision-making team in the palace. The upper bureaucratic system was formally divided into internal and external dynasties. Because the inner court actually represented the absolute power of the emperor, it gradually became the power center except the emperor, and the situation of strong inside and weak outside gradually formed.

The reason why Emperor Wu of Han set up the inner court to check and balance the prime minister is that the contradiction between the monarch and the prime minister is intensifying.

When 'Historical Records' recorded Emperor Jing of the Han Dynasty, Dou Hou wanted Emperor Jing of the Han Dynasty to seal the marquis to Wang Xin. Zhou Yafu, the then Prime Minister, rejected it on the grounds that his ancestors swore that 'no marquis is allowed without merit', and Emperor Jing had to stop. Later, Emperor Jing wanted to enfeoff the five Xiongnu kings who surrendered to the Han Dynasty to encourage others to return, and Zhou Yafu blamed these people for not keeping their duties. However, the result was that the Emperor Jing insisted on the appointment of the Marquis and the Prime Minister was dismissed from office due to illness. It can be seen from this that the emperor's measures were easily constrained by the prime minister, but

Jingdi did not make political changes after all, but only limited and weakened the power of the prime minister. In the early period of Emperor Wudi, he was repeatedly interfered by his relatives in politics. First, the Queen Mother Dou controlled the power, and then the Queen Mother Wang and the political constraints of Wu'an Houtian Fen. Tian Fen was arrogant and unscrupulous person. He served as the prime minister as a close relative, and promoted the people who were attached to him, so that the prime minister gradually used the emperor's authority, which caused the dissatisfaction of Emperor Wu. Emperor Wu said dissatisfiedly, I also want to appoint some of their own people. It can be seen that at this time, the emperor, bound by the prime minister everywhere, could not manipulate the regime at will.

The "Table of Chancellors and High Officials" in the Book of Hansuccinctly summarizes the scope of the Chancellor's authority as "presiding over assistance to the Son of Heaven and assisting in the administration of all state affairs." These eight characters encompass two major aspects of the Chancellor's power in the Han dynasty: assisting the emperor in decision-making and overseeing the administration of the empire. As recorded in the Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Chancellor Chen Ping, Chen Ping stated: "The Chancellor, above, assists the Son of Heaven in harmonizing yin and yang and aligning with the four seasons; below, he fosters what is appropriate for all living beings; externally, he pacifies the four barbarian tribes and the feudal lords; internally, he draws the common people close and ensures that the ministers and officials fulfill their respective duties." This account also shows that the power of the prime minister covers a wide range.

The development of the prime minister system has made the importance of the prime minister to a country self-evident, and its power has gradually reached the peak, but the formation of

this situation is contradictory to the authoritarian monarchy envisaged by Emperor Wu. Between this, Emperor Wu took the lead in making changes.

According to the rules of the past, the prime minister who is the first of the three publics generally has military merit or glory in status (marquis). For example, Xiao He calmed the world with the high emperor, left behind the rear to stabilize the national politics, so as to ‘crown the ministers and give voice to the later generations’, and like Zhou Yafu, the second son of Zhou Bo, the former captain, and had the merit of leading the army to quell the rebellion of the seven countries, so as to be the prime minister. As another example, Dou Ying, who had the function of calming the chaos, was the nephew of Dou Tai. Tian Fen was the Queen’s mother and brother. Both of them were successively appointed as prime ministers. Since the beginning of Emperor Wu, he has broken the situation of aristocratic prime ministers, thus opening an unprecedented ‘civilian prime minister’, that is, Gongsun Hong. In the past, the selection of the prime minister was first based on whether he was a marquis to determine whether he was qualified, but at this time he became a former prime minister and then a marquis, which directly led to the decline of the prime minister’s respected status.

The most ironic case was the appointment of Che Qianqiu as Chancellor. According to the Book of Han: Biography of Che Qianqiu, “Che Qianqiu hurriedly submitted a memorial claiming that the Crown Prince was wronged,” thereby enlightening Emperor Wu that the Crown Prince’s rebellion had been an act of desperation. Furthermore, because “Che Qianqiu was over eight feet tall, of handsome and imposing appearance, and Emperor Wu was pleased at the sight of him,” he promoted Che Qianqiu to the position of Grand Minister of the Imperial Clan. Several months later, Che was elevated to Chancellor and enfeoffed as the Marquis of Fumin. This incident even drew ridicule from the Xiongnu leader, who remarked, “When the Han appoints a Chancellor, it does not employ worthy ministers—any official who submits a memorial can obtain the position.” This illustrates that by this time, the selection of the Chancellor was no longer a matter of great importance to Emperor Wu. As imperial autocracy was further strengthened, the scope of the Chancellor’s authority gradually diminished. For instance, the Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Wan Shi and Zhang Shun notes that Chancellor Shi Qing himself was “excessively meticulous in documents, cautious and conservative, lacking in greater wisdom or vision,” making his political role even more insignificant. In fact, from then on, it can be shown that the prime minister has lost the decision-making power of national policy and acted more as an executive agency.

Due to the weakening of the prime minister’s power, the corresponding decision-making power was gradually attributed to the emperor and the emperor’s inner court. The so-called internal dynasty, in essence, represents the absolute power of the emperor. The imperial court group was mainly composed of the emperor’s cronies, ministers, relatives and other advisors. The chief of the imperial court group was General Sima Da. During the period of Emperor Wu, the inner court was not perfect. Its main responsibilities were secretarial advisers, refuting ministers and offering advice and suggestions for the emperor, but at this time, it had set up a

general above the prime minister. It can be seen that as the emperor’s trusted and influential person in the inner court, the prime minister can no longer be the same as the power of the early Han Dynasty. However, although the generals in the period of Emperor Wu were famous for a time, the forces did not threaten the emperor, nor did they form a disaster. There are three main reasons:

- 1) At this time, most of the generals were leading the expedition and less involved in court politics.
- 2) General is familiar with the taboo of Emperor Wu.
- 3) Emperor Wu has a strong desire for power and a dictatorial personality.

Therefore, the great general who was respected by all people at this time did not dare to act recklessly, and everything was still followed by imperial decrees. It was not until the Zhaoxuan period that the general Neichao led by Huo Guang gradually reached the peak of the political power of the Western Han Dynasty. Since then, the general must be the emperor’s relatives and gradually formed a custom. The combination of the internal dynasty and the relatives also shows that the situation of the strong internal dynasty and the weak external dynasty was formally formed.

2. During Huo’s Reign, the Change of Power in the Internal and External Dynasties and the Balance of Imperial Power

In the second year of Houyuan, Emperor Wu collapsed. Previously, Emperor Wudi had appointed Huo Guang, Jin Riqin, Shangguan Jie and Sang Hongyang four people to form an auxiliary political team, and jointly assisted the Shaozhu under the imperial edict. At this time, Che Qianqiu, who was the prime minister, was not included. ‘Hanshu · Che Qianqiu Biography’ records that Huo Guang said to Che Qianqiu: ‘Now I govern the internal affairs, you govern the foreign affairs’. The prime minister who lost power had to respond to ‘all follow the instructions of the general’ and did not dare to say more. It can be seen that the role of the prime minister in the decision-making of the imperial policy is no longer necessary at this time, and it also shows that the internal dynasty has leaped from the previous embryonic stage to the mature stage in the development, from less participation in politics to a real major political leader. At this time, the internal dynasty system was formally established and became a veritable power center. Since the mother of the young lord Zhaodi, Mrs. Gouyi, had already died, Zhaodi’s sister princess became the eldest princess. In this way, for the general, there is less constraint of the empress dowager, a figure with considerable discourse power, which makes Huo’s inner court more powerful. This also bred the ambition of Huo Guang and others to be arrogant and domineering, so that the emperor also had to fear three points.

For example, some ministers said Huo Guang’s bad words, and Emperor Zhao of Han criticized and refuted them. The emperor said that the general was a loyal minister, and whoever dared to say his bad words would be convicted. It can be seen that whether Emperor Zhao of Han feared the power of Huo Guang, or for the purpose of letting Huo Guang put

down his guard, Huo Guang, as the head of the auxiliary minister, was also a symbol of the power of the inner court, and his deterrence was still very large. Even later, when Huo Guang shared a carriage with Emperor Xuan, the emperor felt “as if needles were pricking his back”—a palpable sense of intimidation that reflected the awe Huo Guang inspired. At this time, Huo Guang himself and his representative’s inner court were very powerful. Compared with the external dynasty of the prime minister, the internal dynasty is probably far ahead of it.

By this period, the inner court system had become firmly established. It was increasingly evident that the inner court was responsible for formulating major policies, while the outer court focused on their implementation. At the central level, the inner court had gradually emerged as the de facto center of power. It should be noted, however, that the inner court’s formal status was derived entirely from the practice of granting additional titles to officials. Although its authority appeared formidable, much of the allegiance it commanded was rooted in fear rather than genuine loyalty. In essence, the inner court exercised what might be described as “borrowed authority”—operating under the mantle of the emperor’s prestige rather than its own inherent power. Although the prime minister at this time has been eclipsed, there are still potential and confrontational disputes between the internal and external dynasties, which are still due to the basic contradiction between the emperor and the prime minister.

Even if the status of the inner court is improved, it still represents the absolute power of the emperor, and the conflict between the emperors is an unavoidable problem for most imperial countries, that is, the power conflict between the emperor and the auxiliary minister will generally exist in the dynasty. It is worth noting that once the imperial power declined, the former ministers completely obeyed the emperor’s political situation and now became obedient to the generals. The general’s inner court was directly related to the forces of the foreign relatives, and the inner court directly became a tool for the general’s dictatorship led by the foreign relatives.

Under the cognition of the imperial power, when a certain power is too expansive or violent, it is bound to be restricted and hindered. The rapid rise of the status of the inner court has already caused the balance of power to be broken, which is contrary to the dictatorship of the monarch, so the incumbent emperor must find a new way to balance the inner court. Emperor Xuan of Han knew that this matter should not be rushed and understood the seriousness of his own political situation. Therefore, in order to ease the conflict, he also allowed himself to safely pass this period of weak imperial power, and directly allowed Huo Guang to handle all political affairs. It is also this conservative measure that created good conditions for the subsequent removal of the Huo family. However, Emperor Xuan was not a man who was willing to be subject to others, but at the same time he was also a shrewd man. Therefore, before the death of Huo Guang, Emperor Xuan rarely targeted the Huo family politically. However, when Huo Guang died, Emperor Xuan, who had blindly

listened to the arrangement of the inner court, gradually released the growing dissatisfaction, and also restricted the various measures of the Huo family’s dictatorship. At this time, Wei Xiang, the then censor, proposed to weaken Huo to Emperor Xuan. This idea coincided with Emperor Xuan’s mind.

The proposal put forward by Wei Xiang to curb the influence of the inner court was the “abolishment of the duplicate copy to prevent deception and obstruction.” According to the “Biography of Wei Xiang,” officials previously submitted memorials in duplicate, with one copy marked as the duplicate. The Director of the Secretariat would first review the duplicate copy and, if the content was unfavorable, withhold the memorial from the emperor. This practice allowed the official in charge to exercise personal discretion over which reports reached the emperor, thereby deceiving and isolating the ruler. Wei Xiang’s proposal to eliminate the duplicate copy aimed to strengthen the emperor’s right to information. Emperor Xuan followed his advice and promoted Wei Xiang as the official position of “Ji Shi Zhong.” After that, it was found that Huo Guang was involved in the murder of Empress Dowager Xu. Emperor Xuan dismissed the marquis of Huo Yu, Huo Yun and Huo Shan, and allowed Wei Xiang to replace Wei Xian as the prime minister, in charge of the affairs of various government offices. Until then, the power of the outer court headed by the prime minister had increased slightly. These measures also represented that Emperor Xuan had sent a signal to balance the inner court, and the power between the Chinese and foreign dynasties had begun a new transformation. When the power of the Huo family was weakened step by step, the Huo family had already germinated a sense of rebellion, but they were executed according to the law after being perceived by Emperor Xuan. Since then, the situation of the Huo family’s rule over the dictatorship has gone forever.

At this time, Wei Xiang, the then prime minister, planned political affairs for the emperor everywhere, which seemed to increase the power of the foreign dynasties, at least not as before, but it should also be seen that since the prime minister was encroached on by the generals, his status and dignity were not comparable to those before Emperor Wu. Wei Xiang himself did not have the corresponding style of a country. After the death of Wei Xiang, Bing Ji took over as prime minister, and Bing Ji’s contribution was actually rescued by Emperor Xuan at the time of his crisis, and there was no record of his political behavior in the history books. After Bingji’s death, his successor was Huang Ba, and he was not completely competent. It can be seen that the foreign dynasties headed by the prime minister at this time, although compared with the Huoguang period, had more political participation, and their identity and status had also been improved, but in general, it was still slightly irrelevant, and the prime ministers selected by Emperor Xuan were mostly able to govern the people rather than the country. In fact, the emergence of this situation is not accidental, which may be related to the taboo of emperor Xuandi and the harsh mentality of talents. Of course, to some extent, this also restores the political balance under the control of imperial power.

3. The Rise of Eunuchs and Imperial Relatives in the Imperial Court During the Reigns of Emperor Xuan and Emperor Yuan of the Han Dynasty and the Re-balancing of Power

During the reign of Emperor Xuan, the internal and external courts, under the emperor's strict supervision, maintained a relatively balanced situation in general. However, the principle of internal dominance over external dominance was always present, and the decline of the prime minister's power was also an inevitable historical trend. Given Emperor Xuan's discerning nature, he was destined to firmly hold onto the power in his own hands. For this reason, with the consideration of redistributing power, the authority of the eunuchs in the secretariat rose during his reign. The History of the Han Dynasty records that Shi Xian and Honggong "both entered the palace at a young age and were appointed as the Middle Yellow Gate, and were selected as the Middle Secretary." During the Xuanyuan period, both of them were successively appointed as the secretaries of the Central Secretariat. The Central Secretariat was an official of the Shao Fu. Originally, it was an internal official serving the emperor. During the reign of Emperor Wu, it had already been granted the power to "handle the affairs of reporting in and out". Among them, Shi Xian obtained political power during the reign of Emperor Yuan. Historical records state, "No matter how big or small the matter was, it was all decided by Shi Xian." At this time, the eunuchs of the Central Secretariat, as a new political entity, stepped onto the political stage of the upper-level bureaucrats.

Shi Xian and others held absolute power during the reign of Emperor Yuan, which might be related to his "gentle, benevolent and fond of Confucianism" personality. However, the rise of the eunuchs of the Central Secretariat began during the reign of Emperor Xuan. Emperor Xuan might have learned a lesson from the disaster of the Huo family and believed that the central power should be redistributed, so that the overall authority could be divided up once again, thereby achieving the goal of strengthening the imperial power. The central authority needed to be redistributed once again, leading to a further division of overall power, thereby strengthening the emperor's control. In this way, the eunuchs of the "Zhongshu", who held the authority to manage the submission and distribution of memorials, filled the power vacuum left after Wei Xiang abolished the "duplicate memorial." This also subjected the exercise of power by both the inner and outer courts to renewed constraints, creating what might be termed a new "balance of three powers."

During the Western Han Dynasty, the political involvement of imperial relatives through maternal or marital lines was a frequent occurrence. Beginning with Emperor Wu's establishment of the Inner Court, its leadership was predominantly held by these consort kin. However, due to Emperor Wu's stringent control over the Inner Court, their influence remained relatively limited and not yet a major concern. When Huo Guang served as the lead minister entrusted with the late emperor's will, holding the titles of "Da Sima Da Jiangjun" and "Ling Shangshu Shi", the Inner Court of this period can be described as a "consort kin-dominated Inner Court." This was because the Inner Court not only held

high rank and substantial power but also saw consort kin playing an extremely pivotal role within it. Following the fall of the Huo clan and Wei Xiang's abolition of the "duplicate memorial," the dominance of the consort kin within the Inner Court was somewhat curtailed. Nevertheless, the influence of consort kin continued to develop quietly in the background.

During the reigns of Emperors Xuan and Yuan, the expansion of power of the Zhongshu eunuchs led to the Inner Court once again falling under the control of new consort kin. The collusion between these two groups caused the Outer Court, headed by the Chancellor, to decline again after a brief resurgence, with some officials even resorting to currying favor with eunuchs and consort kin to protect their own positions. This fully demonstrates the gradual political decline of the Western Han Chancellorship, step by step approaching its finale.

Under Emperor Yuan, the Zhongshu eunuchs enjoyed a period of significant prominence, becoming political rivals to the consort kin-dominated Inner Court. However, this phase was relatively short-lived. Unlike the Eastern Han pattern, they did not alternate in power with the consort kin. By the reign of Emperor Cheng, their influence had gradually waned. Conversely, the Inner Court, led by consort kin, experienced a revival and became the most powerful political force in the late Western Han aside from the emperor himself, most notably represented by the Wang clan, including figures such as Wang Feng and Wang Mang.

4. Conclusion

The internal and external system of the Western Han Dynasty was the product of the struggle between imperial power and ministerial power, which was inseparable from the emperor's strengthening of individual monarchy and centralized rule in the imperial society. With the establishment of the internal dynasty by Emperor Wu, the prime minister gradually declined. Although it recovered slightly during the reign of Emperor Xuan, it was difficult to change its decline. By the time of Emperor Cheng, it was finally replaced by the new Three Dukes system. The Inner court was exactly the opposite. First, its power continued to expand and its status rose day by day, reaching its peak in the early period of Emperor Xuan of Han. Although the Inner court was suppressed after the "Huo" family was wiped out, it soon united with the relatives of the empress and entered another period of development, forming a second peak of power and eventually swallowing up the Han Empire.

The Zhongshu eunuchs, who rose during the power struggles between the Inner and Outer Courts, emerged as a third force intervening between the two. During Emperor Xuan's reign, this created a situation of a "balance of three powers." Under Emperor Yuan, who trusted the eunuchs, a brief period of dominance by eunuchs led by Hong Gong and Shi Xian emerged. However, this lasted only a few years before the "consort kin-dominated Inner Court" reclaimed power. It did not develop into the pattern seen in the Eastern Han, where eunuchs and consort kin alternated in control. The constant checks and balances among these three forces enabled the Han empire to operate stably for several more decades following its mid-dynasty revival.

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