


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Noble Rank (*Lie hou*) and the Changing Definitions of Merit (*Gong*) during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE)

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Abstract

The founding emperor of the Han envisioned the noble rank (*lie hou*) as a system rewarding “merit” (*gong*) that mainly referred to military achievements. However, the criteria for granting the noble rank changed considerably throughout the Han. This is reflected by the various categories of nobles in the *Han shu* tables: meritorious ministers (*gongchen hou*), the kings’ sons (*wangzi hou*), and the imperial affines and favorites (*waiqi enze hou*), as well as the new category of eunuch nobles (*huanzhe hou*) in the Eastern Han. This article argues that the *Han shu* tables should be read as one of the multiple narratives about the noble rank and merit during the Han rather than an objective statistical summary. Whereas the *Han shu* tables emphasize Gaozu’s original definition of merit, the imperial edicts granting the noble rank kept reinterpreting merit to serve the court’s contemporary needs. Recently excavated Han manuscripts provide a third way of viewing merit based on the length of service.

Keywords: merit; noble; rank; Han dynasty; *Han shu* (Book of Han)

Introduction

During China’s transition from the Zhou dynasty’s blood-based regime (c. 1046–256 BCE) to the Qin (206–221 BCE) and Han empires, certain reformers and intellectuals advocated for the principle of meritocracy and challenged hereditary privileges. A renowned example is the Shang Yang 商鞅 (c. 390–338 BCE) Reform in the pre-imperial state of Qin, which

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regulated the distribution of ranks (*jue* 爵) based on military merit.¹ The twenty-rank system continued into the Qin and Han dynasties, despite numerous changes to the system. The rank system was still significant in the Han. This is because the ranks brought not only honor and status but also practical privileges to the rank holders, such as exemption from taxes and corvée labor.² Scholars agree that the ranks brought legal privileges to the rank holders. However, they disagree on which ranks could be used to lessen legal penalties, what kinds of legal penalties could be lightened, and how these legal privileges changed throughout the Qin and Han.³ There is also a consensus that the ranks brought economic privileges, including privileges of land and housing, although these policies changed significantly over time.⁴ The amount of land and housing allocated by the state typically corresponded with one's rank. Moreover, a person's rank and official post were interdependent. The highest ranks were often granted as a result of the rank holders' government posts. This connection was not institutionally guaranteed except in the case of the Grand Chancellors (*chengxiang* 丞相) after Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (c. 200–121 BCE). They routinely received the noble rank. If one had a noble title first, one had a higher chance of being appointed to the highest offices in government compared with those who

¹ *Shi ji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 68.2230.

² For explanations of the twenty ranks and relevant privileges, see Michael Loewe, "The Orders of Aristocratic Rank of Han China," *T'oung Pao*, 2nd ser., 48, 1/3 (1960), 97–174; Nishijima Sadao 西嶋定生, *Chūgoku kodai teikoku no keisei to kōzō* 中国古代帝国の形成と構造 (Tokyo: Daigaku shuppansha, 1961).

³ Nishijima considers the rank holders' privilege of redeeming legal penalties as a representation of the essential function of the twenty-rank system, which was to designate statuses and regulate social order, rather than a temporary privilege in a particular period. Tomiya Itaru 富谷至 points out that reducing legal penalties with ranks was conditional in the Qin and Han; not all ranks could be used to lessen penalties, nor could all the penalties be reduced by ranks. Zhu Shaohou 朱紹侯 agrees that the Han inherited the Qin's policy of redeeming or lessening crimes with ranks, but not all the crimes could be reduced or redeemed. Likewise, Li Junming 李均明 has studied the legal privileges of rank holders in the early Western Han using the Zhangjiashan excavated manuscripts. According to Li's research, while rank holders could receive a reduction of or exemption from legal penalties or redeem their crimes under certain conditions, this rule did not apply to some crimes such as unfiliality, the law-executors' violation of the law, and officials or clerks' appropriation of state property. Kiyoshi Miyake 宮宅潔 points out that two kinds of labor punishments—*guixin* 鬼薪 (males collecting firewood for the spirits) and *baican* 白粲 (females sifting white rice)—were adopted exclusively for the rank holders to protect them from falling into slavery. (According to Kiyoshi, the mark of slavery was wearing red clothes, manacles, and fetters.) See Nishijima, *Chūgoku kodai teikoku no keisei to kōzō*, 330–45; Tomiya Itaru, *Shin kan keibatsu seido no kenkyū* 秦漢刑罰制度の研究 (Tokyo: Dōhōsha, 1998), 287–335; Zhu Shaohou, "Cong zouyanshu kan hanchu jungong jue zhi de jige wenti" 從《奏讞書》看漢初軍功爵制的幾個問題, *Jianbo yanjiu*, issue 2 (1996), 183–84; Li Junming, "Zhangjiashan Han jian suo fanying de ershi deng jue zhi" 張家山漢簡所反映的二十等爵制, *Zhongguo shi yan jiu*, issue 2 (2022), 37–47. Kiyoshi Miyake, "Shinkan jidai no shaku to keibatsu" 秦漢時代の爵と刑罰 (The Aristocratic Rank and Penalty under the Qin–Han Dynasties), *The Tōyōshi-kenkyū* 58.4 (2000), 641–72.

⁴ According to Zhu Shaohou's research, the granting of land and housing emerged, developed, and declined hand in hand with the rank system. In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the rulers granted land and housing when they granted ranks. Shang Yang associated land and housing with military ranks and institutionalized it. In the early Western Han (before the reigns of Emperors Wen 文 and Jing 景), this system was inherited because the military elites were still in power. From the mid-Western Han to the end of the Eastern Han, with the inflation of ranks and the prevalence of land mergers, the big landlords grew increasingly powerful, and the system was undermined. See Zhu Shaohou, "Shilun mingtian zhi yu jungong jue zhi de guanxi" 試論名田制與軍功爵制的關係, *Xuchang shizhuan xuebao*, issue 1 (1985), 54–61.

did not.⁵ Rank holders also enjoyed other privileges including tax exemption or reduction. They could sell ranks for money, and wives enjoyed the same status as their husbands. All of these privileges made the ranks crucial for defining an individual's status as well as for regulating political and social hierarchies in the Han.⁵

The noble rank (*che hou* 徹侯 or *lie hou* 列侯) was the highest in the twenty-rank system. This made it highly desirable, especially among military officials.⁷ It was not easy to become a noble. For instance, Li Guang 李廣 (d. 119 BCE) was famous for his military prowess and his experience in the Han campaigns against the Xiongnu, but, over the course of his entire career, he never achieved enough merit for the noble rank.⁸ While the value of lower ranks decreased throughout the Han due to rank inflation, the noble rank was still reserved for a small number of individuals. It signified the highest status after the emperor and the king.

⁵ According to Bu Xianqun 卜憲群, the unity of official posts and ranks in the Qin began to change with the Qin unification of China, and the separation of the two became increasingly obvious in the Western Han. The characteristic of this change was that official posts determined ranks. In the Eastern Han, the twenty-rank system was no longer complete. Liu Chunfan 柳春藩 observes that the early Western Han emperors granted ranks mainly to the military elites and to commoners, but emperors in the mid- and late Western Han bestowed ranks mainly on bureaucrats. This brought the high officials many privileges. In the Eastern Han, the system of granting ranks to officials was basically abolished, and the commoners' ranks had lost their value. In general, the ranks and official posts largely corresponded to each other in the Han (i.e., high officials received high ranks, and high rank-holders could become high officials). Tatemi Satoshi 榑身智志 holds that after the reign of Emperor Jing, officials were granted ranks according to their posts, and that the correspondence between the posts and ranks were as follows: Grand Chancellor (*chengxiang*)—*lie hou*, Grandee Secretary (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫)—*guannei hou*, officials of fully 2,000 piculs (*zhong erqian shi* 中二千石) and officials of 2,000 piculs (*erqian shi* 二千石)—*zuogeng* 左更 or *youshuzhang* 右庶長, officials of 600 piculs (*liubai shi* 六百石)—*wudafu* 五大夫. Yang Guanghui 楊光輝 thinks that official posts and ranks were largely separated in the Han, but they began to converge after the mid-Eastern Han. Zhu Shaohou argues that ranks were more important than official posts in the early Western Han; after the mid-Western Han, as the ranks inflated, official posts became more important than ranks; in particular, after the eight commoners' ranks (*minjue* 民爵) were separated from the twenty military ranks, the lowest eight ranks became honorary titles and no longer had a direct link with official posts. Liu Min 劉敏 argues that compared with the pre-imperial period, a person's rank and official post were more separated in the Qin and Han, but they still largely corresponded to each other. See Bu Xianqun 卜憲群, "Qin Han ershi deng cijue zhi yu guanliao zhi" 秦漢二十等賜爵制與官僚制, *Wenshi zhishi*, issue 1 (2000), 17–23; Liu Chunfan 柳春藩, *Qin Han fengguo shiyi cijue zhi* 秦漢封國食邑賜爵制 (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1984), 120–46, 186–98, 208–9; Tatemi Satoshi 榑身智志, "Shin kandai no kyo 20 tō shakusei no hensen to kanri tōyō seido no tenkai" 秦・漢代の「卿」—二十等爵制の變遷と官吏登用制度の展開, *Tōhōgaku* 116 (2008), 20–36; Yang Guanghui 楊光輝, *Han Tang fengjue zhidu* 漢唐封爵制度, 3rd ed. (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2004), 159–71; Zhu Shaohou, "Jungong jue zhi tanyuan" 軍功爵制探源, *Junshi lishi yanjiu*, issue 1 (2015), 61–64; Liu Min 劉敏, "Chengxi yu bianyi: Qin Han fengjue de yuanze he zuoyong" 承襲與變異: 秦漢封爵的原則和作用, *Nankai xuebao* (zhexue shehui kexue ban), issue 3 (2002), 103–10.

⁶ Throughout this article, the term *lie hou* is translated as "nobles" rather than "marquis." I adopted this translation because "marquis" in the European context refers to a nobleman ranking above a count and below a duke; in contrast, *lie hou* was the highest rank in the Han twenty-rank system. Moreover, the term "nobles" reflects the fact that the *lie hou* rank was inheritable. For more explanation of the twenty ranks, see Zhu Shaohou, "Cong ernian lüling kan Han chu ershi ji jungong jue de jiazhi—ernian lüling yu jungong jue zhi yanjiu zhi si" 從《二年律令》看漢初二十級軍功爵的價值—《二年律令》與軍功爵制研究之四, *Henan daxue xuebao* 43.2 (2003), 51–56.

⁷ The noble rank was called *che hou* in the early Western Han. Starting from Emperor Wu's reign, it was renamed *lie hou* in order to avoid offending Emperor Wu's given name, *Che*. In this article, "noble rank" always refers to *che hou* or *lie hou*, the highest rank in the Han rank system. It does not include the noble Within the Pass (*guannei hou*), the second highest rank in the system.

⁸ *Shi ji* 109.2867–2878.

The noble rank is suitable for long-term, quantitative analysis for several other reasons. First, after the early Western Han, the value of ranks gradually declined due to rank inflation, the private selling of ranks, and the increasing importance of bureaucratic offices to one's social status. By the early Eastern Han, all ranks except the two highest ranks, *lie hou* and *guannei hou* 關內侯 (“Noble Within the Pass”), had largely lost their value,⁹ and the lower ranks are thus not suitable for diachronic comparison. Second, all the other ranks would be reduced by one rank when inherited by the rank holder's son; in contrast, the *lie hou* and *guannei hou* ranks were not reduced when they were inherited. This made them prominent throughout the Han.¹⁰ Third, due to the gradual detachment of government posts from ranks, only the *lie hou* and *guannei hou* ranks remained closely connected to bureaucratic office. Fourth, the *lie hou* benefited from inheritable domains (*fengguo* 封國), whereas the *guannei hou* did not. This crucial difference makes the noble rank more similar to the rank of king and more privileged than the *guannei hou*.¹¹ Therefore, while Michael Loewe refers to both the *lie hou* and *guannei hou* as “nobles,” in this article the word “noble” is only used to translate *lie hou*.¹² Finally, Han sources provide a systematic record of who received the noble rank and why; moreover, most of the nobles have their own biographies in dynastic histories, making it possible to contextualize the implications of the noble rank in Han history.

In the beginning of the Western Han, the noble rank was designed to reward loyal subjects of the dynasty based on merit. The founding emperor, Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (Liu Bang 劉邦, d. 195 BCE), swore an oath to his ministers that “if any non-Liu is made king, all Under Heaven should attack him; if anyone is made a noble not because he has merit, all Under Heaven should kill him.”¹³ The first part of the oath was followed throughout the Han dynasty. Emperor Gaozu established nine kings of the Liu lineage and eight kings of other surnames, but seven of the non-Liu kings were soon killed for loyalty issues and their kingdoms were abolished. The only non-Liu king who survived Gaozu's reign was the King of Changsha 長沙, Wu Rui 吳芮 (d. 202 BCE). After five generations, the Kingdom of Changsha was abolished in 157 BCE due to the lack of a male heir. Empress Dowager Lü 呂 (d. 180 BCE) also established male members of the Lü family as kings, but they were all eliminated during the struggles between the Lü family and Gaozu's founding ministers.¹⁴ Starting from the reign of Emperor Jing (r. 157–141 BCE), all kings were

⁹Zhu Shaohou, “Jungong jue zhi tanyuan” 軍功爵制探源, *Junshi lishi yanjiu*, issue 1 (2015), 61–64. Li Junming 李均明, “Zhangjiashan Han jian suo fanying de ershi deng jue zhi.” 張家山漢簡所反映的二十等爵制, *Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, issue 2 (2002), 37–47. Yan Buke 閻步克, *Pinwei yu zhiwei—Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao guanjie zhidu yanjiu* 品位與職位—秦漢魏晉南北朝官階制度研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2002), 72–122. Sun Wenbo 孫聞博, “Ershi deng jue queli yu Qin Han jue zhi fenceng de fazhan” 二十等爵制確立與秦漢爵制分層的發展, *Zhongguo renmin daxue xuebao* (Journal of the Renmin University of China), no.1, (2016), 131–137.

¹⁰Zang Zhifei 臧知非, “Zhangjiashan Han Jian suojian xi Han jicheng zhidu chulun” 張家山漢簡所見西漢繼承制度初論, *Wen shi zhe*, issue 6 (2003), 73–80.

¹¹Because *guannei hou* had no private domain, Zhu Shaohou argues that the *guannei hou* and all the other lower ranks were “officials' ranks” (*guan jue* 官爵), whereas the king and the noble were “aristocratic ranks” (*guizu jue* 貴族爵). Zhu Shaohou, “Jian lun guannei hou zai Han dai jue zhi zhong de diwei” 簡論關內侯在漢代爵制中的地位, *Shixue yuekan*, issue 1 (1987), 15–19.

¹²Loewe, “Social Distinctions, Groups and Privileges,” in *China's early empires: A re-appraisal*, edited by Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 296–307.

¹³*Shi ji* 17.801.

¹⁴“Chronological Table of Kings after the Founding of the Han” (*Han xing yilai zhuhou wang nianbiao* 漢興以來諸侯王年表), in *Shi ji* 17.801–875.

members of the Liu lineage except during two unusual times: during the interregnum between the Western Han and the Eastern Han, Emperor Gengshi enfeoffed several non-Liu kings;¹⁵ and at the end of the Eastern Han, the powerless Emperor Xian 獻 (r. 189–220 CE) ennobled the de-facto ruler, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220 CE), as the King of Wei 魏.¹⁶

The ministers who were loyal to the Liu lineage took pains to defend the first part of Gaozu's oath. When Empress Dowager Lü made the Lü kings, Wang Ling 王陵 (d. 180 BCE) remonstrated with her, citing the oath.¹⁷ Similarly, when Emperor Gengshi 更始 (a contender for the throne during the Western Han–Eastern Han interregnum, ?–25 CE) made his ministers kings, Zhu Wei 朱鮪 argued that the decision would violate Gaozu's oath.¹⁸ These ministers' insistence on Gaozu's oath was not only a gesture of loyalty to the founding emperor, but also a reflection of how they conceptualized the Han regime. As Ōba Osamu argues, many ministers considered the Han regime not the property of a single emperor; rather, they thought it belonged to Emperor Gaozu and the entire Liu lineage. Therefore, Gaozu's oath and the ancestral temple constituted the foundation of the Han regime.¹⁹ This point is illustrated by an incident at a court feast, where Emperor Jing joked that he would pass on the throne to his younger brother, King of Liang 梁 (Liu Wu 劉武, d. 144 BCE), rather than to his own son. Empress Dowager Dou 竇 (d. 135 BCE) was pleased because she favored King Liang. However, Dou Ying 竇嬰 (d. 131 BCE) refuted on the spot that “the Under Heaven is Emperor Gaozu's Under Heaven,” and that because Emperor Gaozu established the rule of father–son succession, Emperor Jing could not make this arbitrary decision.²⁰ Another example is when Huo Guang 霍光 (d. 68 BCE) deposed the new emperor who had been the King of Changyi 昌邑; the document he and his fellow ministers drafted stated that “the ancestral temple is more important than the emperor himself” (*zongmiao zhong yu jun* 宗廟重於君).²¹ Considering the specific contexts of these incidents, this view might not have been supported by everyone throughout the Han. Nevertheless, it was held by the founding ministers and a group of officials, at least.

By contrast, the second part of Gaozu's oath was largely ignored by subsequent emperors and only occasionally disputed by the ministers. Each Han emperor granted the noble rank to individuals whose number ranged from dozens to over a hundred, but only some of them were ennobled because of their extraordinary military achievements in defending the Han regime. Many of the nobles acquired the rank because of familial or personal connections to the emperor. This phenomenon indicates that the nature of the noble rank changed over time and corresponded to the changing power base of the court. As Li Kaiyuan has explained, Emperor Gaozu's rulership was based on merit rather than heredity; his authority was limited because he had to share much power with the military elites who had co-founded the Han and with other members of the Liu lineage. However, with the flow of time and various political changes, by the end of Emperor Jing's reign, not only had the founding elites declined but also the regional kingdoms had been largely weakened. At the same time, the ruler's power expanded with the rise of new groups who

¹⁵ *Hou Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 11.470–471.

¹⁶ Chen Shou, *San guo zhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 1.47.

¹⁷ *Shi ji* 9.400.

¹⁸ *Hou Han shu* 1.83.

¹⁹ Ōba Osamu 大庭脩, trans., Xu Shihong 徐世虹 et al., *Qin Han fazhi shi yanjiu* 秦漢法制史研究 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2017), 89.

²⁰ *Shi ji* 107.2839. 天下者，高祖天下。父子相傳，此漢之約也，上何以得擅傳梁王。

²¹ *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 68.2945.

were more dependent on the ruler and the court, including the bureaucracy (now consisting mainly of legal and military clerks) and imperial favorites who were personally close to the emperor.²² The fluctuating numbers of nobles are best understood in this context and similar shifts in the court's power structure thereafter.

Existing scholarship on the twenty-rank system, mostly in Chinese and Japanese, shows continued interest in the system and its significance to our understanding of the Han. Existing research covers a variety of topics including the system's institutional changes, the inheritance of ranks and property, the rank holders' legal and economic privileges, and many more aspects.²³ Despite this wide range of topics, most of them focus on the institutional development of the twenty-rank system. There has been little quantitative analysis of the changing composition of the noble rank holders or critical reading of *Han shu's* classification of nobles. Combining quantitative analysis with close reading, this article is an attempt to answer a question that is key to both the twenty-rank system and the Han regime: To what extent was the noble rank distributed based on merit, and what does this suggest about the Han regime? This article also reveals many complexities within *Han shu's* three categories for nobles—the meritorious ministers (*gongchen hou*), the kings' sons (*wangzi hou*), and the imperial affines and the favored (*waiqi enze hou*).

This article examines the changing categorizations, numbers, and rhetoric regarding the noble rank in the context of Han politics and shifting definitions of merit. It argues that the changing composition of the Han nobles corresponded with the court's shifting power base and its political needs at different times, and that the *Han shu* tables only represent one way of classifying the nobles and a particular view of merit. Importantly, the concept of merit was interpreted in multiple ways by different groups and changed considerably over time.

The first section compares the multiple definitions of merit (*gong*) during the Han, including those in imperial edicts granting the noble rank and those in excavated manuscripts. Regardless of the rank holders' categories in *Han shu*, the imperial edicts always emphasized their merit (and sometimes virtue) to justify their rank but interpreted merit with great flexibility. The excavated manuscripts provide another way of counting merit based on one's lengths of service in the government or the military. In contrast to these two views, the *Han shu* tables represent a narrative largely based on Emperor Gaozu's original definition of merit and the court records of nobles. The second section provides a close reading of *Han shu's* "Tables of Nobles," showing that the specific reasons for granting the noble rank were more complex than what the three categories indicate at first sight. The next two sections offer a statistical analysis of the nobles' numbers and their household numbers, demonstrating that meritorious ministers (according to *Han shu's* definition) did not constitute the majority of nobles except in times of war, nor did they receive more households than nobles of the other categories.

²²Li Kaiyuan 李開元, *Han diguo de jianli yu Liu Bang jituan—jungong shouyi jieceng yanjiu* 漢帝國的建立與劉邦集團—軍功受益階層研究 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2000), 225–29.

²³Shi Binbin 師彬彬, "Liang Han ershi deng jue zhi wenti yanjiu zongshu" 兩漢二十等爵制問題研究綜述. *Shi zhi xuekan*, issue 3 (2016), 61–71. Besides numerous articles, there are a few monographs on these issues, including Yang Guanghui, *Han Tang fengjue zhidu*, 3rd ed. (Beijing: Xue yuan chubanshe, 2004); You Jia 尤佳, *Dong Han lie hou juewei zhidu* 東漢列侯爵位制度 (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2015); Qin Tiezhu 秦鐵柱, *Diguo zhongjian—handai lie hou yanjiu* 帝國中堅—漢代列侯研究 (Ji'nan: Qi Lu shu she, 2019).

To conclude, the composition of the nobles changed significantly over the course of the Han with the court's shifting power base and the efforts to redefine merit. The *Han shu* tables presented a particular way of viewing these changes among other competing narratives.

The Changing Definitions of Merit during the Han

The definition of merit is highly contextual. It depends on how a society and its actors view merit and how its institutions account for merit. How merit is defined changes over time with a society's collective values, and it may vary from one social group to another. Previous scholars of Han political history have largely defined *gong* as military merit, and *gong chen* as the immediate followers of Emperor Gaozu during the founding stage of the Han dynasty. This view is consistent with Emperor Gaozu's original definition of *gong* and helpful for understanding politics in the first half of the Western Han. Masubuchi Tatsuo and Li Kaiyuan have both pointed out that the meritorious ministers, i.e. the military founding elites, monopolized the central government until they were gradually replaced by the new group of technical bureaucrats (*wen fa li* 文法吏) under emperors Jing and Wu.²⁴ They both interpret this change as a result of the two emperors' efforts to centralize power. Tatemi Satoshi has further analyzed this change from the perspective of Emperor Jing's institutional reforms. The reforms required the nobles to financially contribute to the emperor's ancestral sacrifices, during which Emperor Gaozu's oath and the nobles' privileges were reaffirmed. On the other hand, it also gave the emperor the authority to deprive the nobles of their titles and privileges if they did not fulfill their obligations. Tatemi argues that these institutional reforms led to the cancellation of many nobles' rank and contributed to the decline of the meritorious nobles. Like Masubuchi and Li, Tatemi defines the meritorious ministers' merit as military merit during the Chu–Han war (207–202 BCE) and the Han court's campaigns against rebels.²⁵

However, when looking beyond the scope of Emperor Gaozu's oath and the first half of the Western Han, we can find at least three ways of defining *gong* in early imperial China. First, recently excavated manuscripts indicate that one could accumulate *gong* through regular bureaucratic or military service. Second, the imperial edicts granting the noble rank always justified the imperial decision by emphasizing the nobles' extraordinary achievements or virtue, and they interpreted *gong* differently over time. While *gong* was mainly defined in terms of military achievement in the early Western Han edicts, imperial edicts after the mid-Western Han often appealed to the language of honoring the worthy (*zunxian* 尊賢) and being close to relatives (*qinqin* 親親), thus expanding the implications of merit to include virtue and family ties. This change was connected to the rise of classical studies and the growing power of imperial affines. A third view of merit is represented by the *Han shu* tables. The tables largely define *gong* in terms of military achievement according to Emperor Gaozu's original criteria. Nevertheless, a close reading shows that they are sometimes inconsistent due to the difficulty of clearly separating personal achievements from imperial favor.

²⁴Masubuchi Tatsuo 增淵竜夫, trans. Lü Jing 呂靜, *Zhongguo gudai de shehui yu guojia* 中國古代的社會與國家 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017), 171–225. Li Kaiyuan, *Han diguo de jianli yu Liu Bang jituan-jungong shouyi jieceng yanjiu*, 180–245.

²⁵Tatemi Satoshi 榎身智志, *Zen Kan kokka kōzō no kenkyū* 前漢國家構造の研究 (Tōkyō: Waseda Daigaku Shuppanbu, 2016), 183–226, 534–39.

The excavated manuscripts regarding merit indicate that merit could be quantified for those serving in the government or the military. The *Gongling* 功令 manuscript from Zhangjiashan Tomb No. 336 reflects how merit was viewed by the state in the early Western Han. It includes a “Form for Submitting Merit [gong] and Length of Service [lao]” (*shang gong lao shi* 上功勞式) for individuals serving in the bureaucracy and the military to report their merit. It details how *gong* was calculated using the smaller unit of *lao*:

官自佐史以上,各以定視事日自占勞,勞盈歲為中勞,中勞四歲為一功。從軍勞二歲亦為一功。[王]身斬首二級、若捕虜二人各為一功。軍論之爵二級為半功。²⁶

Officials holding the post of Assistant Scribe and above calculate their own *lao* based on the days in which they are in office. An entire year of *lao* counts as one *zhong lao*, and four years of *zhong lao* counts as one *gong*. Serving in the army for two years of *lao* also counts as one *gong*. [No. *ren*]

Taking two heads of the enemy, or catching two captives, each counts as one *gong*. Two levels of military rank equal half a *gong*.

The document shows that both military and bureaucratic service were counted as *gong*, but one could accumulate *gong* more efficiently through military service than through bureaucratic service. The number of *gong* was then used as the basis for evaluation and promotion. As Ōba Osamu has observed, the Han manuscripts found at Juyan and Dunhuang confirm that *lao* was calculated by the length of service and *gong* was counted as one, two, three, etc.²⁷ The Juyan documents, which were found at the northwestern frontier of the Han, reveal that serving in the military at the frontier was rewarded with more *lao* than serving elsewhere; thus, two days (of service) was counted as three days.²⁸ Additional *lao* was awarded to military men on special occasions. For example, during the Autumn Hunt, one shooting was counted as fifteen days of *lao* for those whose accuracy rate exceeded fifty percent.²⁹

An anecdote in the *Han shu* shows that there were two major ways of achieving *gong*. One was “accumulated *gong*” (*ji gong* 積功) through regular bureaucratic or military service, and the other was extraordinary military achievement. Yuan Ang 袁盎 (d. 150 BCE) rebuked the Grand Chancellor Shentu Jia 申屠嘉 (d. 155 BCE) for the latter’s disrespectful behavior to him:

君乃為材官蹶張,遷為隊率,積功至淮陽守,非有奇計攻城野戰之功。³⁰

²⁶Jingzhou bowuguan, ed., *Zhangjiashan Han mu zhujian* (336 hao mu) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2022), 97.

²⁷Ōba, *Qin Han fa zhi shi yan jiu* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991), 392–99.

²⁸Juyan Han jian, 10.28. Zhongguo shehui kexue yanjiusuo, *Juyan Han jian jia yi bian*, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2:7.

²⁹Juyan Han jian, 45.23, 285.17, 270.23. Zhongguo shehui kexue yanjiusuo, *Juyan Han jian jia yi bian*, 2:32, 194, 205.

³⁰*Shi ji* 101.1741.

You, (by contrast,) served as a Soldier of Physical Strength and Archery Talent, were promoted to a Corporal of a squad, and then accumulated *gong* to receive the position of the Prefect of Huaiyang. You did not have the *gong* of employing extraordinary tactics to besiege a walled city or fighting on the battlefield.

The Han manuscripts from Yinwan Tomb No. 6 record that most of the local officials in Donghai Prefecture were promoted due to their *gong*. However, a few officials were promoted because of their probity (*lian* 廉), special talent (*xiu cai* 秀才), or extraordinary achievement of catching outlaws (*bu ge ... zei/dao you yi* 捕格 ... 賊/盜尤異).³¹ According to this classification, *gong* is defined by accumulated days of service, not extraordinary achievement, talent, or virtue. Whereas the concept of merit in the *Han shu* “Table of Meritorious Minister-Nobles” emphasizes the nobles’ extraordinary military achievement, the excavated manuscripts reflect the calculation of accumulated *gong* that applied to most bureaucrats and soldiers at the lower levels.

However one’s merit was achieved, the process of receiving a noble rank required an imperial edict that specified the merit and justified the rank. Only a few of these edicts have survived. Forty-two Western Han imperial edicts concerning the granting of the noble rank are preserved in the *Han shu* and have been collected by Chung-hsien Cheng.³² While in the *Han shu* tables Ban explicitly claims that the actual bestowment of the noble rank was highly dependent on kinship and personal relationships, the imperial edicts preserved in other chapters of the *Han shu* almost always appeal to the language of meritocracy. Naturally, the edicts for the *gong chen*—meritorious ministers or generals—highlight their *gong*, such as winning a war, surrendering to the Han, and crushing a rebellion. But even the edicts for the imperial affines and favorites praised their talent and virtue as the reasons for their noble rank.

Han shu lists Gongsun Hong under the “Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor” (*Waiqi enze hou biao*), suggesting that Gongsun Hong had received the noble rank due to imperial favor. However, the imperial edict of Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), which is preserved in another chapter of the *Han shu*, justifies Gongsun Hong’s rank with the language of meritocracy:

朕嘉先聖之道，開廣門路，宣招四方之士。蓋古者任賢而序位，量能以授官，勞大者厥祿厚，德盛者獲爵尊，故武功以顯重，而文德以行褒。其以高成之平津鄉戶六百五十封丞相弘為平津侯。³³

I (the Emperor) laud the Way of the previous sages, open doors and widen roads, and recruit talents from the four directions. In ancient times, they appointed the worthy to order status and evaluated candidates’ abilities to assign official posts. Those whose credit was high received generous salaries, and those whose virtue was abundant gained ranks of honor. Thus military merit was honored due to prominence, and cultural achievement was commended due to performance. I thereby grant the title of

³¹“Donghai jun xiaxia zhangli mingji” 東海郡下轄長吏名籍, in *Yinwan Han mu jian du*, edited by Lianyungang shi bowuguan et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 85–95.

³²Chung-Hsien Cheng, “Shi xi Xi Han fengzhou zhaoshu” 試析西漢封侯詔書, *Zaoqi zhongguo shi yanjiu* 5.1 (2013), 59–82.

³³*Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 58.2620–2621.

Pingjin hou to the Grand Chancellor Hong with six hundred and fifty households in the Pingjin Village of Gaocheng County.

This edict was issued in the context of Emperor Wu's promotion of literary talent. By the time of Emperor Wu's reign, the founding ministers who had fought together with Emperor Gaozu had mostly passed away. To recruit a new group of elites into the central government, Emperor Wu was expanding the criteria of merit to include non-military achievement. This change may have provoked some debate among the elites regarding the legitimate reasons for granting the noble rank.

The imperial edicts for imperial affines also tend to emphasize their merit. Emperor Wu's imperial edict granting the noble rank to Huo Qubing 霍去病 (c. 140–117 BCE) mentions only his military success, even though Huo was originally appointed general due to his kinship with Empress Wei 衛.³⁴ Huo Qubing's case may have been without dispute given his truly remarkable military achievement. Even the compiler of the *Han shu* table acknowledged that Huo Qubing and Wei Qing 衛青 (d. 106 BCE) had obtained their noble rank primarily due to their own merit.³⁵

The case of Li Guangli 李廣利 (d. 89 BCE) was perhaps more controversial. Li Guangli was first appointed general because he was the brother of Emperor Wu's favorite consort, Lady Li. The Emperor ordered his troops to conquer Dayuan 大宛. Li failed in his first attempt, forcing the army to retreat to Dunhuang. Emperor Wu was furious but gave Li another opportunity to attack Dayuan. This time, Li's troops defeated the Dayuan, and he received a noble rank. The imperial edict justified Li Guangli's new rank by detailing the harsh environmental conditions that he and his troops had overcome during the campaign, such as crossing rivers, mountains, and deserts, as well as his accomplishments which included receiving the Dayuan nobles' surrender, the Dayuan king's head, and thousands of precious "blood-sweating horses" (*Hanxue ma* 汗血馬).³⁶ This case illustrates that emperors could create opportunities for their affines and favorites to establish merit and use merit to justify their noble rank.

A similar case is that of Dong Xian 董賢 (c. 22–1 BCE), the male favorite of Emperor Ai 哀 (25–1 BCE, r. 7–1 BCE) who was known for his "cut sleeve" homo-erotic relationship with the emperor. The imperial edict granting the noble rank to Dong Xian said nothing of his personal relationship with the emperor. Instead, the edict justified the decision based on Dong's discovery and report of a plan for revolt. This edict also cited the *Book of Documents*, "the good-doer shall have his virtue distinguished (*yong de zhang jue shan* 用德章厥善)."³⁷

Even the imperial edict for Wang Yin 王音 (d. 15 BCE), who obviously received his noble rank due to his kinship with Empress Dowager Wang, extolled his merit. An edict of Emperor Cheng 成 (r. 33–7 BCE) first praised Wang Yin's loyalty, uprightness, and diligence in guarding the palace. Next it explained that Wang Yin deserved the noble rank, which was a routine reward to the Grand Chancellor. But because he was an imperial affine, he had served as a general at the inner court instead of Grand Chancellor. Thus the emperor was displeased and wished to make Wang Yin Lord of

³⁴*Han shu* 55.2478.

³⁵*Han shu* 18.678.

³⁶*Han shu* 61.2703.

³⁷*Han shu* 86.3492–3493. The citation from the *Book of Documents* is from the "Pan Geng I" 盤庚上 chapter. See James Legge's translation in Sturgeon, Chinese Text Project, at <https://ctext.org/shang-shu/pan-geng-i/zh?en=on>.

Anyang 安陽.³⁸ By the time of Emperor Cheng's reign, granting the noble rank to the Grand Chancellor had become an accepted practice, and the meaning of merit had expanded to regular bureaucratic service in addition to the previous meanings of military credit in wars, surrender to the Han, or crushing rebellions.

Not all the imperial edicts granting the noble rank appealed only to the nobles' *gong*. Some imperial edicts celebrated virtue—both the noble's virtue and the emperor's virtue of repaying their favor—as the primary reason for granting the noble rank. This phenomenon started during the reign of Emperor Xuan 宣 (r. 74–48 BCE), when the classics gained more influence and the concept of virtue became increasingly important in official rhetoric. Several individuals received the noble rank because they had supported Emperor Xuan through hardships before he was enthroned. For instance, Bing Ji 丙吉 (d. 55 BCE) saved Emperor Xuan's life when he was a baby and his father condemned. Emperor Xuan's edict explicitly stated that granting Bing Ji the noble rank was meant to repay his favor, citing a line from the *Book of Odes*, “Every good deed has its recompense (*wu de bu bao* 亡德不報).”³⁹

Not only an individual's own virtue, but also a family member's virtue could be a justification for awarding noble rank. According to Emperor Xuan's imperial edict granting the noble rank to Zhang Pengzu 張彭祖 (d. 59 BCE), his rank was a reward for his uncle's service to the emperor. His uncle was Zhang He 張賀, who had taught the classics to the emperor in his childhood. After he was enthroned, the emperor learned his teacher Zhang He had passed away. The emperor therefore made Zhang He's brother's son Zhang Pengzu a noble and gave Zhang He a posthumous noble title.⁴⁰ Since Zhang He's and Zhang Pengzu's noble titles were the same (*Yangdu hou* 陽都侯), Zhang Pengzu was likely Zhang He's heir because Zhang He had no biological son. The *Han shu* “Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor” also states that Zhang Pengzu received his noble rank due to the emperor's recognition of his uncle.⁴¹ However, *Han shu* also suggests that a reason for Zhang Pengzu's noble rank was that he studied closely together with Emperor Xuan when the emperor was still young and not recognized by the royal family.⁴²

Likewise, an emperor might justify granting the noble rank to his mother or grandmother's male relatives as repaying his mother's or grandmother's favors to him. Emperor Ai's edict for Fu Shang 傅商 declared that the emperor was making an imperial affine a noble in order to repay the empress dowager's raising him. Fu Shang was a cousin of Emperor Ai's biological paternal grandmother, Empress Dowager Fu (d. 2 BCE). While Emperor Ai had been adopted as the heir of Emperor Cheng and thus owed no ritual obligations to his biological kin, he insisted on granting imperial favor to his biological mother's and biological paternal grandmother's families. This act incurred criticism and opposition from certain officials, including Zheng Chong 鄭崇, who thought the emperor's favors to his biological kin had been excessive and inconsistent with prior rules.⁴³ Empress Dowager Fu became angry at these words and convinced Emperor Ai that a ruler should not be dictated to by his ministers. Under such circumstances,

³⁸*Han shu* 98.4025.

³⁹*Han shu* 74.3144. “Yi” 抑, *Book of Odes*. See James Legge's translation at <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/yi/zh?en=on>.

⁴⁰*Han shu* 59.2651.

⁴¹*Han shu* 18.692.

⁴²*Han shu* 59.2651, 93.3721.

⁴³*Han shu* 77.3255.

Emperor Ai issued an edict, stating that although he had already given a posthumous noble title to Empress Dowager Fu's father, it was not enough to repay her favor. Therefore, he ordered to make Fu Shang a noble and the heir of Empress Dowager Fu's father.⁴⁴ The imperial edict quoted a line from the *Classic of Odes*, which celebrated one's parents' favor of raising oneself:

欲報之德，曷天罔極。

If I would return your kindness,
Your kindness is like great Heaven, illimitable.⁴⁵

Certain imperial edicts addressed both the noble rank holder's merit and virtue. The "Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor" stated that Shi Dan 史丹 (d. 13 BCE) received the noble rank due to his mentorship of Emperor Cheng when the emperor was crown prince.⁴⁶ But the imperial edict documented in the "Biography of Shi Dan" referred to both Shi's mentorship of the emperor and his virtue:

夫褒有德，賞元功，古今通義也。左將軍丹往時導朕以忠正，秉義醇壹，舊德茂焉。其封丹為武陽侯，國東海郟之武彊聚，戶千一百。⁴⁷

Praising the virtuous and rewarding the meritorious is the right conduct both in the past and present. General of the Left, Dan, led me with loyalty and correctness in the past. He followed righteousness purely and persistently, and his prior virtue was abundant. Therefore, I grant the title of Wuyang noble to Dan, with the domain of the Wuqiang Village of the Tan County in Donghai Commandery, where there are one thousand and one hundred households.

The rhetoric of meritocracy and virtue continued into the Eastern Han. Using the keywords *feng* 封 and *hou* 侯, I was able to collect fourteen imperial edicts granting the noble title from the *Hou Han shu*. Two of these edicts were intended not as rewards but rather as an order to demote certain kings to nobles. The other twelve edicts mostly invoked the language of rewarding people based on their merit and virtue, but the connotation of "merit" or "contribution" (*gong*) became even more flexible compared with that of the Western Han.

By the Eastern Han, bestowing the noble rank upon the emperor's maternal uncle had become an established practice. During the founding stage of the Eastern Han, Emperor Guangwu (5 BCE–57 CE, r. 25–57 CE) had closely collaborated with several great families. The ties between these families and the imperial lineage were strengthened through intermarriage. Thus many members of these families were both meritorious ministers and imperial affines. The imperial edicts granting the noble rank to these individuals celebrated both their merit and their marriage relations with the imperial family.

⁴⁴*Han shu* 77.3255–3256.

⁴⁵"Liao e" 蓼莪, from the *Book of Odes*. The translation is based on James Legge's with slight modification; see <https://ctext.org/book-of-poetry/liao-e/zh?en=on>.

⁴⁶*Han shu* 18.698.

⁴⁷*Han shu* 82.3378–3379.

Two examples in the extant Eastern Han edicts show that granting the noble rank to imperial affines had become a standard practice in the Eastern Han. Emperor Ming (28–75 CE, r. 57–75 CE) granted the noble rank to the sons of his maternal uncle Yin Xing 陰興 (9–47 CE), Yin Qing 陰慶, and Yin Bo 陰博. In his edict, the emperor extolled both Yin Xing's military merit and his status as the emperor's maternal uncle, saying that Yin Xing deserved the noble rank but had been too modest to accept it. Now that Yin Xing had passed away, the emperor felt that the descendants of this virtuous person should receive the noble rank.⁴⁸ Likewise, Emperor He's (r. 88–106 CE) edict granting noble rank to several members of the Dou family specified two reasons for this decision: first, Grand General Dou Xian 竇憲 (d. 92 CE) had defeated the northern nomads; second, this decision was consistent with the "old conventions" (*jiu dian* 舊典), which referred to the precedents of granting the noble rank to emperors' maternal uncles starting from the late Western Han.⁴⁹

A new phenomenon in Eastern Han politics was that consort families and eunuchs alternated in dominating the court. Thus, "merit" in the Eastern Han could also mean allying with the emperor and assisting the emperor in a struggle against his political enemies. For instance, Emperor Shun 順 (r. 125–144 CE) eliminated the Yan 閻 family with the assistance of nineteen eunuchs. Therefore, he granted the noble rank to all these eunuchs, stating in his edict that they had been loyal in "wiping out the evil force and stabilizing the imperial house" (*saomie yuan'e yi ding wangshi* 掃滅元惡, 以定王室).⁵⁰ Likewise, Emperor Huan 桓 (146–168 CE) relied on five eunuchs and seven officials to kill the powerful Grand General Liang Ji 梁冀 (d. 159 CE) and eliminate the Liang family. In his edict granting the noble rank to these individuals, he stated that the noble rank was bestowed "to reward their loyalty and meritorious deeds to the royal house" (*yi chou zhong xun* 以酬忠勳).⁵¹

In reviewing these edicts from the Western and the Eastern Han, it becomes clear that the actual bestowment of the noble rank was highly dependent on kinship and personal relationships with the ruler, even though the rhetoric of meritocracy continued in imperial edicts throughout the Han. On the surface, the system largely followed Emperor Gaozu's oath of rewarding merit. The rise of classical studies after the mid-Western Han added a layer, allowing imperial edicts to appeal to the language of honoring the worthy (*zunxian* 尊賢) and being close to relatives (*qinqin* 親親). The implications of "merit" and "virtue," however, varied with the changing political circumstances. As Chung-hsien Cheng has noted, the imperial edicts granting the noble rank after Emperor Wu's reign often cited the classics.⁵² This trend reflects the increasing influence of classical texts and the classicist scholar-officials at the Han court. In my view, this shift also reflects the change in the composition of the nobles and the need to legitimize this change by appealing to the authority of classics. Starting from Emperor Wu's reign, some nobles obtained their rank not because they had significant military achievements, surrendered to the Han, or crushed rebellions, but because they had kinship or other kinds of personal relations with the emperor. To rationalize the decision to grant the noble rank to these individuals, the imperial edicts expanded the meaning of "merit" and added the criteria of "virtue," using the classics to enhance the validity of such statements. In the Eastern Han, the concepts of "merit" and "virtue" continued to be malleable, encompassing all kinds of deeds that were helpful to the emperor's consolidation of power.

⁴⁸ *Hou Han shu* 32.1132.

⁴⁹ *Hou Han shu* 23.818.

⁵⁰ *Hou Han shu* 78.2516.

⁵¹ *Hou Han shu* 7.305.

⁵² Cheng, "Shi xi Xi Han fenghou zhaoshu," 80.

Han shu's Categorization of Nobles

The *Han shu* contains separate tables for three types of nobles. (1) The kings' sons, all of whom were descendants of the Liu lineage, were ennobled as nobles. These are recorded in the "Table of Kings' Sons Ennobled as Nobles" (*Wangzi hou biao* 王子侯表). (2) Some nobles did not belong to the imperial lineage but were awarded noble ranks for their merit. These are recorded in the "Table of Meritorious Minister-Nobles during the Reigns of Emperor Gaozu, Emperor Hui, Empress of Gaozu, and Emperor Wen" (*Gao Hui Gao Hou Wen gongchen biao* 高惠高后文功臣表) and "Table of Meritorious Minister-Nobles during the Reigns of Emperor Jing, Emperor Wu, Emperor Zhao, Emperor Xuan, Emperor Yuan, and Emperor Cheng" (*Jing Wu Zhao Xuan Yuan Cheng gongchen biao* 景武昭宣元成功臣表). (3) Some nobles were bestowed the rank because they were imperial affines or favorites, or because they served in the highest offices in the bureaucracy. These are recorded in the "Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor" (*Waiqi enze hou biao* 外戚恩澤侯表). For convenience, I call the three groups "Liu nobles," "Meritorious nobles," and "Affine nobles." Each table includes a preface written by the historian. In the tables, each entry specifies the "reason for the noble rank" (*hou zhuang* 侯狀) for each noble.

We are not sure who invented the categories of nobles in *Han shu*, but Ban Gu and Ban Zhao likely adopted those categories from previous government archives and the categories that Sima Qian had used in *Shi ji*. The tables in *Shi ji* already had the categories of "meritorious ministers-nobles" (*gongchen hou*) and "the king's sons-nobles" (*wangzi hou*). Thus, it is possible that the compilers borrowed those categories. Michael Loewe argues that both the *Shi ji* and *Han shu* tables were based on lists or registers of holders of noble rank and others that were retained in the offices of the central government.⁵³ Loewe thinks that the different formats of the *Shi ji* and *Han shu* tables—horizontal in *Shi ji* and vertical in *Han shu*, according to Song-dynasty editions dating to 1035—may have resulted from the original archives that they copied from. However, we cannot verify this hypothesis because earlier versions have not survived. In addition, Loewe points out that "the presence of minor differences between the two sets of tables, i.e., concerning names or dates, is consonant with independent copying from the same source rather than by a supposition that the editor of the *Han shu* copied the text of the *Shi ji*."⁵⁴ Another piece of evidence suggests that the categories in the *Han shu* tables were not invented by Ban Gu or Ban Zhao. One of the inventories excavated from Yinwan M6, which dates to Emperor Cheng's reign, mentions an "Edict of Imperial Favor" (*enze zhaoshu* 恩澤詔書), indicating that the category of *enze* already existed in the late Western Han.⁵⁵

Ban Zhao is the most likely author of the *Han shu* tables. Given that she was officially appointed to finish *Han shu* after Ban Gu's death, she should have had at least partial access to previous records. If that is the case, then the *Han shu* categories would not directly reflect the historian's personal judgment; the prefaces of those tables can better represent the historian's own view. There is also evidence that Ban omitted certain nobles from the tables due to the lack of material or deliberate omission, as there are some nobles mentioned in other chapters of the *Han shu* who do not appear in the tables.⁵⁶

⁵³Michael Loewe, *The Men Who Governed Han China: Companion to a Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 257.

⁵⁴Loewe, *The Men Who Governed Han China*, 263.

⁵⁵Yinwan YM6D13 (front), Lianyungang shi bowuguan et al., eds., *Yiwan Han mu jiandu*, 24. 131.

⁵⁶Michael Loewe, *The Men Who Governed Han China*, 257.

The *Han Shu*'s classification of nobles in its "Tables" may seem straightforward at first sight, but it involves complex historiographical decisions. An interesting issue is how the historian classified nobles who could fit into more than one category. This is because a person could have achieved success through both personal connections and personal merit.⁵⁷ A complicating factor is that while some nobles fit into the criteria for more than one category, they are only counted once in the tables. In the tables for meritorious minister-nobles, Ban acknowledged that several other nobles had also achieved extraordinary merit (*gong*) but recorded them in the tables for the Liu nobles or affine nobles. Why did the historian make these choices?

Ban clarified the decision to make a separate table for "Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor" at the beginning of this table. The first paragraph explains why this table includes high officials, especially the Grand Chancellors (*chengxiang*). According to this passage, when Emperor Gaozu rewarded his founding ministers, he granted the ranks based on their merit and appointed the officials according to their abilities (*jue yi gong wei xianhou, guan yong neng wei cixu* 爵以功為先後, 官用能為次序).⁵⁸ However, by the time of Emperor Wu's reign, most of the founding ministers had passed away. As a result, the criteria for assigning noble rank were changing. Emperor Wu promoted literary talents from across the empire. Gongsun Hong quickly rose to the position of Grand Chancellor from a humble background. Emperor Wu gave him a special "favor" (*chong 寵*), honoring him with a noble rank. After that, giving the noble rank to Grand Chancellors became customary.

The next paragraph provides a narrative of the history of affine nobles as such. At the beginning of the Han, two imperial affines were bestowed the noble rank because they had contributed to the founding of the dynasty. Emperor Gaozu made the oath that all future kings must be members of the imperial lineage and that all future nobles must receive the rank because of their merit. Due to this rule, some officials obstructed Empress Dowager Lü's proposal of making the Lü kings and blocked Emperor Jing's attempt of granting the noble rank to Empress Wang's family members. After that, several imperial affines "received the noble rank because of their merit" (*yi gong shou jue* 以功受爵). These included Bo Zhao 薄昭 (d. 170 BCE), Dou Ying, and male members of the Shangguan, Wei, and Huo families. Besides, the empress's father and the emperor's maternal uncle routinely received noble rank, meaning that the criteria had gradually expanded. The author concludes that "therefore I record them separately (from the meritorious nobles)."⁵⁹

Ban's decision implies that the Liu nobles and the meritorious nobles were legitimate, whereas the imperial affines and Grand Chancellors received the noble rank due to their rulers' additional favor. While Ban acknowledged that some imperial affines in this table had obtained the noble rank because of their merit, he or she still classified them into this table instead of the tables for meritorious nobles. This implies that imperial favor was the precondition or the primary factor for their success. The key distinction here is whether a person had been an imperial affine or Grand Chancellor prior to their meritorious deeds. For instance, if Wei Qing were not Empress Wei's brother and Huo Qubing were not

⁵⁷While the majority of the *Han shu* was compiled by Ban Gu, after Ban Gu's death, his sister Ban Zhao was appointed by the emperor to finish the remaining parts of the *Han shu*. It is very likely that the *Han shu* tables were compiled or finalized by Ban Zhao. In this article, I have resorted to the expediency of referring to the author of *Han shu* as "Ban," because I am not entirely sure of their respective contributions to the work.

⁵⁸*Han shu* 18.677.

⁵⁹*Han shu* 18.678.

Empress Wei's nephew, they would not have been noticed by Emperor Wu or appointed to the position of general, despite their great military talent and their success afterward.

The "Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor" lists the specific reasons why certain imperial affines received a noble rank. The reasons are mostly written in two formats. The first one is (A) "Made a noble due to (*yi* 以) his identity as the [kinship relation] of Empress/Empress Dowager/Emperor/King X]" or "due to his position as the Grand Chancellor." The second format is (B) "Made a noble due to [his contribution]. He is Empress X's [kinship relation]." The two formats suggest there are in fact two subcategories in this table: (A) those who received the noble rank primarily because of their kinship relations or their bureaucratic offices, and (B) those who deserved the noble rank because of their merit but who also happened to be imperial affines. The two formats suggest the historian's intention of differentiating meritorious ministers from the other types of nobles. However, the meritorious imperial affines presented conceptual difficulties for this categorization because the actual situations were more complex.

Ban recognized that some imperial affines in the *Waiqi enze hou biao* received the noble rank primarily because of their merit. For instance, Empress Lü's brothers, Lü Ze 呂澤 (d. 199 BCE) and Lü Shizhi 呂釋之 (d. 193 BCE), both contributed to the civil war and the founding of the Han dynasty. Ban acknowledged their contributions by recording their merit as the reason for their noble rank. The table states that Bo Zhao, who received the noble rank under Emperor Wen (r. 180–157 BCE), was awarded the title because he had helped the emperor ascend the throne, although he was also the emperor's maternal uncle. Dou Ying received his noble rank mainly because he had defeated the rebels from the Wu and Chu kingdoms, although he was also the son of Empress Dowager Dou's cousin. Likewise, Empress Wei's brother Wei Qing and her nephew Huo Qubing both received the noble rank due to their military success.

Another issue worthy of attention is why the "Tables for Imperial Affines and Favorites" includes high-level bureaucrats. Why are the Grand Chancellors in this table, not in the table for meritorious nobles? What did the concept of meritorious ministers (*gongchen*) mean? This distinction suggests that "merit" (*gong*) has specific meanings in the *Han shu*'s classification scheme. In the *Han shu* tables for the Western Han meritorious nobles, the term *gong* consistently refers to one's actions of directly defending the regime, including fighting for the Han dynasty in warfare, surrendering to the Han dynasty, and forestalling a rebellion. No one in this table achieved the noble rank merely due to long-term bureaucratic service. However, the excavated documents from Zhangjiashan and Juyan show that routine service in the bureaucracy and the military could both count toward *gong*. Nevertheless, it would have been very slow and difficult to attain noble rank just by accumulating *gong* through regular bureaucratic service.

Did all the individuals in the tables for "meritorious nobles" receive their rank entirely because of their own merit? In fact, a close reading of these tables shows that some of them benefited from kinship and other personal connections. Some of them received the noble rank because their fathers had died for the dynasty in war. For example, Emperor Gaozu granted the noble rank to Zhou Cheng 周成 (d. 159 BCE) because his father Zhou Ke 周苛 had followed the emperor to overthrow the Qin and later died for the Han after scolding Xiang Ji 項籍 (Xiang Yu 項羽, 232–202 BCE), the leader of a rebel force. Empress Dowager Lü granted Lü Ta 呂它 (d. 180 BCE) the noble rank due to his father Lü Ying 呂嬰 having followed Emperor Gaozu to overthrow the Qin dynasty. Likewise, Emperor Wen granted the noble rank to Sun Dan 孫單 because Sun's father Sun Ang 孫卬 had died fighting against the Xiongnu's invasion. Four other individuals were made nobles by Emperor Jing because their fathers had died refusing to cooperate with the kings

of Zhao and Chu during the “Revolt of Seven Kingdoms.” While these nobles received their rank not because of their own achievements, their cases seem natural because their fathers had merit and the noble rank was inheritable. This indicates that the rank was a reward to a person’s entire family rather than an individual.

Two nobles in the “Tables for Meritorious Minister-Nobles” benefited from their personal connections to the ruler. Liu Ze 劉澤 (d. 178 BCE) was listed in a “Table for Meritorious Ministers” with the reason that he had attacked Emperor Gaozu’s enemy Xiang Yu during the civil war. However, the next sentence adds that Liu Ze was a cousin of the emperor. Moreover, he was granted 11,000 households.⁶⁰ This number was significantly higher than most of the meritorious nobles’ in the same period, showing the emperor’s special favor for him. The same table includes another person, Shan Youche 單右車, noting that he followed Emperor Gaozu as a soldier and attacked an enemy’s troops. But the next sentence further explains that he had provided a horse for Emperor Gaozu when the emperor was of humble status, and this was the real reason why he received the noble rank.⁶¹

Several other individuals in the “Tables for Meritorious Minister-Nobles” received their rank partly through their bureaucratic service but, perhaps more importantly, also their military merit. According to the tables, Emperor Gaozu and Emperor Hui 惠 (r. 195–188 BCE) respectively granted the noble rank to Wu Ying 吳郢 (d. 200 BCE) and Li Zhucang 黎朱蒼 (Li Cang 利蒼 in *Shi ji* and on the seal from his tomb at Mawangdui, d. 186 BCE) for their service as the Grand Chancellor of the Kingdom of Changsha, without mention of their special merit.⁶² It is worth noting that the Kingdom of Changsha was the only one of the eight non-Liu kingdoms that was not eliminated by Emperor Gaozu because the kings demonstrated extreme loyalty to the Han dynasty. Wu Ying was not only the Grand Chancellor of Changsha but also the younger son of the first king of Changsha, Wu Rui 吳芮 (d. 202 BCE). When the King of Huainan 淮南, Ying Bu 英布 (d. 196 BCE), rebelled against the Han shortly after the founding of the dynasty, the third king of Changsha (Wu Hui 吳回, Wu Rui’s grandson and Wu Ying’s nephew, d. 187 BCE) tricked and murdered Ying Bu.⁶³ The strategic significance of Changsha and their collective action against the rebellion of Huainan explain why Wu Ying and Li Cang enjoyed a special status, unparalleled by the Grand Chancellors of other kingdoms and even by the Grand Chancellors of the Han central government at the time. Besides the two Grand Chancellors of Changsha, Emperor Wen granted Shentu Jia the noble rank partly because of his service as the Grand Chancellor and partly because of his previous merit of following Emperor Gaozu during the founding stage of the Han.⁶⁴ Likewise, Zhi Buyi 直不疑 (d. 137 BCE) was made a noble by Emperor Jing when he was serving as the Grandee Secretary (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫). However, the table also mentions that Zhi had the earlier merit of leading the troops to attack the rebel forces of the Wu and Chu kingdoms.⁶⁵ Ban probably considered their military merit the primary reason for their noble rank, in contrast to the Grand Chancellors like Gongsun Hong who received the rank mainly due to imperial favor.

⁶⁰*Han shu* 16.602.

⁶¹*Han shu* 16.608.

⁶²*Han shu* 16.596. *Han shu* 16.618.

⁶³*Shi ji* 91.2606.

⁶⁴*Han shu* 16.630.

⁶⁵*Han shu* 17.641.

The *Han shu*'s classification scheme conforms to Emperor Gaozu's initial criteria for granting the noble rank according to one's merit, which was defined primarily as military achievement. This view of merit represented not only Ban's own idea but also that of a group, many of whom were technical bureaucrats and scholar-officials. Throughout the Western Han and the Eastern Han, these officials submitted memorials to caution against the power of those who had personal connections to the ruler, especially at times when imperial affines, favorites, and eunuchs were the most powerful. When Empress Dowager Lü made the Lü kings, Wang Ling remonstrated with her, citing Gaozu's oath.⁶⁶ In the Eastern Han, there were still officials citing Emperor Gaozu's oath to argue against granting the noble rank to imperial affines and favorites. For example, Emperor An 安 (r. 106–125 CE) allowed Liu Gui 劉瑰 to inherit his cousin Liu Hu 劉護's noble rank, even though Liu Hu's brother was still alive and should thus have inherited his rank. The emperor made this decision because Liu Gui had married the granddaughter of Emperor An's nurse, who was personally very close to the emperor. Yang Zhen 楊震 (54–124 CE), an official known for his moral integrity, submitted a memorial to Emperor An to argue against this decision, citing Emperor Gaozu's oath.⁶⁷ His memorial was ignored by the emperor.

In the late Eastern Han, Emperor Huan granted the noble rank to many favorites and eunuchs. Zhao Dian 趙典, a literatus, submitted a memorial to Emperor Huan, in which he quoted Gaozu's oath and suggested that the emperor should revoke all the non-meritorious nobles.⁶⁸ With a tone of empathy for the literati and technical bureaucrats, the *Hou Han shu* records that Zhao was expressing the thoughts of many officials but did not dare to remonstrate. Zhao's suggestion was ignored by the emperor. However, Emperor Huan partially adopted the admonition of the famous official Chen Fan 陳蕃 (d. 168 CE). Chen also quoted Gaozu's oath to dissuade the emperor from granting the noble rank to some imperial favorites.⁶⁹

These officials insisted on the criteria of merit in Emperor Gaozu's time, considering the non-meritorious nobles as somewhat illegitimate. Judging from the historians' narratives, they did not represent the views of the majority. Rather, they were celebrated as the "heroes" who bravely stood out, and their suggestions were usually not welcomed by the emperors. But the authors of the *Han shu* and the *Hou Han shu* highlighted their remonstrations by recording the full text of their memorials and portraying their moral character in a positive light, suggesting the historians' subtle approval of their values and their spirit of challenging authority.

Despite such efforts to preserve Emperor Gaozu's initial standards, the boundary between merit and privilege was never clear-cut in practice, nor could the nobles be simplified into the deserving and the undeserving types. As this close reading of the *Han shu* tables reveals, there were many variations inbetween the two poles, and even the nobles recorded in the same table were not all the same. A major reason for this complexity was the political changes throughout the course of the Han. The growing group of literati and technical bureaucrats after the mid-Western Han desired upward social mobility and competed with the imperial affines, eunuchs, and favorites for political influence. Aimed at defending Gaozu's oath throughout the long span of four centuries, their attempts at clearly distinguishing the two groups resulted in a certain degree of

⁶⁶*Shi ji* 9.400.

⁶⁷*Hou Han shu* 54.1761–1762.

⁶⁸*Hou Han shu* 27.948.

⁶⁹*Hou Han shu* 66.2161–2162.

simplification and in biases against imperial affines and imperial favorites. Ban Gu and Ban Zhao were aware that the actual composition of nobles and the criteria for granting noble titles had changed. Nevertheless, they still felt the necessity of using different tables to separate the different groups.

The Shifting Composition of Han Nobles: A Statistical Analysis

The *Han shu*'s categories are based on the nobles' family backgrounds, political groups, and the types of their merit.⁷⁰ This is, of course, not the only way to classify the nobles. An alternative method of categorizing them, for example, is the channels of their success: whether they received the rank due to military service, bureaucratic service, or sudden promotion by the ruler. Another possibility is to classify them by the specific meanings of their merit—hereditary privilege, individual ability, virtue, or emotional and secretarial support to the emperor. Thus, the *Han shu* categories represent only one way of classifying the nobles, albeit the most complete one available to us today.

Nevertheless, conducting a statistical analysis of the *Han shu* tables may still yield observations that help us understand the long-term trends in the noble system and the *Han shu*'s historiographical decisions. The systematic record of the Western Han nobles in the *Han shu* allow us to see how the numbers in each category fluctuated over time and which categories were dominant in different periods. As for the Eastern Han nobles, while the *Hou Han shu* lacks such tables, scholars from the Song to the Qing made supplementary tables for the *Hou Han shu* following *Han shu*'s model. I have adopted the tables compiled by the Qing scholar Qian Dazhao 錢大昭, because his tables are the most complete and accurate among these.⁷¹ Qian made the tables based not only on the *Hou Han shu* but also on other sources about the Eastern Han, including *Dong guan Han ji* 東觀漢記, various histories bearing the name of *Hou Han shu* (not the *Hou Han shu* compiled by Fan Ye), gazetteers, inscriptions, and personal writings. In addition to the above three categories, Qian made a table for a fourth group that emerged in the Eastern Han, "eunuch nobles" (*huanzhe hou* 宦者侯).

Figure 1 shows the numbers of nobles ennobled during the reigns of Western Han and Eastern Han emperors. Figure 2 shows the fluctuations of the numbers in each category. Note that these graphs reflect the numbers of the newly ennobled rather than the total numbers of existing nobles during each emperor's reign, which depends on inheritance and the revoking of some nobles' rank. The rank was inheritable, but it would be removed if a noble had no heir or was convicted of certain crimes.⁷² Major political events could cause many nobles to lose their noble rank, for instance, during "the case of the sacrificial

⁷⁰All the data used in this section and the next section have been published on Harvard Dataverse. Li, Yunxin, "Han Nobles (Lie Hou) Dataset," (2024), <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ACV7N2>; Harvard Dataverse, V1, UNF:6:KOWARLF/qv7+qgaDZpfpTw== [fileUNF].

⁷¹Qian Dazhao 錢大昭, *Hou Han shu bu biao* 後漢書補表, in Xiong Fang 熊方 et al., *Hou Han shu San guo zhi bu biao sanshi zhong* 後漢書三國志補表三十種 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 251–442. For a comparison among different scholars' supplementary tables for the *Hou Han shu*, see Cao Jinhua 曹金華, "Hou Han shu bu biao shiwu zhong kao lun" 《後漢書》補表十五種攷論, *Nandu xuetan* (renwen shehui kexue xuebao) 36.6 (2016), 1–6.

⁷²For an explanation of the hereditary rules of nobles and under what circumstances the emperor would revoke the nobles' rank, see Liu Pak-yuen 廖伯源, "Handai juewei zhidu shi shi" 漢代爵位制度試釋, *Xinya xuebao* 10.1 (1973), 163–76. You Jia 尤佳, "Cong kaogu ziliao zai kan Handai lie hou de juewei jicheng zhidu" 從考古資料再看漢代列侯的爵位繼承制度, *Sichuan wenwu* 2 (2016), 58–65.

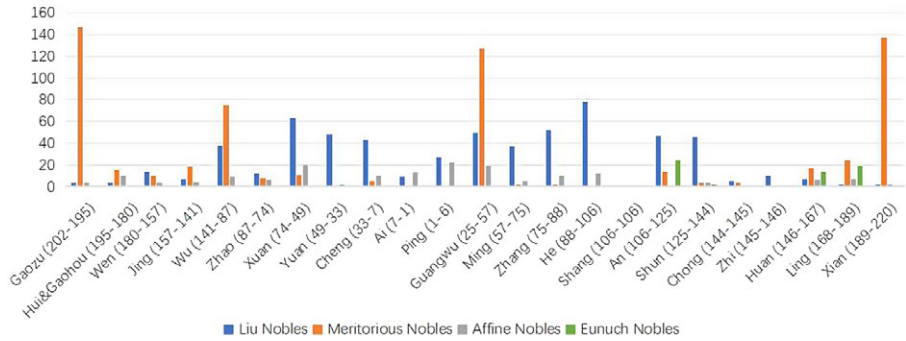


Figure 1. Numbers of New Nobles in the Han (I).

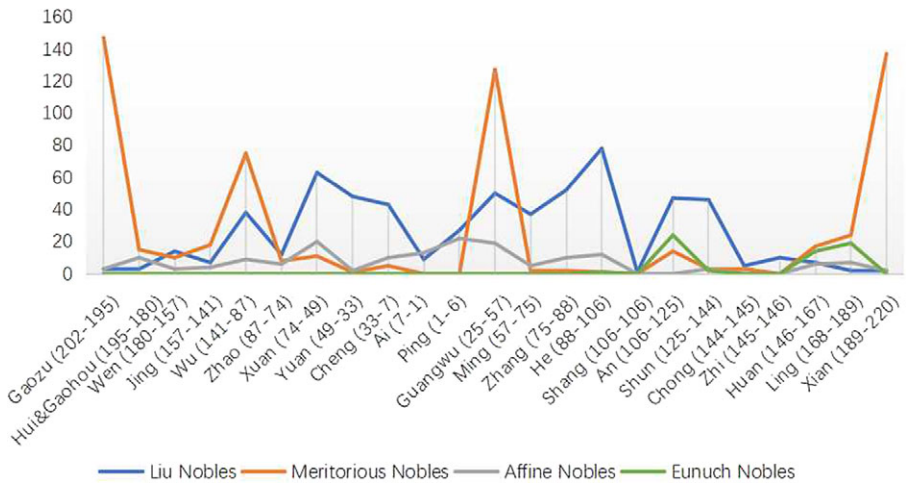


Figure 2. Numbers of New Nobles in the Han (II).

gold contribution” (*zhoujin an* 酎金案), Emperor Wu deprived roughly one hundred nobles of their rank, especially the meritorious nobles descended from the founding ministers and the nobles who had controlled over 10,000 households.⁷³ Ma Menglong’s book *Xi Han houguo dili* includes more complete data on the establishment and abolition of the Western Han nobles’ domains as well as their geographical distribution.⁷⁴

The fluctuations in the numbers of new nobles must be explained in light of Han political history. The number of Liu nobles depended on two major factors: the number of sons produced by the Liu kings and irregular successions to the throne. The high numbers of Liu nobles under Eemperors Wu, Ming, Zhang, and He can be ascribed to the first factor. In contrast, the high numbers of Liu nobles under Eemperors Xuan, An, and Shun are due to disruptions in imperial succession. These emperors were enthroned either

⁷³Ma Menglong 馬孟龍, *Xi Han houguo dili* 西漢侯國地理 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 2013), 329–45.

⁷⁴Ma Menglong, *Xi Han houguo dili*, 367–520.

when the previous emperor left no son or when fierce political struggles caused chaos, and the dominant political group chose an indirect relative of the previous emperor to be the new emperor. These new emperors would then make their direct relatives kings and nobles.

Sometimes the increase in the number of the Liu nobles was a result of the emperor's strategy of dismembering the kingdoms to strengthen the imperial court's power. For instance, after the rebellion of the King of Jibei 濟北 was suppressed, Emperor Wen did not appoint a new king of Jibei. Rather, he dissolved the kingdom into ten domains and granted each of them to one prince of the Liu family.⁷⁵ The policy of giving the noble rank to the king's sons was suspended during the Yuanguang reign of Emperor Wu. But, after Emperor Wu's "Promulgating Favors Order" (*tui en ling* 推恩令), which was a deliberate effort to reduce the power of kingdoms by dissecting them into smaller pieces, the number of Liu nobles grew significantly. However, this growing number of nobles actually reflects the declining political influence of the Liu kings and their descendants.

The number of meritorious nobles peaked during the reigns of the founding emperors, Emperor Wu, and the last three emperors of the Eastern Han. This is because many military officials had the chance to accumulate merit in times of war. These wars included civil wars during dynastic change, the Han court's wars with the Wu and Chu kingdoms and with the Xiongnu under Emperor Jing, wars with the Xiongnu under Emperor Wu, wars with the Qiang people under Emperor An, and wars with the Yellow Turban rebels and regional warlords in the late Eastern Han. Most nobles in this category were ennobled because of their military success, their surrender to the Han government, or their report of rebellious activities. Turbulent times provided them with opportunities for upward social mobility.

The numbers of affine nobles were high when empresses dowager and imperial affines had strong political influence. Affine nobles first became prominent during the reigns of Emperor Hui and his mother, Empress Dowager Lü, when Lü family members were ennobled. The numbers of affine nobles were also high under the last three Western Han emperors, when the Wang family dominated the court. However, the individuals listed in the "Table of Nobles Ennobled for Imperial Affinity and Imperial Favor" are not limited to imperial affines. Some individuals in the table were ennobled because they served as Grand Chancellors, or because they had done some favor to Emperor Xuan before the emperor was enthroned.

The practice of bestowing the noble rank on eunuchs started with Emperor He, as a measure of counteracting the power of imperial affines. The eunuch Zheng Zhong 鄭眾 (d. 114 CE) was ennobled because he had helped the emperor in the struggle against the Dou family. Most of the eunuch nobles recorded under Emperor An were in fact ennobled by Emperor Shun. These eunuchs killed the powerful imperial affine Yan Xian 閻顯 (d. 125 CE) and enthroned Emperor Shun immediately after the death of Emperor An, at which time the era name of Emperor An was still in use. Similarly, Emperor Huan bestowed the noble rank on eunuchs who had killed the imperial affine Liang Ji and supported him in ascending the throne. Emperor Ling (r. 168–189 CE) ennobled the eunuchs who supported him in becoming emperor; he also ennobled twelve eunuchs who had contributed to the suppression of the Yellow Turban rebellion.

All nobles in the category of "Liu nobles" and most nobles in the category of "Affine nobles" were ennobled because of kinship, marital relations, or close personal

⁷⁵Ma Menglong, *Xi Han houguo dili*, 266.

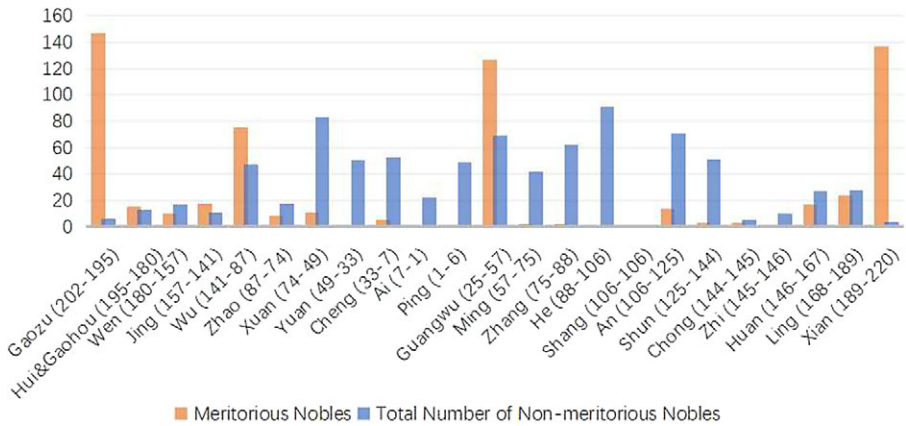


Figure 3. Numbers of Meritorious and Non-Meritorious Nobles in the Han.

relationships with the emperor. The eunuch nobles, similar to the imperial favorites, did not have blood or marriage relations with the emperor. They were lifelong servants of the imperial household and may be considered the emperor's semi-family members. Their heavy dependence on the emperor's favor also distinguished them from meritorious ministers. Thus, only meritorious nobles were ennobled primarily because of their personal abilities and military achievements.

Figure 3 sums up the number of newly ennobled nobles who were the emperor's biological or marital relatives, favorites, and eunuchs. I collectively call them "non-meritorious nobles" for convenience, and compare their number with the number of meritorious nobles during each emperor's reign.⁷⁶ In the three centuries between Emperor Wu and Emperor Huan, except during the Western Han-Eastern Han interregnum, the number of newly ennobled non-meritorious nobles always exceeded the number of meritorious nobles in the same emperor's reign. The long-term trend confirms that noble rank was closely tied to one's personal connections with the ruler, especially one's kinship relations to the emperor, the empress, and the empress dowager.

The contrast between the meritorious nobles and nobles of the other categories confirms that turbulent times were conducive to the rise of meritorious nobles. In peaceful times, when one had few opportunities to defend the dynasty through extraordinary military achievement, it was extremely difficult to obtain noble rank through regular promotion on the bureaucratic ladder. This is because only the highest positions in the bureaucracy could bring one noble rank. However, civil wars or wars with non-Han peoples offered military leaders many opportunities for upward social mobility, which was evident during the reigns of emperors Gaozu, Wu, Guangwu, and Xian.

Considering that the *Han shu* tables may have omitted certain nobles during the Western Han, these numbers could be inaccurate to some extent. One omission that Michael Loewe has noticed is that "the nobilities given under Wang Mang's dispensation

⁷⁶It must be acknowledged that not everyone in those categories were non-meritorious, especially given that the definition of merit changed over time. The term "non-meritorious" is an analytical term based on the conception of merit in the *Han shu* tables, that is, all the nobles who were not recorded in the "Tables of Meritorious Minister-Nobles."

are not included in one of the tables.⁷⁷ This can be explained by the denial of the Wang Mang regime in the Eastern Han's official narrative. But such omission does not change our observation that political instability and warfare could give rise to more new nobles than peaceful times. Other occasional omissions could be due to the lack of previous records available to the historian. Because Qian Daxin's supplementary tables were based on both the *Hou Han shu* chapters and other sources, the Eastern Han data are likely more complete than those of the Western Han.

Han Nobles' Household Numbers

While all the nobles received the same rank, they were not treated equally in terms of the number of households that came with their rank. The number of households that a noble received reflected his economic power and the degree of imperial favor toward him. Therefore, the numbers of households for different categories of nobles corresponded to the court's policy changes as well as the ruler's personal relationship with individual nobles. Which category of nobles received more households? How did the numbers of Han nobles' households change over time, and what do the changes tell us about Han politics?

The historical record is incomplete. The tables of nobles in the *Han shu* only record the household numbers of some Western Han nobles. They include the household numbers of 15 kings' sons out of the 267; 209 meritorious ministers out of the 290; 75 imperial affines and imperial favorites out of 102. These numbers indicate that the meritorious nobles' household numbers were most carefully documented either by the *Han shu*'s author or by previous imperial officials. Moreover, the household numbers in the *Han shu* tables could be inaccurate. As Kamiya Masakazu has pointed out, some of these numbers are inconsistent with the numbers in other *Han shu* chapters or other historical records.⁷⁸

Despite the limitation of sources, these numbers may be still useful for a comparison of the households granted to different categories of nobles. The table below shows the median and average of available household numbers for each of the three categories (Table 1).

In this case, the median is a more useful indicator than the average due to the existence of outliers. For instance, during Emperor Gaozu's reign, the founding ministers Cao Can 曹參 (d. 190 BCE) and Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 186 BCE) received much higher numbers of households than other meritorious ministers. Cao Can received 10,600 households and

Table 1. Median and Average of Western Han Nobles' Household Numbers

| Category | Liu Nobles | Meritorious Nobles | Affines and the Favored Nobles | Total |
|----------|------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| Median | 740 | 1,110 | 1,253 | 1,100 |
| Average | 848.13 | 1,948.89 | 1,973.64 | 1,905.64 |

⁷⁷Loewe, *The Men Who Governed Han China*, 256.

⁷⁸See Kamiya Masakazu 紙屋正和, "Kanjo rekkōhyō kōshō ue" 「漢書」列侯表考証-上, *Fukuoka daigaku jinbun ronsō* 15.2 (1983), 707–37; Kamiya Masakazu, "Kanjo rekkōhyō kōshō naka" 「漢書」列侯表考証-中, *Fukuoka daigaku jinbun ronsō*, 15.3 (1983), 1165–95; Kamiya Masakazu, "Kanjo rekkōhyō kōshō shita (shiryō)" 「漢書」列侯表考証-下-(資料), *Fukuoka daigaku jinbun ronsō*, 15.4 (1984), 1567–99.

Zhang Liang received 10,000 households. These unusually high numbers cause the average to be significantly higher than the median. Nevertheless, the median and the average both indicate that the imperial affines and favorites often received slightly more households than the meritorious ministers, and that the descendants of the Liu kings tended to receive fewer households than nobles of the other two categories, perhaps due to the imperial courts' caution against these kingdoms' power.

Although there is no systematic data regarding the household numbers of Eastern Han nobles, anecdotal evidence suggests that the meritorious nobles received roughly the same numbers of households as their Western Han counterparts, whereas the Eastern Han nobles who had personal relationships with the emperors often received more households compared with their Western Han counterparts. Ban Chao 班超 (32–102 CE), who achieved great military success in the Western Regions, received 1,000 households with his noble rank.⁷⁹ This number was close to the median of the Western Han meritorious nobles' household numbers. By contrast, Emperor Guangwu granted Hou Ba 侯霸 (d. 37 CE) a posthumous noble title with 2,600 households due to his service as the Grand Chancellor.⁸⁰ The imperial edict made it clear that Hou Ba was not considered a meritorious minister, so he was similar to Gongsun Hong and would have been categorized as a "favored noble" (*enze hou*) according to the *Han shu*'s criteria. Gongsun Hong received only 373 households when he was granted the noble rank by Emperor Wu. The imperial affines and eunuchs in the Eastern Han tended to receive even more households. Emperor He issued an edict granting the noble rank to three members of the Dou family, giving Dou Xian 20,000 households and the other two 6,000 households each.⁸¹ Emperor Huan made nineteen eunuchs nobles, and their household numbers ranged from 1,000 to 10,000.⁸² In his memorial to Emperor Huan, Li Yun 李雲 (d. 160 CE) criticized the emperor's decision to grant so many households to the eunuch nobles, saying that the decision went against Emperor Gaozu's intention.⁸³

The noble tables and biographies in the *Han shu* and *Hou Han shu* show that household numbers were subject to change. The number of a noble's households could be adjusted by the emperor after the initial bestowment of the rank. Sometimes the emperor would grant additional households. If a noble committed crimes, his households could be confiscated in part or in full. The households were passed on to a noble's heir together with the noble rank. Some heirs received additional households after they had inherited the rank, whereas some heirs lost households due to their crimes. However, after a noble had lost his rank and households, the emperor might restore them for his descendants to continue his family's honor, which signified special imperial favor and enhanced the family's loyalty to the court. The fact that the noble rank was inherited intact indicates that it was perceived as a reward to a person's family rather than the person himself. In other words, merit could be perceived as family-based rather than individual-based, just as Lawrence Zhang and Sudev Sheth have observed in the contexts of the Qing and Mughal empires.⁸⁴

⁷⁹*Hou Han shu* 47.1582.

⁸⁰*Hou Han shu* 26.902.

⁸¹*Hou Han shu* 23.818.

⁸²*Hou Han shu* 78.2516.

⁸³*Hou Han shu* 57.1852.

⁸⁴Sheth and Zhang, "Locating Meritocracy in Early Modern Asia: Qing China and Mughal India," in *Making Meritocracy: Lessons from China and India, from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Tarun Khanna and Michael Szonyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 85–117.

Conclusion

This article both confirms and supplements previous research on merit, noble rank, and the twenty-rank system. While the noble rank was conceived by Emperor Gaozu as a reward for military merit, in the course of Han history, merit was repeatedly redefined to fit the changing influence of different political forces. Most importantly, military merit was the dominant form of merit at the beginning of the Han and thereafter spiked during some periods of war and political instability; virtue was incorporated into the definition of merit with the growth of classical studies after Emperor Wu's reign; and the eunuch nobles became a new group after Emperor He's reign. My numerical analysis of the Han nobles reveals the long-term trends in the nobles' composition, which corresponds to the rise and fall of various groups at the court and the ruler's political considerations at different times. It also demonstrates that the noble rank and the households were often allocated through familial and personal connections with the imperial family during peaceful times, whereas the meritorious ministers figured prominently during times of political instability.

Simply counting the numbers of different categories of nobles is not the essence of this study, especially given the possible omissions of some nobles from existing sources. What is more revealing is that the fluctuations in those categories, which echoed the restructuring of the Han court, were accompanied by reconceptualizations of noble rank and merit. The different narratives about nobles in the *Han shu* tables, the imperial edicts granting the noble rank, and recently excavated manuscripts can be read as different ways of viewing these changes. The *Han shu* tables, as well as the original government archives that they were based on and some Han officials' citation of Gaozu's oath, represent a commitment to Gaozu's original criteria, which could be used to remonstrate against later emperors' extraordinary favor of imperial affines, male favorites, and eunuchs. By contrast, the imperial edicts issued by those emperors demonstrated a respect for meritocracy but redefined merit according to their contemporary needs. The excavated manuscripts from Zhangjiashan, Juyan, and Yinwan provide further evidence that multiple ways of counting merit existed during the Han, including both military and bureaucratic service.

While this study cannot answer all the relevant questions, it invites a reflection on the place of meritocracy broadly within the context of the Han. The existence of the twenty-rank system and discourses regarding virtue and talent in early Chinese texts may lead to the assumption that meritocracy was central to the promotion of officials and the allocation of rank. The intellectual traditions attributed to Confucius, Mencius, and Mozi all advised rulers to appoint the virtuous and capable as officials.⁸⁵ During the Han, such texts were cited by bureaucrats and literati who desired social mobility and a meritocratic political system. However, this view runs the risk of confusing the rhetoric of particular groups with the overall picture. While the noble rank was originally conceived as a mechanism to reward people based on their merit, the implications of merit shifted over time with the changing political circumstances. After the founding ministers had passed away, there were no longer many opportunities for people to obtain merit except in major

⁸⁵“Zi lu,” Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 516; “Gongsun Chou I,” Jiao Xun 焦循, *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 226; “Li yun,” Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 582; “Shangxian I,” “Shangxian II,” “Shangxian III” [Exaltation of the Virtuous], Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Mozi jian gu* 墨子閒話 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 43–72.

military campaigns. Given the ruler's continuous need to secure the loyalty of supporters, the definition of merit was expanded to include virtue, which was open to more flexible interpretation. As a result, meritocracy often functioned as a rhetorical device to justify some elites' privileges or a language for their opponents to criticize them.

This study also contributes to a critical reading of the *Han shu* and early Chinese historiography in general. The prefaces for the *Han shu* "Tables of Nobles" indicate that the historian understood the changes in the noble system over time. However, due to the conventions in previous government archives and intentional historiographical decisions, the historian still separated the meritorious ministers from the other categories and specified the "reasons for the noble rank" to elaborate on those differences. However, the complex realities, especially the difficulty of categorizing those who had both *gong* and the ruler's special favor, presented conceptual challenges to this classification scheme. Thus, the *Han shu* tables cannot be simply read as an objective summary. Rather, they must be read closely in the contexts of Han political history and the various views towards merit that co-existed during the Han.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2024.34>.

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