

The Early Economic History of China

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## The Early Economic History of China

China offers a double attraction to the student of economic history. It affords in the first place relatively abundant records that enable us to trace an economic evolution over a two-thousand-year period: from a stage of largely self-sufficient local units contemporaneous with the Roman republic to a nationally integrated economy in the thirteenth century and later, characterized by a fairly advanced system of currency, regional specialization, and internal and foreign trade in common commodities. In the second place, China has left the record of many and varied experiments in governmental economic controls, at all stages of her evolution.

The economic aspect has been relatively neglected by Western scholars specializing on China, and until recently the general economic historian has had to rely on materials gathered haphazardly. Valuable pioneering work has, however, been done on certain periods. The archaistic economic experiments of Wang Mang in the first century of our era have attracted much attention.<sup>1</sup> L. S. Yang has surveyed the third and fourth centuries A.D., with their interesting trends toward feudalism.<sup>2</sup> Étienne Balázs has pictured broadly the beginnings of a commercial revolution in the seventh to ninth centuries.<sup>3</sup> K. A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng have given us valuable economic information in their study of the partly Chinese culture that grew on the northern frontier in the tenth and eleventh centuries. (*History of Chinese Society: Liao [907-1125].*) Herbert Franke has provided a study of Chinese economy under the Mongols.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hu Shih, "Wang Mang, The Socialist Emperor of Nineteen Centuries Ago," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, North China Branch*, LIX (1928), 218-30.

H. O. H. Stange, *Leben, Persönlichkeit, und Werk Wang Mangs* (Berlin, 1934).

H. H. Dubs, "Wang Mang and His Economic Reforms," *T'oung Pao*, XXXV (1940), 219-65.

C. B. Sargent, *Wang Mang, A Translation of the Official Account of His Rise to Power as Given in the History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Shanghai, 1949).

<sup>2</sup> L. S. Yang, "Notes on the Economic History of the Chin Dynasty," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, IX, No. 2 (June, 1946), 107-85.

<sup>3</sup> Étienne Balázs, "Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte der T'ang-Zeit (618-906)," *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen zu Berlin*, XXXIV (1931), 1-92; XXXV (1932), 1-73; XXXVI (1933), 1-62.

<sup>4</sup> K. A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, with the assistance of John De Francis, E. S. Goldfrank, Lea Kisselgoff, and K. H. Menges, *History of Chinese Society, Liao (907-1125)* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949). Herbert Franke, *Geld und Wirtschaft in China unter der Mongolen-Herrschaft* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1949). [These books are reviewed in the winter 1952 issue of THE JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC HISTORY—Editors.]

Nancy Lee Swann now gives us the first general study devoted to the economy of the second and first centuries B.C.<sup>5</sup> This period is one of special importance for Chinese economic history: It is the earliest time for which a considerable bulk of economic data is available, and we can establish there a bench mark for the surveying of China's economic evolution thereafter. Miss Swann's book is not so much an analytical study of the economy of the period she treats, the western Han dynasty, as a critical presentation of the principal source materials relating to the subject, in the form of annotated translations with more detailed studies of certain special phases. Since the sources translated devote over a fifth of their space to Chinese economy from the legendary period down to the end of the third century B.C., the book affords valuable materials for the study of China's earlier economic history as well.

With the appearance of Miss Swann's work, the foundation is prepared for an effort to interpret the general nature of western Han economic institutions and the significance of the phenomena they present, from the point of view of the Occidental historian. To aid in this task, other scholars have already translated important segments of the sources, complementing those presented in the present work. E. M. Gale has translated the records left to us concerning a controversy over governmental control of trade and commodities.<sup>6</sup> C. M. Wilbur has translated and analyzed extensive materials on ancient slavery.<sup>7</sup> R. C. Blue has translated passages in which early historians evaluate the economic trends of their times.<sup>8</sup> Édouard Chavannes has translated the treatises on commerce and water control in the *Shih Chi*<sup>9</sup>, and economic materials are scattered in his translation of the imperial annals of that work, a basic source for the western Han. Economic materials are also scattered in the translation by H. H. Dubs of the imperial annals of the *Han Shu*, the other basic source for this period.<sup>10</sup> It has remained for Miss Swann to translate the economic treatises of the *Han Shu*, more comprehensive than those of the *Shih Chi*, and certain other pertinent passages from the *Han Shu* and *Shih Chi*. While still more can no doubt be gleaned from biographies and various miscellaneous sources, we can be confident that the

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Lee Swann, translator and annotator, *Food and Money in Ancient China: The Earliest Economic History of China to A.D. 25, Han Shu 24, With Related Texts, Han Shu 91 and Shih-chi 129* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. xiii + 482.

<sup>6</sup> E. M. Gale, *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (Leiden, 1931). Continued by Gale, Lin, and Boodberg in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, North China Branch*, LXV (1934), 73-110.

<sup>7</sup> C. M. Wilbur, *Slavery in China During the Former Han Dynasty* (Chicago, 1943).

<sup>8</sup> R. C. Blue, "The Argumentation of the Shih-huo Chih," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XI, Nos. 1 and 2 (June, 1948), 1-118.

<sup>9</sup> Édouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires Historiques de Se-ma Ts'ien*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1895-1905).

<sup>10</sup> H. H. Dubs, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty by Pan Ku*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, 1938 and 1944).

major economic source materials of the period are now available to the Occidental reader.

The original organization of the *Han Shu* economic materials makes their use rather difficult for the modern reader not thoroughly familiar with their contents. Miss Swann has greatly eased the task by outlining in a chronological table the contents of the two principal sections translated, and by presenting a structural analysis of these and of the related treatise on geography. She has further come to our aid with commentaries and appendixes which serve a triple purpose. They supply background information necessary to the understanding of the texts, carry further the explanations of the text that are incorporated in the translation and footnotes, and discuss certain points of special difficulty.

The constructions and explanations to be found in the translations and elsewhere reflect Miss Swann's long and painstaking research on the texts. At home in the literature of this period (having previously published the biography of Pan Chao, a famous literary woman of a few years later), she has drawn widely on Han sources other than those here translated, as well as on Chinese and Western monographic studies. She has made use of at least five variant editions of the *Han Shu*, including those generally accepted as standard. Great care has been shown in parenthesizing the translator's explanatory additions, and footnoting points of doubt. Chinese, however, is often indefinite on points of some consequence, even more than most other languages. It may matter whether we read "many" starved to death, or "the greater part" did so, but it is not possible to annotate every such ambiguity in the text (cf., p. 197). Before relying too heavily on a translation, one who wishes to base conclusions on it needs to test the solidity of the underlying Chinese. Miss Swann has greatly facilitated this step by reproducing the complete Chinese texts of the *Han Shu* treatises and of one of the *Shih Chi* treatises, to which the translations have been keyed. It is inevitable that in a pioneer work such as this, some of the translations and constructions will be questioned. A number of such controversial points have been discussed in a review of this book by J. J. L. Duyvendak and in a review article by L. S. Yang.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the features already mentioned, the book includes eleven excellent plates and three maps that help throw light from archaeological discovery on economic activities of the time. A table of parallel passages in the *Han Shu* and *Shih Chi* economic treatises is extremely useful. There is also a list of the Chinese characters for expressions referred to but not found in the texts reproduced. A long list of abbreviations and titles serves as a bibliography. While this list gives very little discussion of the sources, it is cross-indexed and identifies editions used and makes a useful checklist of literature bearing on the western Han economy. The general index is full and makes available much information on noneconomic subjects. While it is at first a little baffling to find one's way among

<sup>11</sup> J. J. L. Duyvendak, Review of Food and Money in Ancient China, *T'oung Pao*, XL, Livr. 1-3 (1950), 210-16.

L. S. Yang, "Notes on Dr. Swann's Food and Money in Ancient China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, XIII, Nos. 3 and 4 (December, 1950), 524-57.

these many elements, the explorer will be increasingly impressed by the number of ways in which this book can be of service for both economic and noneconomic research on the period. The use of the volume has been made easier and pleasanter by the clear and handsome type and attractive format in which the publisher has presented it.

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