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Two Ephemeral Revivals: The "Feudal" Transformations of the Commandery-County System

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Abstract
The replacement of the feudal system by the commandery-county system marked a fundamental transformation in the governance structure of ancient China. Yet this process was far from smooth: during the Han and Jin dynasties, two notable distortions of "feudal" practice emerged. Taking the Western Han and Western Jin as representative cases, this article examines in depth the resurgence of feudal elements within the framework of the commandery-county system. The study shows that the early Western Han's implementation of the dual system of commanderies and kingdoms was a strategic choice intended to absorb the lessons of the Qin collapse and to reconcile existing historical traditions. Its success lay in the central government's effective suppression of regional princely power through measures such as the Reduction of the Principalities and the Tui 'en edict, thereby strengthening centralized authority.By contrast, the Western Jin's system of princely enfeoffment arose from the Sima regime's political need to consolidate its legitimacy. However, by excessively empowering members of the imperial clan without establishing effective checks and balances, the regime ultimately allowed central authority to be eroded, triggering the profound crises of the Rebellion of the Eight Princes and the Incursions of the Five Barbarians. Comparative analysis suggests that the dynamic balance between central and local power constitutes the core foundation of state stability. The successful transplantation and effective functioning of any institutional model must correspond to the prevailing historical conditions and social foundations. The divergent outcomes of "feudal" transformations under the Han and Jin thus offer valuable historical insight into the evolutionary logic of imperial centralization in ancient China.

Keywords
Commandery-County System; "Feudal" Transformation; Centralized Authority

In the evolution of ancient China's political institutions, the configuration of relations between the center and the localities consistently constituted a core issue determining dynastic stability or decline. The feudal system and the commandery-county system—two fundamentally different modes of governance—alternately shaped the course of history. The Qin dynasty replaced the feudal system with the commandery-county system in an attempt to construct a highly centralized polity, establishing a new model of centralized authority that became the basic framework for later dynasties' rule over the realm. Yet its regime collapsed swiftly under the weight of its own harsh administration.At the beginning of the Han dynasty, the court adopted the dual system of commanderies and kingdoms, representing in part a reversion toward feudal arrangements; by the reign of Emperor Wu, however, the central government strengthened its control through measures such as the Tui'en edict. The Western Jin, by contrast, blindly imitated antiquity, enfeoffing members of the imperial clan

on a massive scale but without establishing effective checks and balances. This ultimately precipitated both the Rebellion of the Eight Princes and the Incursions of the Five Barbarians, plunging the realm into prolonged turmoil.The vitality of any institution lies in its capacity to adapt to concrete historical conditions. Institutions are never immutable doctrines; rather, they are continually reshaped within specific historical contexts. The recurring resurgence of "feudal" elements within the commandery-county system is often described as its "two ephemeral revivals," as though the feudal order briefly glimmered twice within the commandery-based structure. Understanding these two episodes not only helps illuminate the internal logic of institutional change from the Zhou and Qin through the Wei and Jin periods, but also offers insights into the perennial challenges of managing relations between central and local authorities. Building on this historical background, the present study seeks—through a comparative analysis of institutional practices in the Han and Jin dynasties—to reveal the causes, manifestations, and consequences of the repeated reappearance of "feudal" elements within the commandery-county framework, thereby offering a historical perspective on the continuities and ruptures of ancient China's political institutions.

1 Concepts and Comparative Framework of China's Feudal System and the Commandery-County System

1.1 The Feudal System

The feudal system was a major socio-political institution in Chinese history, whose core principle lay in the enfeoffment and establishment of states. The term feng referred to the demarcation of territorial boundaries, while jian denoted the establishment of a polity; together, they constituted the basic connotation of the feudal system.

The concrete implementation of the feudal system included the granting of territory, population, and noble titles. Granting territory meant assigning land to an enfeoffed lord for governance, symbolizing his administrative authority over a designated region; moreover, lands in different directions were associated with different ritualized colors. Granting population referred to transferring the inhabitants living on that land to the authority of the enfeoffed lord. Granting titles involved conferring a noble rank, indicating that the enfeoffed lord served as the Son of Heaven's deputy and confirming his leadership status within his fief. Noble ranks were classified into five grades—duke, marquis, count, viscount, and baron—whose hierarchy corresponded to the size, status, and prosperity of the fief. Yet within their respective territories, all enfeoffed rulers held essentially equivalent leadership positions.

The feudal system fundamentally differed from the commandery-county system established by the Qin dynasty. The main characteristics of the feudal system included the following:

(1) Legal Foundations.The three fundamental institutions of feudal society were the patriarchal clan system, the enfeoffment system, and the well-field system. The patriarchal clan system regulated the inheritance of political status within the family, implementing primogeniture. The enfeoffment system delineated the relationships among the realm, the fiefs, and the granted estates (caoyi), whereby the feudal lords

(zhuhou) were enfeoffed to govern the fiefs on behalf of the Son of Heaven, while the ministers (dafu) acted on behalf of the lords to administer the granted estates. The well-field system prescribed the economic relations between ruler and subjects: all land was owned by the Zhou Son of Heaven, who, or the feudal lords, allocated plots to the populace for cultivation. The peasants were required to jointly cultivate the public fields as a form of land tax.

(2) Multi-Core Hierarchical Structure.Feudal society was divided along kinship lines into multiple tiers: the Son of Heaven, feudal lords, high-ranking ministers (qing-dafu), scholars (shi), commoners, and slaves, forming a stable social structure. From the Son of Heaven to the scholars constituted the noble class; commoners were free subjects, while slaves were considered private property of the nobility.

(3) Layered Accountability in the Governance System.The feudal polity implemented a system of layered accountability, where the Son of Heaven's interests depended on the support of the feudal lords, and the lords' interests were secured by the ministers. By contrast, the imperial system centered on the emperor as the sole authority, who theoretically possessed absolute power.The ethical structure of feudal society can be summarized as "family, state, and realm." The patriarchal clan system, as the fundamental law, was based on kinship ethics and regulated the familial relationships among the Son of Heaven, the feudal lords, and the ministers.

Strictly speaking, only the Western Zhou period in Chinese history fully conformed to the characteristics of the feudal system. It is noteworthy that the feudal system gradually disintegrated after the Eastern Zhou period, which is why the Western Zhou is considered the prototypical model of Chinese feudalism.

1.2 The Commandery-County System

The commandery-county system emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods and gradually took shape under the Qin dynasty. It was a system of local administration based on commanderies and counties as the basic units. In the early Spring and Autumn period, states such as Chu, Qin, and Jin had already begun establishing counties along their borders, which were later extended to the interior regions, with county governors initially inheritable. By the Warring States period, counties were subordinated to commanderies, gradually forming a two-tier system of commanderies overseeing counties.After the unification of China, the Qin dynasty, following the proposals of Li Si, fully implemented the commandery-county system. Both commandery and county officials were appointed by the central government and were no longer inheritable. Qin divided the realm into thirty-six commanderies, later increased to forty, each administering several counties. The commandery-county system played a crucial role in administrative management and local governance, aiming to maintain social order, manage land resources, and consolidate central authority.

1.3 Differences between the Feudal System and the Commandery-County System

The distinction between the feudal system and the commandery-county system is first reflected in the distribution of power. The feudal system tended to disperse authority to local entities while maintaining central primacy; in contrast, the commandery-county system focused on consolidating power at the center,

granting localities only relatively limited autonomy. Under the feudal system, the Son of Heaven allocated most authority to the feudal lords, who in turn delegated power to the ministers, with scholars below them. Each level of authority was centered on its respective domain and did not fully encompass governance over the entire realm. By contrast, the commandery-county system divided the entire country into commanderies and counties, with local governors appointed and removed by the central government. Supervisory institutions were established to oversee their activities, achieving a degree of delegated authority while ensuring ultimate power remained concentrated at the center, thereby preventing the rise of powerful local forces.

Significant differences also existed in the scope of responsibilities. Under the feudal system, the Zhou Son of Heaven granted land and governing rights to the feudal lords and ministers, who were responsible for defending their borders and providing tribute. Within their respective fiefs, they could raise armies, levy taxes, and establish administrative systems, effectively functioning as a "miniature Son of Heaven" within their domains. After the implementation of the commandery-county system, local authority was sharply curtailed: governors were prohibited from raising private armies or levying taxes, and their functions were limited to administrative management, with military, fiscal, and supervisory powers separated. Consequently, local power was significantly weakened, fundamentally strengthening centralized authority and enhancing oversight of the regions—this was a key rationale behind the Qin dynasty's vigorous promotion of the commandery-county system.

2 Two Ephemeral Revivals: "Feudal" Transformations of the Commandery-County System in the Han and Western Jin Dynasties

2.1 The Success of Feudal Elements in the Han Dynasty

2.1.1 Historical Background

After the collapse of the Qin dynasty, Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Western Han, established the dual system of commanderies and kingdoms, enfeoffing nine major feudal lords of the same clan and certain meritorious officials. Their fiefs accounted for approximately half of the realm, while the remaining regions were directly administered by the central government under the commandery-county system.

2.1.2 Causes of the "Feudal" Transformation of the Commandery-County System in the Han Dynasty

From the rise of the enfeoffment system to the early Qin period, feudal practices had persisted for more than eight hundred years, whereas the Qin dynasty lasted only fifteen. The feudal notion expressed in the Book of Songs (Shijing), "Under the whole heaven, there is no land that is not the king's; along the borders of the realm, there are no subjects who are not the king's ministers," remained deeply ingrained in people's consciousness. In the thirty-fourth year of Qin Shi Huang's reign, the scholar Chunyu Yue once advised him to enfeoff his descendants and meritorious officials to assist the royal house and prevent the disaster of "the Tian clan replacing Qi." This demonstrates that the ideology of enfeoffment had not been completely eradicated and could revive whenever circumstances allowed.

The rapid collapse of the Qin dynasty was primarily due to its tyranny. The Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji: Annals of Qin Shi Huang) records: "The King of Qin harbored greed and petty ambition, acted according to his own cleverness, distrusted meritorious officials, neglected the scholars and common people, abandoned the royal way, established private power, banned writings, and enforced harsh laws." Such governance provoked popular uprisings. Moreover, Qin failed to uphold the traditional principle of "destroying and inheriting states in succession" during the wars of unification. The nobility of the six eastern states accused Qin of "destroying people's states, exterminating their patrimonies, and cutting off their descendants," and thus took advantage of uprisings to restore their own states, reaffirming feudal claims.

When Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Western Han, established his regime, he drew lessons from Qin's downfall. Observing that the Qin court was isolated due to the absence of kin assisting in governance, he granted roughly half of the realm to relatives of the imperial clan and meritorious officials to stabilize his regime. At the same time, he retained the commandery-county system in regions under direct central administration to consolidate centralized authority. In this sense, the dual system of commanderies and kingdoms represented a moderation of Qin's complete abolition of feudalism and served as a compromise between the commandery-county system and feudal practices.

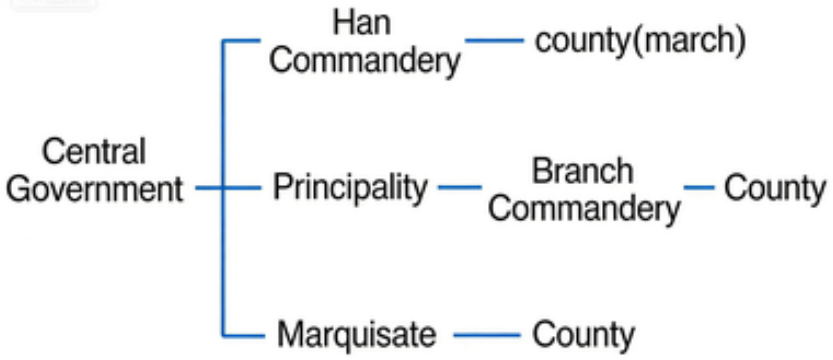

Figure 1. Central–Local Relations in the Early Han Dynasty

2.1.3 Conflicts between the Central Government and the Feudal Kingdoms

In the early Western Han, the feudal lords were formidable in power. Across the realm, there were forty-six commanderies, of which only fifteen were under direct imperial administration. The feudal lords had the authority to appoint officials with ranks below two thousand bushels (erqianshi) and to levy taxes on the subjects of their fiefs, posing a serious threat to both the central treasury and the overall governance of the empire.

To reverse this situation, Emperors Wen and Jing successively implemented the Reduction of the Principalities, which provoked strong resistance from the feudal lords, culminating in the Rebellion of the Seven Kingdoms. After the rebellion was suppressed, Emperor Jing seized the opportunity to strip the lords of their taxation rights, limit their authority to appoint officials, and strictly prohibit their participation in cen-

tral government affairs. From that point onward, the kingdoms were placed on the same administrative level as the commanderies, both constituting primary-level administrative units.

During the reign of Emperor Wu, the Tui'en edict was issued to further weaken the feudal lords. Following the strategy of "grant many to the lords but diminish their power," fiefs were inherited jointly by multiple sons; younger sons were enfeoffed as minor lords (liehou) under the supervision of the commandery governor. By this means, the problem of the kingdoms in the early Western Han was largely resolved, and centralized authority was significantly strengthened.

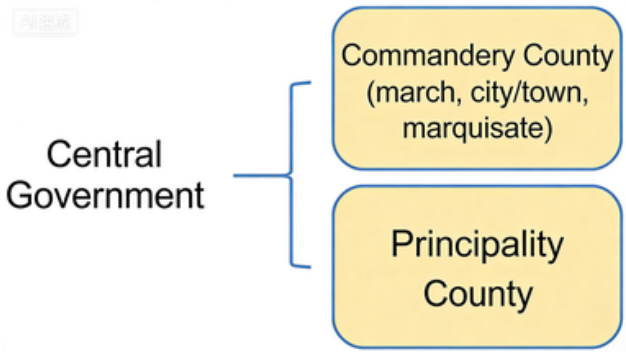

Figure 2. Central–Local Relations during the Reign of Emperor Wu of Han

2.2 Failures of Feudal Practices in the Western Jin

2.2.1 Historical Background and Causes

In AD 265, Sima Yan usurped the throne of Wei and established the Western Jin, with his primary task being the consolidation of the new dynasty.

Having founded the Western Jin through the overthrow of Wei, the Sima clan faced the imperative of legitimizing their rule within a context that emphasized dynastic orthodoxy. Consequently, they sought to secure the support of the gentry clans (shizu), safeguarding their political, economic, and social privileges in exchange for loyalty to the Jin regime.

However, as the power of the gentry clans expanded, conflicts with imperial authority became inevitable. To strengthen imperial control, Emperor Wu of Jin subsequently expanded the authority of the imperial clan, implementing extensive enfeoffments in an effort to use kinship power as a counterbalance against the gentry clans.

2.2.2 Process and Manifestations of Enfeoffment

In the first year of the Taishi era, the Western Jin began large-scale enfeoffments of princes of the same clan. Emperor Wu of Jin organized the empire's commanderies into kingdoms, enfeoffing twenty-seven of his kinsmen, and restored the five-tier noble ranking system of duke, marquis, count, viscount, and baron. Initially, the princes enjoyed stipendary lands (shiyi) and were allowed to appoint officials within their own fiefs.

Subsequently, Emperor Wu categorized the kingdoms into three ranks based on household population, establishing corresponding military forces: the major kingdoms maintained three armies of 5,000 troops; secondary kingdoms, two armies of 3,000 troops; and minor kingdoms, one army of 1,500 troops. This measure aimed to use the power of the imperial clan to restrain the gentry clans and to create a system of mutual checks among the princes, preventing any from becoming excessively powerful.

To strengthen control, Emperor Wu also granted some imperial princes the authority to command military forces across multiple provinces and to execute those who violated orders. Certain princes concurrently held the office of cishi (regional inspector), supervising local administration and gradually concentrating both administrative and military power in their hands. Some princes, such as the Prince of Changsha and the Prince of Donghai, even participated in central government affairs, further increasing their influence. Meanwhile, the military capabilities of local commanderies and provinces were significantly reduced. Although intended to consolidate central authority, this resulted in vulnerabilities in local defense and weakened the regions' capacity to protect the imperial center.

2.2.3 Impacts and Consequences

(1) Weakening of Central Authority

Through three rounds of enfeoffment, the power of the feudal lords continued to expand. The size of their stipendary lands (shiyi) increased from ten thousand households to one hundred thousand, and the number of commanderies under their control grew from one to ten, forming so-called "super kingdoms." The income of these lords approached that of the crown prince, while the gentry clans that had held influence since the Cao Wei period maintained their power into the Jin dynasty. Emperor Wu of Jin, navigating among the imperial clan, Jia Chong, and the Yang family factions, failed to achieve the intended balance through enfeoffments, resulting in a progressive weakening of central authority.

(2) War of the Eight Princes

After the death of Emperor Wu, Sima Zhong ascended the throne, and political power fell into disputes between the palace and the maternal relatives. The Yang clan, led by Yang Jun, failed in its power struggle against Empress Jia Nanfeng, resulting in the collapse of the Yang family. Sima Zhong's incompetence created a political vacuum. Empress Jia then allied with members of the imperial clan, triggering internal conflict among the princes.

After the fall of the Yang clan, Sima Liang gained power, but Sima Wei, under Empress Jia's orders, captured and killed him. Empress Jia subsequently executed Sima Wei under the pretext of a forged edict, eliminating two of the eight princes. Empress Jia ruled for ten years before being overthrown by Sima Lun and Sima Jiong. Sima Jiong, Sima Ying, and Sima Yong's coalition captured Sima Lun, transferring power to Sima Jiong. Later, Sima Yong ordered Sima Yi to attack Sima Jiong; Sima Jiong was killed, and Sima Yi assumed control. Sima Ying and Sima Yong then allied against Sima Yi but were repeatedly defeated; eventually, Sima Yue captured Sima Yi, allowing Sima Ying to gain power. Finally, Sima Yue defeated Sima Ying and Sima Yong, ending the sixteen-year turmoil and becoming the de facto ruler of the Western Jin.

This internal conflict, which spread from the palace to the entire country, severely undermined the authority of the Western Jin, devastated the livelihood and economy of the populace, and planted the seeds for the dynasty's decline.

(3) Incursion of the Five Barbarian Peoples

Long-standing northern ethnic minority powers seized the opportunity presented by the chaos in the Central Plains. The Di, Xiongnu, and other groups moved southward, plundering resources and population. The Western Jin court failed to recognize the severity of the crisis and even enlisted these groups as military allies, ultimately bringing "wolves into the house." The Central Plains descended into over a century of warfare. Population in northern China sharply declined, the gentry clans migrated southward, and the economic and political centers gradually shifted to the south.

2.3 Chapter Summary

The feudal system of the Western Zhou was supported by ritual institutions, and the low level of productive forces meant that local powers accumulated slowly, allowing the system to function effectively for a certain period. The reason the enfeoffments of the Western Han did not result in major disorder was that Emperor Wu of Han, through measures such as the Tui'en edict, gradually curtailed the power of the feudal lords mid-term, thereby ensuring centralized authority. In contrast, when Sima Yan attempted to emulate the ancient system, he failed to fully consider the real conditions of the Western Jin: he neither accounted for contemporary productive forces and social conditions nor designed effective mechanisms of checks and balances, and he lacked prudent planning for the long-term fate of the state. Consequently, the Jin dynasty rapidly collapsed, and the Central Plains endured over a century of turmoil.

3 Characteristics, Impacts, and Lessons of the "Feudal" Transformation of the Commandery-County System

3.1 Characteristics of the Feudal Transformation of the Commandery-County System

A survey of the evolution of the commandery-county system reveals that its responsibilities were continuously adjusted in response to changing political, economic, and social contexts, exhibiting patterns of repetition and cyclical development, and gradually improving and sustaining over time.

Compared with earlier local administrative systems, the most prominent feature of the commandery-county system lies in the reinforcement of vertical governance and the deepening of centralized authority.

3.2 Advantages of the Commandery-County System Compared with the Feudal System

The commandery-county system not only enhanced governance efficiency at the time but also exerted a profound influence on subsequent local administrative systems. From the perspective of national unification, it established vertical governance of the center over the regions, breaking the pattern of enfeoffment and fragmentation that had persisted since the Western Zhou, effectively preventing regional separatism and

maintaining unity.In terms of power structure, local officials were appointed and removed directly by the emperor, bypassing hereditary kinship, and their selection was based on ability and merit. This promoted social mobility and facilitated development. In administrative efficiency, the system of layered supervision ensured uniform implementation of imperial orders, shortened execution time, strengthened social management capabilities, and contributed to long-term stability. The commandery-county system laid the administrative foundation for later dynasties and also provides a historical reference for modern administrative divisions.

However, the system also carried risks and disadvantages. Improper allocation of power could lead to abuse and corruption by local officials. In terms of institutional design, overlapping structures intended to provide mutual checks resulted in bureaucratic expansion and proliferation of redundant offices. Frequent rotation of officials also affected the continuity and stability of local governance, to some extent hindering development.

3.3 Lessons from the "Feudal" Transformation of the Commandery-County System

To ensure the long-term stability of a regime, the implementation of strong centralized authority is imperative, as the dispersion of power easily leads to social disorder and regional fragmentation. The dual system of commanderies and kingdoms in the early Western Han can be seen as a transitional stage from enfeoffment to the commandery-county system. The subsequent resolution of issues arising from the kingdoms demonstrates that the replacement of the feudal system by the commandery-county system was an inevitable historical trend.

In summary, the over two-thousand-year development of the commandery-county system shows that only institutions aligned with historical and social realities can endure over time. From a contemporary perspective, examining the twists and turns of the commandery-county system can help clarify the relationships among local administrative hierarchies, their scale, and the division of responsibilities between central and local authorities, providing valuable historical insights for modern administrative planning.

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