

Communications

August 4, 1971

Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies*:

In my opinion R. J. Krompart's review (*JAS*, May 1971) of Wang Shou-nan's *T'ang-tai fan-chen yü chung-yang kuan-hsi chih yen-chiu* (A study of the relations between the regional commanders and the central government during the T'ang dynasty; Taipei, 1969) misses a key finding in this important book. Krompart describes the *fan-chen* (regional commanders) in familiar terms as disrupting the centralized authority of the state: they "came to form a stratum of unmanageable local satraps outside the system, their tenure at first quasi-permanent and finally largely hereditary" (p. 660). Krompart leaves the impression that this is Wang's view too.

In fact Wang's work is a revisionist one challenging this simplistic picture. While Wang emphasizes the phenomenon of "refractory" and "rebellious" *fan-chen*, he also shows that this phenomenon was temporally and geographically limited, and that to a large extent the institution of the *fan-chen* was compatible with effective centralized control. Far from being "local satraps" with "quasi-permanent" tenure, most *fan-chen* officials enjoyed only short tenures: out of the 1990 more important cases of *fan-chen* rule, only 114 are known to have lasted ten years or more. Except for 109 cases in which the data are unclear, most other instances of tenure were much shorter: tenure was three years or less in 1280 instances (pp. 56-61). Thus surprisingly the pattern of tenure seems similar to that of regular bureaucratic officials during the more centralized periods.

Moreover hereditary tenure was exceptional. Out of 2222 cases of appointment to a *fan-chen* office, 1893 were based on the will of the court; 133 were made when the appointee used his own local military forces to pressure the court into appointing him; 94 were the result of pressure on the court exerted by another *fan-chen*; and in only 50 cases was the office transmitted from one relative to another (the remaining 52 cases are not clear) (pp. 72-74).

Finally, Wang finds (pp. 44-51) that out of 2705 units of *fan-chen* rule, 2221 units were "obedient," 375 "refractory," and 34 "rebellious" (75 are not clear). (Each unit consists of one *fan-chen* official enjoying one term of office in one *fan-chen* office under one emperor—thus an official jointly holding two *fan-chen* posts over a number of reigns counts as 4 or more units.)

Wang's statistics may partly require a further critique, which a T'ang specialist would have to give, but they still strongly suggest that some previous scholars have underrated the degree of effective centralized control involved in the *fan-chen* system. Admittedly this point is somewhat obscured by Professor Wang's own stance, since he is mainly interested in specifying the conditions leading to the different kinds of *fan-chen* behavior, and his point of emphasis, in line with the traditional concern for maintaining centralized authority, is explication of the "refractory" and "rebellious" cases rather than the "obedient" ones.

Be that as it may, although not familiar with more recent trends in political science, Wang goes a long way toward systematically and imaginatively sorting out the various geographical, institutional, ideological, and policy conditions of T'ang political power and showing how they interacted over time. Like K. C. Liu's reevaluation of late Ch'ing regionalism, Wang's work reveals a complex grammar of political power in which regional leaders could

not easily become entrenched because they had to contend not only with various facets of capital power but also with local interests under them.

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Editor, *Journal of Asian Studies*:

I have read Professor Metzger's letter with pleasure. As my review suggests, I would not be willing myself to take such a strong positive position on Wang Shou-nan's revision of our received view of the *fan-chen*, but I am happy that Professor Metzger is willing, since I feel the opinion is defensible on the basis of Wang's data and deserves to be publicized. I would not like to think that through too great reticence my review might turn interested readers away from a rich and stimulating work. I would be unhappy, too, if what was intended as a summary of the received view has been generally taken to represent Professor Wang's conclusions, and I am as anxious as Professor Metzger to have that impression corrected.

I am afraid, however, that I feel that the book will retain its value longer as a pattern for marshaling information and as an aid to revision than for its own revisionist position. But I would suggest that my view may be in some ways distorted, perhaps unfairly, by my personal concentration on fragmentation products of T'ang disintegration, specifically the establishment and stabilization of the T'ang's southern successor states.

On the other hand, part of my reticence about Wang's revisions stems from the increasing inefficiency and final breakdown of the T'ang historiographic engine in the latter part of the dynasty, leaves us with a great confusion of evidence, mostly of unofficial derivation, that has been cloaked in *chi-chuan* or gathered in *hui-yao* and *lei-shu* format by Five Dynasties and Sung historians. In short, I am still not sure that Wang's "obedient" means the same thing in the 850's that it does in the 780's, since I know for a fact that it does not mean the same thing after 1880, when obedient *fan-chen* commonly were successful rebels who had possessed themselves, one way or another, of the emblematic *ching-chieh* of regional commanders and whose acts were legitimated *ex post facto* by the court.

Please allow me to reemphasize my high opinion of Wang Shou-nan's accomplishment. The reservations I have expressed in my review and in this letter are in no way intended to understate the truly staggering reduction by the author of massive and recalcitrant historical materials to data that compute. The fact that his findings tend independently to agree with the results of K. C. Liu, despite the comparative unavailability to Wang of substantial correctives to the bias of T'ang state historiography in favor of reports of obedience and stability, is most suggestive. I certainly would second Professor Metzger's expressed judgments that Wang's revisions are imaginative, that he has taken us a long way in refining our understanding of the *fan-chen*, and that he has revealed a "complex grammar of political power" in T'ang China. But T'ang is not Ch'ing, and I am apparently less convinced that Professor Metzger that we are presently reading the structure of the grammar correctly, let alone the semantics of the vocabulary it deploys. I do think that we can now get a much clearer reading as a result of Professor Wang's researches.

In closing I would express the hope that Professor Metzger's letter will stir thoughtful interest in Wang Shou-nan's book as actively as it has renewed mine.

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