



# Emperor Liuche's Use of Troops Against Xiongnu Accelerate the Publication of "On Salt and Iron"

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**Abstract.** In this article, the main topic is about the relationship between Emperor Wudi's use of troops against Xiongnu and the publication of the book "On Salt and Iron". This paper cites the economic policies of the early Western Han Dynasty, the amount of military expenditure during the reign of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty, and the Treasury revenue during the reign of Emperor Wudi. By comparison, it is concluded that the military expenditure was much higher than the Treasury revenue, so the right to operate salt and iron should be nationalized. Because of the far-reaching significance of this policy, the publication of the book was accelerated. In addition, the Confucian thought displayed in "Salt iron nationalization" also reflects the conflict with the thought of Huang Lao. Finally, this paper also compares the different conscription system between the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire and its influence.

**Keywords:** accelerate · war expenditure · treasury revenues · thinking and conflicts

## 1 Introduction

Since Emperor Wudi was named as one of the most prominent emperors in Han Dynasty—ones of the most powerful dynasty in Chinese History—it is worthwhile for people to pay attention to the historical events of it. Mention of the Han Dynasty has to bring to mind its uneasy relationship with the nomads around it, such as Xiongnu. The Xiongnu civilization originated in Mongolia, where the fertile land and good natural conditions provided favorable conditions for the development of animal husbandry economy. Because of the nature of the nomadic economy—the need to constantly change settlements to provide sufficient food for livestock—the Huns had to constantly travel between water and pasture. However, around the third century BC, the Xiongnu society underwent a major transformation: from the primitive commune system to slavery. This change made class distinctions within the Huns society. The Xiongnu slave owners intermarried with each other and owned a lot of livestock and property. In addition, they kept turning prisoners of war into slaves to work for themselves. Nevertheless, their mode of production has not changed, so they have run into difficulties. A livestock economy needs to be powered by good natural conditions, such as abundant water and the right

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M. F. b. Sedon et al. (Eds.): SSHA 2023, ASSEHR 752, pp. 31–36, 2023.

[https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-062-6\\_5](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-062-6_5)

temperature. So when the water was insufficient or the cold came, the livestock would die in large numbers due to lack of food and other negative effects of the environment, which would seriously affect the economy of the Huns and even cause the collapse of the tribe. In addition, the ruling class had become accustomed to an extravagant lifestyle. Therefore, in this case, the Huns had to take the form of external expansion to obtain resources.

## 2 Background Information

After 70 years of recuperation, Emperor Wudi began his crusade against the Xiongnu. In the course of successive troop deployments, military spending has exceeded the tax revenues. In order to change this situation and achieve balance of income and expenditure, Emperor Wudi adopted the policy of “salt and iron monopoly”. I think the introduction of the book of *On Salt And Iron* has a very close relationship with Emperor Wudi’s successive invasion of Xiongnu. The introduction of this policy has far-reaching significance and inspiration. The introduction of the theory of Salt and Iron not only reflected the conflict between Confucian and Laotian politics, but also the difference between the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire at that time—the difference between the centralization of power and the senatorial capacity of war.

From his accession to the throne until his death, Emperor Wudi waged about 15 wars against the Xiongnu, and the costs of each war were enormous. The costs of war broadly fall into three categories. The first was the cost of soldiers and horses. The second was the cost of repairing roads and cities that were damaged during the war. The third was the cost of rewarding soldiers who have done well and Hun soldiers who are willing to surrender. These three combined, the Han Dynasty in the period of Emperor Wudi into a huge financial crisis.

## 3 Financial Expenditure

First of all, the war consumed a lot of soldiers and horses. “Later, the Han army used tens of thousands of horses to attack the Hu people every year. Finally, the chariot general Wei Qing captured the land south of the Xiongnu River Tao and built Shuofang City” [1]. Besides, When the two armies led by Wei Qing and Huo Qubing marched out of the fortress, they had a military parade in the frontier fortress. “At that time, there were 140,000 government and private horses. When they returned to the fortress, there were less than 30,000 horses left” [2]. All of this shows the sheer number of Han armies that were sent into battles. “The ancient war was in the era of cold weapons, so the amount of effective force is very important to the victory or defeat of the war. Therefore, the war at that time must have consumed a large number of effective forces, such as more than one hundred thousand soldiers and horses of the Han army died.”

In addition, without food and grass, the soldiers and horses would be weak due to hunger, thus losing their ability to fight. Therefore, the Han Dynasty needed to build and maintain roads that were used to transport food. “Besides, the city would be destroyed because of many battles, so newer and stronger fortifications were needed to be constructed. It could cost hundreds of thousands or millions” [3]. Thirdly, at the end of

each war, in order to show the emperor's care and encouragement to the soldiers, it was necessary to reward the soldiers with contributions, which usually consisted of money and land. Since there are thousands of soldiers participated in the wars, the number of people who will receive rewards was also excessively large. "At that time, the Han Dynasty recruited more than 100,000 men to attack the Xiongnu every year. They killed or captured the enemy's soldiers and were rewarded with more than 200,000 jin of gold" [4]. Furthermore, many Xiongnu soldiers were taken prisoner by the Han because of the defeat of the army, and a large number of them expressed their willingness to surrender to the Han. Therefore, in order to encourage future captives to surrender to the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wudi gave many rewards to the captives. "After king Hunxie from Xiongnu fled to changan, Emperor Wudi rewarded him for hundreds of thousands of money, sealed him for pads Yin, and gave him ten thousand acres of land and people living in it. His following four princes like King Hudu were granted as feudal lords."

#### **4 The Carry Out of New Policy and Its Impact**

On the other hand, because of the many wars with the Qin Dynasty and Xiang Yu, the economy of Han Dynasty at that time was devastated, and the economic situation of the whole country was not good. When the emperor traveled, he could not even find four horses of the same color, and the prime minister had to travel by bullock cart instead. Therefore, in order to restore the feudal ruling order, develop the feudal economy, and maintain the stability of the Western Han regime, the emperor of the Han Dynasty took a series of measures. One of the most important orders was to reduce taxes people needed to turn over. In contrast to Qin's tithing tax, the Han emperor Liu Bang adopted a policy of one tax in fifteen, which was further implemented by several subsequent emperors. Later, Emperor Wendi further reduced the tax to be one tax in thirty. This policy was also followed during the reign of Emperor Wudi. In addition, he also changed the count of small mu to large mu, which further reduced the burden of the people in paying field tax. However, as a result, taxes received by the government were too low to pay for the expenses used in wars against the Huns. Therefore, Emperor Wudi had to take other measures to bridge the monetary gap. Indeed, Emperor Wudi decided to raise the state revenue, and the first thing to do is to increase taxes.

Although in the early Han Dynasty the government decided to delegate the production of salt and iron to private traders in order to stabilize the situation, the result was that private traders had even more money than the government and were reluctant to lend to the country when it faced a financial crisis. Therefore, Emperor Wudi decided to nationalize the manufacturing of salt and iron and to sell salt and iron exclusively. "So he appointed Dongguo Xianyang and Kong Jin as Danong Cheng, who were also responsible for salt and iron affairs. Sang Hongyang was appointed since he was good at calculating" [5]. There were 36 salt officials in 27 counties; There were 48 iron officials, distributed in 40 counties, in charge of salt and iron officials. There were strict requirements for the production and sale of iron, and the exact price was determined by the emperor. In the implementation of salt and iron monopoly, the government also issued many laws to restrict the people in order to prohibit private production and sales. If anyone was found to have broken the law, severe penalties would be imposed. Therefore, the salt and iron

monopoly not only promoted economic development, but also strengthened the authority and leadership of the Han government.

It is true that salt and iron monopoly greatly increased the government's tax revenue. By the time of Emperor Pingdi in the late Han Dynasty, "there were Two hundred and eighty-eight billion money in the Treasury". Therefore, not only has the money shortage been solved, but the Treasury is often left with surplus. But the policy of salt and iron monopoly has some disadvantages. After the salt and iron monopoly, the prices of salt and iron were high and the quality was not up to the standard. Moreover, officials would forcibly sell products to the people, which brought many difficulties to the people. "All over the country, the government was accused of running the salt and iron industries. The iron they made was of poor quality and sold at extremely high prices, sometimes forcing ordinary people to buy it" [6]. Therefore, some people could not afford the salt and iron. They ate food with no iron and reclaimed land with wood hoes, which severely decreased people's living quality. In addition, the salt and iron sold by the government had uniform patterns and specifications, but could not meet the needs of all regions. Because the geographical environment of each region is different, and the government has not conducted an in-depth investigation of the geographical environment of each region, the iron farm tools that are suitable for the land of one place may not be suitable for the land of another place. As a result, the less suitable farming tools led to less harvest, which devastated the life of farmers at that time.

## **5 The Publication of "On Salt and Iron" and the Conflicts Between Ideological Schools**

Therefore, we can see that the policy of salt and iron monopoly was fraught with controversy. On the one hand, it did increase the government's revenue, but on the other hand, the ban on the private manufacture of salt and iron brought many inconveniences and heavy economic burdens to people. Therefore, there was a heated debate among politicians and intellectuals about the advantages and disadvantages of the policy of salt and iron monopoly and whether it was suitable for the national conditions of the Han Dynasty. In February 81 BC, more than 60 newly recommended literary scholars were gathered together in the palace to debate with the prime ministers Che Qianqiu and Sang Hongyang on whether the fiscal policies of Sang Hongyang should be abolished. This debate was called the "Salt and Iron Conference". Later, Heng Kuan compiled the content of this conference into a book called "On Salt And Iron". The book is both important and special. Unlike the Analects of Confucius and other books, which reflect the thoughts and words of the author or the people who are recorded, the book records the views and arguments of those who support and oppose the economic policies of Sang Hongyang in the form of dialogue in meetings. It emphasizes objectivity and accuracy. Therefore, "On Salt and Iron" reflects the views of people from all walks of life on the current situation of economy, politics, culture, diplomacy and other aspects during the reign of Emperor Zhaodi.

For example, the Wen Xue (the scholars) in this book announced that "It is appropriate to wish to abolish the salt and iron government, the liquor monopoly, and the equal-export law in order to promote agriculture and to restrict industry and commerce in favour of

its development.” While the Da Fu claimed that “Because of the lack of border defense expenses, salt, iron, alcohol monopoly and uniform export law were implemented to increase the national fiscal revenue to supplement the border defense funds. Now you wish to abolish it, which will empty the Treasury, starve the frontier abroad, and leave the soldiers in the frontier cold and hungry. With what shall the State provide them?” [7]. According to this passage, we can see that literature and doctors are divided as to whether the monopoly of salt and iron should be practiced.

6. In the early Han Dynasty, the economy was devastated by war. In order to stabilize the economy, Emperor Gaozu decided to adopt Huang-Lao thought (an extension of Taoism in the political field). Huanglao thought has two main points: small country with a few people and the best way to govern the country is doing nothing. In the early Han Dynasty, the rulers rebated against the way of Qin Dynasty and implemented the fete system. Kings with the same surname and those with different surnames were assigned to fiefs to manage the affairs within their territories respectively. At the same time, the rulers did not interfere in the daily economic activities of the people, allowing the private production and sale of salt and iron. The ruler did not force people to do things and ruled relatively loosely. For Taoist political thought, order has the potential to impede and destroy everyone's freedom and nature. So while order is important, it has certain negative effects. In the period of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty, due to the lack of national financial revenue caused by the successive invasion of troops against Xiongnu, Emperor Wudi implemented the system of “salt and iron monopoly” and nationalized the production and sales rights. This reflects Confucianism, because Confucianism emphasizes “loyalty to the emperor,” meaning that everything should be done in the interest of the emperor, that is, the government, and advocates centralized power. Unlike Taoism, Confucianism values the role of order. “There is an order in the creation of the world, and there is a rank in the formation of all things. Only by knowing the “order” can we grasp the basic law of things, and only by knowing the “rank” can we grasp our own rules of words and deeds.” So order is an effective tool for rulers to manage their country. Therefore, the book of *On Salt And Iron* reflects the shift of ideological emphasis in the Han Dynasty.

## 6 Comparison Between Han Dynasty and Roman Empire

From the article above, it can be seen that the main reason for the publication of “Salt and Iron Theory” is to record a debate about the advantages and disadvantages of the policy of salt and iron monopoly and whether it is suitable for the national conditions of Han Dynasty. The main reason for this dispute was that the Han Dynasty was unable to meet its military expenses due to the continuous invasion of troops against the Xiongnu, the prevalence of private production of salt and iron, and the fact that all the money for the war was paid by the government. Therefore, the conscription system of the Han Dynasty and itself determined that the Han Dynasty would inevitably face the problem of excessive military expenditure. However, there was one country that had a very different system of conscription from that of the Han Dynasty: the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire adopted the Citizen conscripts. Servius Tullius (578 BC–534 BC) created the Citizen conscripts system by dividing citizens into five classes according to the amount

of property they owned, and obliging citizens between 17 and 60 years old to serve in each class. The King was in charge of leading the army, and the soldiers bought armor and weapons at their own expense. After the war, the soldiers returned home to resume their work. Therefore, the ruler does not need to arm his soldiers with money in the war, then he will not face the problem of military expenditure.

## 7 Conclusion

To sum up, the publication of “On Salt And Iron” was closely related to Emperor Wudi’s successive dispatch of troops to Xiongnu. At that time, the Han Dynasty was faced with a kind of external tension and national defense burden, which led to the government’s fiscal revenue could not meet the military expenditure. In order to relieve the burden, the Han government needed a way to increase fiscal revenue, so it adopted the policy of salt and iron monopoly, which led to the discussion of salt and iron monopoly among scholars and officials. So the war accelerated the publication of the book.

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