Chapter 1

The structure of local administration
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The structure of local administration:
To a remarkable degree, the forms of local administration under Han were unified throughout the empire. Though the problems of the frontier on the north were clearly different from those of the settled areas within the empire or the expanding colonisation of the lands to the south, the pattern of government was the same, and the administrative units of commanderies (jun) and counties (xian) provided the essential structure.

Under the government of Later Han, all China was divided into some one hundred commandery units, and subordinate to each commandery were a various number of county units, almost 1200 altogether. The chief official of a commandery, the Grand Administrator (taishou), was ranked at the salary level of 2000 shi, just below the status of a minister at the capital. His senior subordinates were the Assistant (cheng), responsible for the civilian administration of the commandery, including such matters as taxation and official appointments, and the Commandant (wei), whose duties included such matters as the suppression of banditry and the supervision of recruitment for military service. In the frontier commanderies, as a reflection of the greater danger and responsibility, this officer was given the title of Chief Commandant (duwei), and some commanderies had more than one chief commandant, each responsible for a different territory (duwei bu).

These chief officials of the commandery were appointed directly by the central government, as were the officials in charge of the counties. A county of large population, over ten thousand households, was administered by a Prefect (ling), with salary and rank at 1000 shi. A smaller county was headed by a Chief (zhang), with salary of 400 or 300 shi. As in the commandery, prefects and chiefs had assistants and commandants, who were also commissioned by the central government. Both in commanderies and counties, however, the lower ranks of administration, from senior secretaries to yamen runners, were held by men recruited locally.
There were some variations in the nomenclature of the commandery and county units: when a commandery was given as a royal fief to a member of the imperial family, its description was changed to kingdom (guo), and the chief administrator was described as Chancellor (xiang). Similarly, the head of a county which had been designated as the fief of a marquis (houguo) was also given the title of Chancellor. In the frontier territories, moreover, a number of county units were described as marches (dao), or dependent states (shuguo) and special provision was made for their surveillance of non-Chinese peoples.

In this matter, however, the distinction between civilian and military administration begins to blur. Marches, it would seem, were regarded merely as a special type of county, but dependent states were developed both at county and at commandery level, and in the reign of Emperor An, early in the second century AD, a number of dependent states were formally established as commandery-type units, with subordinate counties or marches, and were administered by chief commandants rather than by grand administrators.

Under the Later Han system, the title of Chief Commandant could indicate any of three different types of responsibility: the chief military assistant to the grand administrator of a frontier commandery; the executive head of a commandery-level dependent state; and thirdly, very commonly, the title was given to the officer holding responsibility for the administration of a fixed military unit: a garrison, a camp, a fortified pass or an extended base of supply. In this way, for example, we find chief commandants in charge of agricultural settlements (nong duwei) and others responsible for major garrison and training camps, as at Yong near Chang'an or Liyang in Wei commandery. It appears, moreover, that the garrisons of the Great Wall, as a static military installation, were also administered by chief commandants, with subordinate companies (houguan), platoons (hou) and sections (sui).

The various armies which were raised from time to time by the imperial government for special expeditions were not, of course, controlled by the garrison commandants, but by generals (jiangjun) and colonels (xiaowei) appointed for the campaign. On the other hand, the establishment in a garrison base at Manbo near modern Baotou, but also with responsibility for active campaigning, introduced a composite form of military command.

Like any sensible administration, the Han government allocated broad areas of responsibility to different types of officials, but it did not insist upon a rigid distinction. Grand administrators, for example, could be expected to lead troops in the field, and in the centuries of the Han period many are recorded on active service, and even as meeting death in battle. Moreover, on a wider scale than the commandery, the inspectors of the provinces had definite responsibility for general defence co-ordination and active leadership in time of serious trouble.

The development of the province is an interesting aspect of the administrative history of Han. At the beginning, the unit described normally as the circuit (bu), including a number of commanderies and kingdoms, had an inspector (cishi) appointed to check upon the manner in which the grand administrators and chancellors carried out their duties. His rank was low, only 600 shi, and he had no authority to take immediate action on any matter of civil administration. He did however, have the right to report directly to the throne and to set in train an investigation of malpractice. Moreover, in time of disturbance within the territory of his supervision, if it was found that the county and then commandery forces could not cope with the raiding, banditry or rebellion, the inspector had the right and the duty to co-ordinate the levy of an army from all the commanderies in the province and would often command this force against the enemy.

Gradually, from Former through Later Han, the importance of the inspectors and the provincial units increased, and in the closing years of the dynasty, as disturbance became
widespread throughout the empire, the development reached its fulfilment with the appointment of governors of provinces (*zhou mu*), men of ministerial rank who thus held executive authority over their subordinate commanderies. For the greater part of the dynasty, however, this development was gradual, and the authority of the inspector was generally uncertain.

On the other hand, in terms of the frontier regions, with major military forces involved and a great extent of territory to control, the province often served as a sensible strategic unit for defence. Military commanders were not bound by the borders of civil administration, and in times of major crises, as of invasion or internal barbarian rebellion such as that of the Qiang in the early second century AD, the provincial unit provided the effective scale to cope with the emergency. For this reason, in the pages which follow, I describe the geography of the northern frontier primarily in terms of the areas of the provinces.

Finally, however, one may emphasise once again the flexibility, and even the vagueness, of Han administration along the frontier of the north. The formal civilian administration is described by the histories in terms of commanderies and counties, and there is certainly a clear sense of distinction between regular local government and the campaigns of major emergencies. On the other hand the maintenance of settled occupation by Chinese people in the north was a practical problem which had to be solved against a background of nomads beyond the frontier, indigenous non-Chinese peoples within it, long-term garrisons and occasional expeditionary forces, and a continuing need for local militia to defend their own homes. In these circumstances, within the formal structure of imperial administration, the Chinese government offered its officials the opportunity to take appropriate action as the particular need arose in the long-term strategy of survival.

**Liang province:**

The Liang province of Later Han was divided in two by the Yellow River, flowing eastwards from the Tibetan massif and then north towards the desert land of the Ordos. In this region, unlike other territories, the Yellow River was of only minor importance as a communications route: its valley and its waters provide some opportunity for travel upstream or down, but river transport is generally practicable only during the high water of summer, and there were, in any case, few places of interest or value along the stream. On the contrary, in fact, in the time of Qin and at the beginning of Former Han the Yellow River served as the frontier line of the empire, and during later centuries it was a barrier to be overcome for communication between China and central Asia.

According to *Shi ji*, the Great Wall of the empire of Qin began at Lintao, in the valley of the Tao River south of present-day Lanzhou, then ran north to the region of Lanzhou, and then northeast below the Ordos. It was not until the time of Emperor Wu, shortly before 100 BC, that the Han established a military and political presence northwest across the Yellow River and founded the commanderies of Hexi "West of the River". Jiuquan, Zhangye and Dunhuang were probably established in 104 and subsequent years, Wuwei and Jincheng in the half-century following.

Under Later Han, the commanderies of Wuwei, Zhangye, Jiuquan and Dunhuang stretched in that order from southeast to northwest along the present-day Gansu corridor. On the southwest, they were backed by the Qilian Shan and the mountainous region of present-day Qinghai. To the north and east they faced the Helan Shan, the Tengger and other deserts on the edges of the Gobi. The cities and settlements were based on oases, supplied by the snowmelt streams which flow from the high ground to the south and then disappear into marshes in the desert. As in the Tarim basin of central Asia, irrigation
agriculture was maintained around these cities, and the settled farming economy was sufficient to provide a frontier defence for the trade and communications of the Silk Road which led through the Western Regions to India and Rome.

This region of the Gansu corridor was not necessarily and naturally the base for an agricultural economy. It had formerly been taken over from chieftains of Xiongnu states, whose people had no doubt found adequate grazing grounds and pastures among the marshes and among the rivers of this territory. Though the military presence of Han was reinforced by agricultural colonies and settlements, the water supply of the rivers today is still changeable, and ruins in the desert testify to the loss of oases and the need for new settlement elsewhere. The maintenance of Chinese colonisation during the Han period was by no means impossible, but it required constant effort and care.

In one part of this region, now known by the Mongol name of Edsin Gol, the Ruo Shui flows past the present city of Jiuquan for more than three hundred kilometres into the desert. Nowadays, the Edsin Gol provides little more than brackish water and salt pans, but in the time of Han these marshes were fertile, and abundant with wild like. The whole river system then provided a salient of arable land stretching into the heart of the desert.

This territory, called Juyan by the Han Chinese, was maintained and garrisoned by the empire from the time of Emperor Wu till the last century of Later Han. Militarily, the outpost of the Great Wall was important for two reasons: as a supply point for the garrisons in the northwest and, perhaps more significant, as a means to deny this prosperous region to the northern nomads. Left undefended, Juyan would have provided an ideal route for attack against the Chinese commanderies of the corridor itself.

During Former Han, therefore, the Zhelu Zhang (Fortress to Block the Enemy), had been constructed by the marshes of the Edsin Gol, and it was from this base, for example, that the general Li Ling went forth on his disastrous attack against the Xiongnu in 99 BC.

South of the Juyan salient, the main line of defences followed the Great Wall, which ran in this region from the passes of Yumen Guan and Yang Guan in Dunhuang commandery of the far west along the northern edge of the Gansu corridor past Jiuquan, Zhangye and Wuwei.

The commandery of Wuwei also extended a salient to the north, less marked than that of Juyan, but also presenting a forward defence and a frontier pass to the steppe and desert. This area of Chinese control was based upon the river system of the Shiyang He in the region of modern Minqin.

Between these two more advanced positions, along and probably outside the Great Wall, the Dependent State of Zhangye extended a series military posts over marginal land.

The garrisons of the watchtowers on the Wall were supported by civilian farming and by military agricultural colonies (tuntian). Behind this line of fortifications, the government of Han was able to maintain its settlements and its communications to the Western Regions, in central Asia, generally secure from attacks from the north. In the other direction, the high ground of the Qinghai and Qilian Shan, and the limited political organisation of the hill people, required no such scale of protection. Raids are recorded, but for the most part the walls of the Chinese cities and settlements were adequate for defence or deterrence.

In many respects, despite the strategic importance of the Gansu corridor, it was not a territory which presented great military difficulty to the Han dynasty. So long as the defences were properly maintained, the mountains on one side and the desert on the other restricted the risk of serious attack, and the local population of the region, largely Chinese settlers, had small reason or opportunity to cause trouble to their government. The
problems of dealing with non-Chinese people arose rather in the south and east, among the broken ground of the Yellow River and its tributaries.

It is not certain where the Silk Road from China crossed the Yellow River during Han times, but it was surely in the region of present-day Lanzhou; and this frontier place of early Han became the base for expansion to the west of the river. The commandery of Jincheng was not formally established until 81 BC, but administrative and political control had been maintained for a generation before that time, based notably upon the garrison city of Lianju, on the Datong River, about a hundred kilometres northwest of present-day Lanzhou.

Unlike the Gansu corridor, however, the landform of this territory provides more than a simple communications route to the northwest. A short distance upstream from Lanzhou, the Yellow River is joined from the south by the Daxia and Tao rivers, and from the northwest by the Huang Shui, or Xining River. The two southern rivers flow through hill country and the lower edges of the Qinghai massif, and comparatively speaking, communication across the watershed from the Tao River valley eastwards to the upper reaches of the Wei is not particularly difficult. So the Tao and Daxia valleys were incorporated as frontier territories into the empire, and although the Han government does not appear to have maintained the wall defences established by Qin, there was small need or opportunity for expansion into the high ground along the upper reaches of the Yellow River to the est. By the large, it appears that the imperial frontier followed the general line of the present administrative boundary between Gansu and Qinghai.

North of the Yellow River, however, the Xining valley presented a different situation. The Xining River has its source near the closed salt lake of Koko Nor, or Qing Hai, from which the whole modern region gets its name. It flows generally east to join the Yellow River, and shortly before that junction it is joined from the north by the Datong River.

The upper reaches of the Xining River were of no significance for the communications route of the Silk Road, which probably followed the Zhuanglang River from the crossing of the Yellow River close to the line of the present railroad, with the fortress of Lianju as a guard on the west. Further west, the Xining Valley is generally narrow between the mountains, but there is fertile, cultivable ground along the river. For the Chinese, this region, like Edsin Gol, provided economic advantage to their control, and it was also a territory which could be dangerous if left unattended. Non-Chinese peoples might find here the opportunity for political association, and from them could come a coherent threat against the imperial positions on the Yellow River.

The establishment of Jincheng commandery, therefore, served two purposes: firstly as the base for the communications line across the Yellow River which led north through Wuwei and into central Asia; second as an area for colonisation by the Chinese, north of the Yellow River and in the Xining valley.

So far, the discussion of Liang province has been concerned with those areas which were the subject of expansion and settlement the time of Emperor Wu of Former Han. The eastern part of the province, however, was territory which had for the most part been controlled by the government of the Qin state and empire in the third century BC.

Under the Qin, the greater part of this region was administered by Longxi commandery, so named from its position west of Long Mountain, a southern peak of the Liupan Shan, on the border of present-day Gansu and Shenxi provinces. In geographical terms, the term "West of Long Mountain" describes all the valley of the upper Wei, being the bulk of the eastern part of present-day Gansu.
During the Han period, under the arrangements of Emperor Wu, the commandery of Tianshui was established to control the Wei valley immediately west of Long Mountain, and the rump of Longxi commandery governed only the frontier territory of the Tao River and the westernmost part of the Wei valley. South of the Wei and the Tao was Wudu commandery, which had been in Yi circuit under Former Han, but was in Liang province of later Han. The commandery covered the mountainous country of the Min Shan in present-day southern Gansu and the borders of Sichuan, with the upper course of the Han River and of the Bailong Jiang. In this region also, both the non-Chinese and the Chinese settlements were scattered and isolated among the mountains at the foothills of Tibet and the base of the great ridge of the Qin Ling.

Wudu commandery did not contain a good communications route from north to south. The main access from the Wei River through the Qin Ling to present-day Sichuan was the celebrated Baoye Road, which wound its way south from Mei county in Youfufeng, up the Ye River tributary of the Wei, across the Taibai Shan and into the valley of the Bao River, tributary of the upper Han, with terminus at Baozhong in Hanzhong commandery. A second, older road, the Lianyun or "Linked Cloud" Road, which lay east of the Baoye, ran south from Chencang county, in the region of present-day Fengxian in Shenxi, and then across the watershed to the region of present-day Liuba, again on the Bao River above Baozhong.

Both these roads, and the various minor and more difficult routes, are remarkable examples of engineering skill and ingenuity, with galleries cut into the cliffs and escarpments, and trestles built out over the ravines. Though Gudao on the Linked Cloud Road was actually administered as part of Wudu commandery, these lines of communication and transport were designed to connect the lower Wei valley, being the region about Ch'ang'an, with the upper course of the Han River. They climbed, therefore, through the ranges of present-day southern Shenxi, and most of Wudu commandery, in present-day southern Gansu, was a somewhat isolated frontier territory, with its axis along the ridges and among the valleys of the headwaters of the Han River and the Tao. The main communications route east and west along the Wei River was the Long Road, so called from the mountain by which it passed. It seems most probable that the ancient road generally followed the line of the modern railway from Xi'an along the Wei valley, then crossed the watershed to the Tao River, and then went north to the Yellow River near Lanzhou, where it joined the Silk Road leading northwest into central Asia. Most of the country of eastern Gansu is rolling loess hills, not a major obstruction to open movement and manoeuvre, but sufficient to render attractive the silted flood-plain of the major streams, while in the upper reaches of the Wei and about the Yellow River the terrain is steep enough to make travel away from the valleys quite difficult.

Near Long Mountain, however, on the borders of present-day Gansu and Shenxi, the Wei River runs through gorges in the loess. In this region the road left the Wei Valley and crossed the hill country through the Long Pass, north of the river. The Long Pass was a fortified barrier, and it appears also that the Long Road itself was protected as a military highway, with patrols, garrisons, stores and arsenals at intervals along its course.

North of the Wei, the various valleys of its tributaries west of Liupan Shan were controlled by Tianshui commandery, renamed Hanyang in 74 AD, while the small river valleys which joined the Yellow River further north and across the narrow watershed were administered by Wuwei. Some peaks of the Liupan Shan and its northern extension the Quwu Shan may rise above 2500 metres, but the ground is comparatively open, with a number of broad valleys, and the possibility of herding and movement.
In one respect the country was markedly different to the present. In southern Shenxi, the Qin Ling is still covered by forests, but the Wei valley and its tributaries once contained extensive areas of marshland, and the hill country of Long Mountain and the north were also timbered. Now the marshes are almost entirely channelled and drained, and the hill slopes have been extensively deforested and terraced. In the time of Han, the colonisation of Liang province was not fully complete, and there were certainly areas where marshland provided an obstacle to communications. We are told, moreover, that in Han times the commanderies of Tianshui and Longxi were noted for their mountains and forests, and it seems certain that the timbered country of the Qin Ling extended northwards across the Wei, thinning gradually until it petered out in the grasslands of the steppes south of the Ordos.

The development of administrative geography in this region of Liang province reflects a process of amendment to the original scheme of Qin and early Han. With its power base on the lower valley of the Wei, as the government of Qin had expanded west and north, it radiated its administrative control outwards like the arcs of a circle. On the west, Longxi commandery of Qin had been based on the upper valley of the Wei just beyond the Long Pass, and from that advanced base Qin authority had expanded to the valley of the Tao River and the course of the Yellow River further north. In later generations, as Chinese control became firm and the population under its authority increased, the original units of expansion were divided up into smaller areas, so that Tianshui/Hanyang and Wudu commanderies were established from part of the territory of Longxi.

The process was a long one, and it cannot be suggested that the government of Han was instantly responsive to changes in the balance. There was, however, a dynamic to the government of the frontier provinces, with power expressed by communication routes from the settled hinterland to the more uncertain borders. At the same time, it was essential both that the borders should not be too far extended and that the hinterland should remain settled and secure.

To the north of the Wei, two further commanderies were included in Liang province. Anding and Beidi had been based upon what is now the easternmost part of Gansu province, east of the Liupan Shan, extending over the greater part of this drainage basin which forms the Jing River. The Jing is a tributary of the lower Wei, gathering water from a broad open valley and then passing through a ridge of hills northwest of present-day Xi'an. Under the Han dynasty these hills, known as the Qian Shan, marked the border between Liang province and the imperial capital district about Chang'an. In modern times, they separate Shenxi province from the extreme eastern section of Gansu.

In Former Han, Anding and Beidi had controlled a pattern of Chinese settlements which extended northwest from the Jing River to the Yellow River near present-day Yinchuan in Ningxia. Like Wuwei to the west, and the long line of the Edsin Gol, the area of Yinchuan in Ningxia. Like Wuwei to the east, and the long line of the Edsin Gol, the area of Yinchuan may be seen as an outpost of fertile, irrigable agricultural farmland among the dry lands of desert and steppe. In Tang times this territory was an important centre of communications, and it had long been settled by the Chinese under Qin and Han. During the Later Han period, however, though the territories of the commanderies still reached the Yellow River, there were fewer county cities and control was less effective.

Two counties in the west of Former Han Anding had been transferred by Later Han to the territory of Wuwei, and Anding was now restricted to the east of the Quwu range, north of the Liupan Shan. Here the county of Sanshui extended over the valley of the Qingshui He. Sanshui was also the headquarters of the Dependent State of Anding, an expedient to extend the authority of a potentially over-stretched county administration.
North and east of Anding, Beidi commandery had suffered a similar fate. Its territory still extended from the valley of the Jing to the yellow River, but most of the region in between was under the single county of Lingzhou, whose city was in the neighbourhood of present-day Yinchuan. A large number of other counties had been abolished, and the capital, Fuping, which under Former Han had been close to modern Yinchuan, was shifted south by Later Han to the neighbourhood of Jingyang in Gansu.

In this region, therefore, in the lands on the southern fringe of the Ordos, the expansion of Former Han had been largely halted by a combination of political, economic and ultimately geographical factors. As in other regions to the north and east, the frontier position of Later Han was not equal to that of its predecessor.

A note on the question of climate:

At this point we should consider the fact that the form of the land and the potential fertility of the soil are of almost secondary importance compared with the questions of rainfall and temperature. Like all of China, this region of the northwest is affected by the annual monsoon alternation of air movement; with warm wet summers from the south influenced by the seasonal continental low pressure region, and cold dry winters from the great high pressure region which forms over Mongolia.

At the present time, the region of Lanzhou and most of Gansu province lies close to the line of 250 millimetres [10 inches] annual rainfall, and the minimum average temperature in January reaches about -5c, so that only 150 to 200 days of the year are free from frost. Under these conditions, wheat and quick-growing grains such as millet and barley can be sown in spring for harvest in autumn. Slightly further south, near present day Xi'an, a small increase in annual precipitation and a somewhat milder winter allow for the planting of wheat in winter for harvesting in mid-year, followed again by millet, barley or other crops.

The Wei valley about Xi'an, however, is recognised as a region with local climate offering more favourable conditions for agriculture: at the present-day, the Wei valley is the furthest place north of the Qin Ling dividing range which will support the growing of bamboo, a generally tropical plant. It was, indeed, the very fertility of this region which made it the key economic area for the dominance of north China first by Qin and then by Former Han.

It is impossible to assess, with any degree of precision, the details of the climate of north China during the Han. There are interesting accounts in literature, and specific records of droughts and floods have been preserved in the histories. These are, however, isolated items, related only to one particular place or time, and dangerous as the basis for generalisation: it is, for example, remarkably difficult to judge whether a reference to a drought, or even a series of droughts over several years, is the indication of a gradual change in climate or appears rather as a local phenomenon, indicating reasonable but unfulfilled expectations of satisfactory rainfall; and the drought itself may have been reported to the court more for the political value of the portent than as an item of practical concern.

The Chinese scholar Zhu Kezhen, in an article published in 1972, assesses literary and historical records of plants growing in particular regions, and compares his judgements with the climate indicators found in oxygen isotope profiles from drill cores in the Greenland ice sheet. There is an impressive general correlation between Zhu's reconstructions and the evidence from Greenland, and until there are published results of
detailed research from physical sources in China, Professor Zhu's work is the best general outline that we have.

Zhu's reconstruction for the Qin and Han period suggests that in the third and second centuries BC the climate of north China was generally more temperate than today, with an earlier spring and with bamboo well established in the region of present-day Henan province. From that time, however, the climate gradually became colder, with a low point about the beginning of Later Han, early in the first century AD, a slight improvement at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, and then another cold spell leading to the Three Kingdoms period and the Jin. It may be estimated that the overall temperature of China may have fallen 1 or 2 degrees below the present.

It is a tempting speculation to link the decline of Former Han, and the Later Han shift of the capital from Chang’an to Luoyang, with the effect of the gradual cold and dry change of the climate. The temptation however, in our present state of knowledge, must be resisted. Even apart from the general uncertainty of calculations about the climate, there were many other factors, political, personal and military, which determined the shifts of power within the Chinese world from one generation to another.

It should be noted, moreover, that there is no evidence for any major, catastrophic change in the climate of China over the past two thousand years. Such variations as there have been, in rainfall and in temperature, have been incremental one way or another, and though the effect of such changes may have serious local consequences, particularly when change is compounded by mistaken efforts of man, it is present scientific opinion that the climate of north China during Han was similar to that of the present-day.

From the point of view of the frontier history, however, what must be recognised is that the greater part of the northern provinces of Han lay along the margin of agriculture and the pastoral economy. With the aid of water control and storage to provide irrigation for the more level ground of the river valleys, the farmers of Han, like their counterparts today, could harvest their crops and maintain their way of life, while further out, on the open hillsides, other people grazed their flocks and herds. There provinces along the northern frontier of the empire provided the conditions for a mixed economy on the margins of settlement. In such circumstances, a comparatively slight or short-term change in the pattern of rainfall and temperature could have important consequences.

*Bing province:*

North of the Wei River below Xi'an, the territory of present-day Shenxi controls the wide valley of the Luo River and its tributaries. The Luo also flows south to join the Wei River, very close to the Wei’s own junction with the Yellow River at its great bend. Unlike the Jing River, however, the other major tributary of the lower Wei, the Luo appears rather as a main stream with numerous tributaries than as a complex of minor streams across a broad basin. At the head of the valley, the watershed of the Baiyu Shan separates the upper reaches of the Luo from the Wuding and other tributaries of the Yellow River on the northeast, and from the steppe and desert of the Ordos region to the northwest.

In the region of the Wei valley, the lower course of the Luo during Later Han was controlled by the capital commandery of Zuopingyi in Sili province, but the middle and upper reaches of the valley were under Shang commandery, and the territory of the commandery, a Qin dynasty foundation, extended north from the Luo valley to include most of northern Shenxi and to exercise at least nominal responsibility for the south of the Ordos.
Under the Qin dynasty, the Direct Road (zhì dao) led from the imperial capital at Xianyang to the outlying frontier posts of Jiuyuan commandery on the northern loop of the Yellow River. The road ran from Ganquan, site of a great detached palace of the First Emperor, due north along the ridge of the Ziwu Ling ranges, across the Baiyu Shan and then north through the centre of the Ordos to reach and cross the Yellow River by present-day Baotou in Inner Mongolia. It was a remarkable feat of construction by the celebrated general Meng Tian, builder of the Great Wall of Qin, and it confirmed the authority of the Chinese empire along the furthest reach of the Yellow River. In the century which followed the fall of Qin, however, those far northern territories were lost to Chinese control, and it was not until the time of Emperor Wu that the empire returned to the north.

When the Han commanderies of Wuyuan and Shuofang were established along the northern loop of the Yellow River in 127 BC, Shang commandery provided the main route of access. The North Road of Han, however, did not take the direct line of the Qin: it appears rather to have followed the Luo valley, crossed the watershed north past present-day Yan'an, then followed the Wuding River past Fushi, the capital of the commandery, and north through the Great Wall at Yulin. From there, a motor road now runs north through the desert to Dongsheng and on to Baotou. The Han road was not such a spectacular feat of military engineering as that of the Qin, but it also assisted the administration of Shang commandery itself, and it provided a less exposed route for regular communications.

North of the Wuding River and east of the North Road of Han, the tributary streams and valleys of the Yellow River in the area of present-day Shenmu formed part of the territory of Xihe commandery. Half of that commandery lay on the eastern bank of the Yellow River, but until 140 AD the capital of Xihi was at Pingding, probably on the North Road near present-day Dongsheng in Inner Mongolia. Rather more importantly, during the later Han period, the city of Meiji, close to the Yellow River near present-day Fugu in Shenxi, was the enforced capital of the Shanyu of the Southern Xiongnu, tributary and hostage to Han.

Beyond this region of desert and steppe, then, lay the northern loop of the Yellow River. At the east, where a number of rivers meander together across open irrigated ground, there was the frontier commandery of Yunzhong, with its capital, a city of the same name, near present-day Togtoh. The territory of the commandery extended eastwards beyond Huhhot, now the capital of Inner Mongolia. That city, in fact, dates its history only from the Ming dynasty, but there were Han settlements in the region, and the main road through the Daqing mountains at present-day Wuchuan was guarded by the Great Wall.

To the west of Yunzhong, upstream along this northern reach of the Yellow River, were the commanderies of Wuyuan and Shuofang. In this region of frontier territory, steppe and desert, the ancient identification of sites are not always certain, but it seems most probable that Wuyuan commandery controlled the middle of this stretch of the river, and its capital, Jiuyuan, was close to present-day Baotou. The territory of Shuofang embraced the complex of streams and meanders at the west of the loop of the Yellow River, and the capital, Linrong, was within the loop of the main stream, northeast of present-day Dengkou, or Bayan Gol.

In this region, there have been significant geographical changes. As a result of explorations on the ground during the early 1960s, Professor Hou Renzhi of Beijing University was able to identify the site of the Han cities of Linrong and Sanfeng, with their attendant fortifications, in the desert near Dengkou, and he has also reconstructed the ancient course of the Yellow River, as described by Shuijing zhu.
In the present day, the Yellow River flows past Dengkou on the east, and its course traces a gentle curve north-eastwards. During Han times, however, the river lay to the west of the present site of Dengkou, and its line was more directly to the north. The ancient site of Linrong, some thirty kilometres northeast of Dengkou, is now on the western bank of the Yellow River, but it was then a considerable distance east of the stream. A little to the north of Linrong, the ancient course of the Yellow River divided into two, in much the same fashion as it does today. The main channel follows a shorter curve to the sough, but the secondary, outer loop, with its attendant streams, defines the wide area known in the Han period as the Beijia, forming an important part of the territory of Shuofang commandery.

However, besides this reconciliation of *Shuijing zhu* with the modern map, Professor Hou has demonstrated a far more dramatic change in the country. According to *Shuijing zhu*, to the north of Sanfeng, on the west of the Yellow River, there was a great marsh and lake called *Chushen ze*. This can be identified in the present day, but the whole area is now a desert of sandhills and rock, useless for agriculture or for grazing, and totally changed from the fertile oasis of two thousand years ago. Modern Dengkou is a small settlement, with a few patches of irrigated ground along the Yellow River. A short distance south of Dengkou, the railway crosses from the west bank to the east, just to avoid the shifting dunes which cover the whole western bank and flow directly into the river itself.

South of Dengkou, some hundred and fifty kilometres south to the region of Shizuishan, north of Yinchuan, the Yellow River flows between the high ground of the Ordos on the east and the desert mountains of the Helan Shan on the west. On one side, the Ordos territory slopes gradually to the east, with scattered salt lakes across the middle; but nowhere is it hospitable. In the other direction, the Tengger Desert, which includes the Helan Shan, is a southern extension of the Gobi, between the Yellow River and the Gansu corridor. This region has less than 100 mm, about 3 inches, annual rainfall, and although there are scattered lakes and oases, there is no practicable opportunity for settled agriculture or even proper grazing.

It was, of course, possible to traverse the desert region: there were occasions when the Han maintained communications direct from Shuogang to Juyan, and some fortified posts were set up and manned. At other times, the northern nomads are described as coming south through the desert to trade or to attack the Han positions or those of their allies in the Ordos region, or the frontier of Wuwei commandery further west. For the most part, however, the main paths of communication between the Chinese empire and the north lay through Juyan and the Wuwei salient or through the various passes of Shuofang and Wuyuan.

It seems, then, most likely that during the Han period the area about Sanfeng marked the end of a section of the Great Wall. We are told explicitly that the Han fortifications, re-established along the northern part of the Ordos loop after the conquests of the general Wei Qing in 127, followed the Qin system of defences that had been set up by Meng Tian, and those fortifications had guarded the line of the Yin Shan, from the pass at Gaoque, north of Shuofang, through Wuyuan and Yunzhong commanderies eastwards. In this way, the campaigns of Emperor Wu reconquered the irrigable lands north of the Ordos and restored the spur of defences which protected that territory from the steppe.

South of Shuofang, along the western side of the Ordos loop, to the region of present-day Yinchuan, the frontier was marked perhaps only by occasional patrols and watch-posts, not by a continuous defensive system. Moreover, it appears that the Qin dynasty, and the Former Han after it, had maintained a second line, the old wall of the Qin state. *Shi ji* describes the defence line completed by Meng Tian as running from Lintao to Liaodong,
with an additional spur to guard the north of the Yellow River: the main line of the old Qin Wall was therefore in the south of the Ordos, northeast from present-day Lanzhou and along the borders of modern Shenxi province. During the early part of Former Han, until the conquest of the north by the armies of Emperor Wu, this southern Qin wall was the front line of Chinese defence, and even during Later Han there is occasional reference to the old fortification.

At the present day, the region south of the Ordos mountains, along the northern borders of Shenxi and east of Yinchuan, is another wilderness of drifting sand dunes and desert. Like the region of Sanfeng in Shuofang, however, the land was not always so desolate. In the fifth century AD, the chieftain Helian Bobo, founder of the short-lived Xia state, set his capital in this territory, and records of the time describe the place as an open, grassy steppe, ideal for the centre of power of a nomad empire. The ruins of the ancient settlement can still be identified, but they are now surrounded by a waste of sand.

Though the steppe of this region in later Han still provided suitable grazing land, it appears that attempts to establish full Chinese-style settlement had largely failed.

We have observed how Anding and Beidi of Liang province relied on isolated counties to cover broad areas of territory southeast of the Yellow River and southwest of the Ordos. In similar fashion, the Later Han establishments of Qiuci Dependant State and Houguan, both, it would appear, with a military component in their administration, were designed to cover broad areas of territory in a loose supervision of the nomad tributaries of the empire. The intensive and ambitious colonisation pattern of Former Han had largely been dismantled.

This was a deliberate policy of Later Han, begun by the founding Emperor Guangwu in the early days of his government. It was at once a policy of economy and also probably a recognition that the colonisation of the frontiers was overextended in the geographical and military circumstances of the time.

Similar withdrawal and reduction of the imperial presence may be observed elsewhere in the north and northwest. As a result, though the northern frontier of Later Han generally followed the line of Former Han, there is clearly a less energetic occupation of the ground by the people and by the civil administration. In the history which follows, one may observe some of the reasons and results of this policy.

In the immediate area that we are considering, the central desert of the Ordos, fringed by a broad belt of arable steppe, long represented a barrier and offered a choice to the rulers of China. With a conservative policy, the line of the old Wall of the Qin state along the southern frontier of the Ordos could be held in defence of the heart of the empire about Chang’an and Luoyang. In contrast, the First Emperor of Qin and Emperor Wu of Han adopted a “forward” policy, establishing Chinese settlements along the northern loop of the Yellow River. The Han colonies were designed to serve as an advanced defence line against the northern tribes, depriving them of the benefits of the irrigated land, and holding them back from any secure position within reach of the heartlands of the empire.

Each choice presented problems: if the frontier line was south of the Ordos, the people of the steppe could establish a political or military force which would pose a continual threat to the valleys of the Luo and the Jing, and to the territory about the imperial capital itself. If the Chinese committed themselves to the far north, though they gained increased security in the south, there followed inevitable problems of military maintenance and supply. By force of nature, that northern land was a true frontier territory, dangerous to abandon and yet difficult to hold. The dilemma of policy remained with the Han government throughout its history.
So far, however, the problem has been considered in terms of a north-south axis, across the Ordos: the eastern part of Bing province gave a different slant to Han strategy. Though Meng Tian of Qin had conquered the lands of the northern loop of the Yellow River, the first Chinese military occupation of that region was accomplished by the state of Zhao, northernmost of the three successors to the divided state of Jin, about 300 BC. The base of the state of Zhao lay in the northern part of present-day Shenxi, and we are told in Shi ji that King Wuling of Zhao adopted the clothing style and many of the customs of the northern peoples. During the course of his reign, he extended the territory of his kingdom to the north, founded the commanderies of Dai, Yanmen and Yunzhong, and constructed a defensive wall along the Yin Shan range westwards to Gaoque. From this perspective, the defence of the northern loop of the Yellow River was a means to protect the Chinese positions in the north of present-day Shenxi. The conquest by Meng Tian of Qin marked a re-establishment of the Chinese position formerly maintained by the state of Zhao, and the later expansion by Emperor Wu of Han into the same region was again designed as much to support the northern territories of Dai, Yanmen and Yunzhong as to protect the lands south of the Ordos. It was, in fact, a natural corollary of the Chinese occupation of the region about Togtoh and Huhhot that they should attempt to deny their nomad enemies the land immediately west of that position.

Present-day Shanxi was largely controlled by Bing province of Later Han. In the southwest, the Han commandery of Hedong, part of the administration of the capital province Sili, governed the lower reaches of the Fen River and the northern bank of the Yellow River, extending into present-day Henan, but the commandery of Taiyuan in Bing province, centred upon the site of the present-day Taiyuan city, occupied the upper valley of the Fen, and immediately to the south of Taiyuan, the commandery of Shangdang extended westwards from the Taihang Shan, and included the upper basins of the Qin River and the Zhuozhang. From this base within China proper the northern commanderies of Bing province reached into present-day Inner Mongolia.

Under the Han dynasty, a major highway had been constructed north-eastwards from Chang’an, across the Yellow River, up the valley of the Fen to Taiyuan, then through the mountains to the North China Plain. In similar fashion, though on a provincial scale, the lines of communication to the northern frontier followed the Fen River and the upper reaches of the Sanggan River past present-day Datong.

A stretch of the Ming Great Wall follows the line of the Heng Shan, above the upper waters of the Fen, while on the west, between the Fen River and the southwards course of the Yellow River, the Guancen Shan and the Liang Shan are inhospitable territory, which in the Han period was probably uncolonised. Thus the watershed of the Heng Shan and the ridge of the Guancen Shan formed a strategic division between the southern commanderies of Bing province and the north.

Yamen commandery was based on the upper Sanggan valley about present-day Datong, and its territory extended northwards. To the west, Yunzhong commandery was based upon the open valley of the Dahei River in the region of modern Huhhot and Togtoh, while the small commandery of Dingxiang, which in Former Han had also guarded a section of the frontier, was compressed during Later Han into the general area of the Hun River and the northern foothills of the Guancen Shan, on the border of present-day Shenxi province with Inner Mongolia.

The city of Datong was the site of the capital of Northern Wei during the fifth century AD, and it was also a political centre of the Liao and Jin dynasties, contemporary with Northern and Southern Song at the beginning of our millennium. With rainfall about 300
mm, or 10 inches, per year, the territory is marginal between farmland and grazing country. The hills now are bare, a result of the desperate deforestation of recent centuries, but Shi ji states that in the north of the pre-Han state of Jin there were Forest Barbarians, and it appears that the Dai Forest, a sacred site of the Xiongnu, was in the area which later became the Mayi county of Yanmen commandery of Han.

In the period up to the Han dynasty, therefore, this region of northern Shanxi and Inner Mongolia lay on the frontier between China and the barbarians, and it was the political expansion of the Warring States, and of the Qin and Han dynasties which followed them, that incorporated the territory generally into the Chinese sphere of government.

North from Datong, the railroad to Jining in Inner Mongolia lies for the most part through open valley, with gentle hills. From Jining one line extends north-eastwards, to Ulaan Baatar in the Mongolian People's Republic, but another goes west, south of the Daqing Mountains, through Huhhot and on to the Ordos loop of the Yellow River. The Dahei valley is broad and easy to irrigate, and opens in a delta where it nears the Yellow River. The mountains to the north, however, high though not very steep, mark the beginning of the grasslands, with low rainfall, cold winters and a short growing period, and a vast expanse of open country. The steppe provides excellent pasture, with moisture both from the occasional rain and from the snows of winter, and the country supports great herds of cattle and sheep, as well as the horses, camels and other animals useful to the herdsmen. It is not, however, a region where effective settle agriculture is possible by traditional methods using pre-modern equipment.

As a result, the Sanggan valley and the Dahei valley of northern Shenxi and Inner Mongolia are transitional between farmland and steppe, and the balance of nature has changed only very slightly through slight variations of climate and the activities of men. It was primarily a matter of political will and military strength that set the Great Wall frontier of Han along the high ground of the Yin Shan and the Daqing Shan and both will and strength were liable to fluctuation and change.

In this region, however, though there was, as we shall see, considerable loss of Chinese settlement, the frontier of Later Han followed essentially the same line as that of Former Han.

**You Province:**

East of Yanmen in Bing province, the Later Han commanderies of Dai and Shanggu occupied the middle basin of the Sanggan River. As in the region about Datong, the terrain is generally open separated from the North China Plain by the ridges of the Taihang Shan to the south and from the northern steppe by the Damaqun Shan. The modern railroad follows the Yang River tributary of the Sanggan, along the northern part of the basin, past Yanggao, close to the site of ancient Gaoliu, chief county of Dai commandery.

It seems most probable that the Great Wall of Han in this region followed the line of the later Ming, along the lower reaches of the Damaqun Shan. We know that Ning city near modern Zhangjiakou, or Kalgan, was the headquarters of the Colonel Protector of the Wuhuan and a centre for trading with the northern barbarians. There was evidently a significant communications route leading north through the mountains.

Like the territories about present-day Huhhot and Datong, however, this region of the Sanggan was also marginal ground, and in the first years of Later Han the whole region had fallen under the sway of the Xiongnu. The line of hills to the south then became the effective frontier of the empire, and the Feihu, or Flying Fox, pass, in the Taihang Shan
north of Laiyuan in Hebei, and the Juyong Pass, now incorporated into the present-day Great Wall at Badaling northwest of Beijing, were two major defence posts.

During the reconstruction which followed the recovery of this region in the middle of the first century AD, Shanggu commandery, which had formerly extended to the south of the Juyong Pass, was re-established entirely in the north, and the small commandery of Guangyang, in the area about present-day Beijing, and Zhuo commandery, to the southwest, controlled the southern approaches. East of Guangyang and Shanggu, reaching from present-day Tianjin north to the frontier, was Yuyang commandery, and east of Yuyang was Youbeiping.

In this region, northeast of the North China Plain, the frontier of the empire changed significantly between Former and Later Han. During Former Han, the territory of Yuyang had extended northwards to the west of Chengde, beyond the line of the Ming Great Wall in the northeast of modern Hebei province. Similarly, Youbeiping had controlled a stretch of territory from the northern shore of the Gulf of Bohai about Tangshan, up the valley of the Luan He through the Yan Shan range, and into the region of Chengde. Indeed, during Former Han, the capital of Youbeiping commandery was at Pinggang, near present-day Pingquan east of Chengde.

While the other frontier territories of Former Han were re-occupied by Later Han, however, the upper basin of the Luan about Chengde was abandoned. The three northern counties of Yuyang disappeared, and Youbeiping was reduced from sixteen counties in Former Han to four in Later Han. Some of this reduction represented the dis-establishment of counties with small population in the sough of the commandery, but a significant number reflected the withdrawal from the Chengde Region.

The fortifications of Later Han, therefore, now followed the foothills of the high ground immediately to the north of the North China Plain, and the territory of the empire was restricted to the low-lying ground between the Yan Shan and the marshland of the sea-coast: at that time, moreover, the coastal strip was narrower than it is now, for two thousand years of siltation has extended the land considerably.

From Youbeiping an imperial highway followed the coast north-eastwards, past Shanhaiguan at the end of the Great Wall of Ming, and along the strip of land between the Song Ling range and the sea to the Chinese-controlled territories of southern Manchuria and Korea. During Han, this line of communication was controlled by Liaoxi commandery, which extended to the region of present-day Jinzhou in Liaoning.

The administrative and military geography of the northeast during Han times has been the subject of some debate and many questions remain unsettled. It does not appear that Later Han made any attempt to maintain a full line of fortifications among the Song Ling mountains. Instead, some frontier position was maintained in the valley of the Daling He, known as the Bolang He, "White Wolf River", which runs between the Song Ling and the parallel ridge of the Nuluerhu Shan further inland, then curves to enter the Gulf of Liaodong east of Jinzhou. By controlling at least part of this rugged country, the Han was able to maintain a reasonable security from the hill and forest tribes of the frontier; on the other hand, the special problems of the frontier in this area were recognised by the government of Emperor An, with the re-organisation of three counties of Liaoxi and three counties of Liaodong commanderies into the Dependent State of Liaodong.

The remaining commanderies of the northeast of Later Han, Xuantu and Lelang, are of limited interest to this study, and the dealings of the Han empire with the non-Chinese peoples of this region, southern Manchuria and Korea, have been considered by other scholars. In general, it appears that the commandery of Liaodong in Later Han controlled the lower reaches of the Liao River and the open country of the south Manchurian plain,
while Lelang preserved some part of the former Han authority over the southeast of present-day Liaoning and the north-western part of Korea. Xuantu, north-east of present-day Shenyang, faced with mixed success the turbulent and increasingly aggressive kingdom of Koguryo, or Gaogouli. But dealings with Korea and Manchuria were in some respects a sideline to the pressing problems with which the Han government had to contend on the northern frontiers of China Proper: as in central Asia, the power of China on this distant borderland depended ultimately upon the power of the Chinese government in its own territory close to home. The real problem for Later Han lay with the barbarian Qiang, Xiongnu, Wuhuan and Xianbi, and it is with those peoples, and the policies and practice of the imperial government towards them, that the present work must deal.

The lands beyond the frontier:
The two geographical regions of Manchuria and Mongolia are separated by the mountain country if the Great Xing’an range, which extends a ridge from present-day Heilongjiang province of northern Manchuria southwards along the western parts of Jilin and Liaoning. To the north, the watershed marks the international border of China with the Soviet Union and with the Mongolian People’s Republic, and in the south it provides the boundary between Liaoning province and the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia. Topographically, the mountain ranges, rising steeply above the river basins of Manchuria on the east, mark the western rim of the Mongolian plateau.

South and east of the main line of the Great Xing’an range is the broken country of the western headwaters of the Liao River, and further south the river valleys about Chengde in northern Hebei. This region, particularly the territory of present-day western Liaoning, has been traditionally identified with the homeland of the Eastern Barbarians (donghu), and modern archaeology has discovered numbers of sites of tombs, with bronze weapons and utensils, in the valleys region of the Laoha River system. Further north, two peaks of the Great Xingan range, Wuhuan Mountain in Liaoning and Xianbi Mountain in Jilin, are described by legend as the original homes of those two peoples.

Regardless of the truth of such detailed identifications, it may be accepted that the Wuhuan and the Xianbi were originally inhabitants of the mountains and forests of this region, and that the lands of the Wuhuan were initially south and somewhat west of the Xianbi. From this country, however, the Wuhuan first and then the Xianbi came into contact with the Chinese to the south and with the steppe people of the Xiongnu confederacy to the west.

The western slopes of the Great Xing’an range merge gradually into the Inner Mongolian plateau, some 1000 metres above sea level. The mountains act as a barrier to the rainfall: the annual rainfall at Shenyang is about 700 mm [28 inches] and at Harbin almost 600 mm [22.5 inches], and the mountain country receives about 500 mm per year, but to the north and west the readings reduce to 250 mm [10 inches] and below. With low rainfall and long cold winters, the forest country gives way to grassy steppe, and again, in the north and west of Inner Mongolia, to desert.

From the point of view of Han China, the region beyond the frontiers can be considered in three segments, extending roughly north and south. On the east, the mountains of the Manchurian border lead down to the plateau, with internal drainage, light rainfall, and steppe grasslands surrounding and interspersed with desert.

In the central section, west of the railway line which leads from Datong and Jining to Ulaan Baatar, the steppe grasslands north of Huhhot and the Ordos extend, through some poor country, to the river country of the Orhon. Northeast of the Edsin Gol, and northwest
of the loop of the Yellow River, a peak of the Gurvan Sayhan Uul range, in the borders of the Mongolian People's Republic, was known to the Han as Zhuoye Mountain, and was a landmark for armies and travellers on the steppe. North of these hills is the useful stream of the Ongin River.

Further to the west again, from the region of present-day Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the heart of the Gobi Desert is a barrier between the Gansu corridor and the Altai Mountains, with other ridges such as the Gurvan Sayhan Uul northeast of Edsin Gol. North of the Altai, in the western part of the Mongolian Republic, there are again rivers and lakes, a drainage system separated from the Orhon system by the mass of the Hangayn Nuruu. From this western region, it is possible to cross the Altai mountains and the desert south to the oasis cities of modern Xinjiang, the Western Regions of Han, or west into the steppe country of Dzungaria, north of modern Turfan and Urumchi.

In this region, the southwest of Mongolia on the borders of modern Xinjiang, the region about Hami was evidently a point of importance on the route from the steppe lands of the Xiongnu to the oasis cities of central Asia. North of Hami, the high ground of the Barkol Tagh produces streams which irrigate the lower grasslands and lead into the Bar Kol lake. In Han times, the Barkol Tagh were known as the Tian Shan, and the steppe country there, Yiwu, was a notable territory of the western Xiongnu state.

The three segments described above, however, extend northwards from the long arc of the Han imperial frontier, to the central region of the Orhon basin and the region of modern Ulaan Baatar, in a broad gap between the Hentiyn Nuruu mountains on the east and the Hangayn Nuruu to the west. There, some 800 kilometres from the line of the Great Wall of Qin and Han, the grassland and arid country of the Mongolian plateau gives way to mountains and fertile river valleys draining north into Lake Baikal. Though the winters are cold and the growing season short, the rainfall is affected by the Siberian climate rather than by the remnants of the monsoon pattern of China, and the country supplies excellent pasture.

Unlike other regions of the Gobi, the territory south of Ulaan Baatar is not particularly difficult to traverse: besides the railway to the southeast, other routes lead southwest to the Edsin Gol and below the Hangayn Nuruu into western Mongolia. More generally, this region is capable of supporting considerable flocks and herds and a significant population of pastoralists. So the triangle between the Ulaan Baatar/Orhon region in the north, the Ordos loop of the Yellow River and the Sanggan valley in the southeast, and the Edsin Gol corridor in the southwest was a centre of power in the Xiongnu state. Furthermore, in the history which is to follow, primarily concerned with the policies and activities of the Han government against the peoples and states of the north, this central triangle of geographical Mongolia was of notable military importance, since it was comparatively easy for armies to traverse on raids and punitive expeditions between north and south.

In general terms, therefore, looking upon geographical Mongolia as a whole, one may note the different regions of mountain forest merging to steppe in the east, the fertile crescent of grassland north along the Great Wall frontier of China Proper, the prosperous basin of the Orhon River in the north, and the more isolated region beyond the Altai, further to the west towards central Asia. As Owen Lattimore has observed, the zone of political activity has traditionally been in the margin lands of the frontier between China and the steppe, but one may see in the Han period that the essential axis of power extended northwards to the lands of the Orhon.

The military system of Later Han:
The first section of this chapter discussed the arrangements for the civil administration and local defence of the frontier provinces. It is still necessary and appropriate, however, to consider the military resources of the Later Han government, which might on occasion be brought to bear in times of emergency or for major campaigns.

The central military power of the empire was represented by the Northern Army, stationed at the imperial capital, Luoyang. It comprised five regiments, each commanded by a colonel: the Garrison Cavalry (tunji), the Elite Cavalry (yueji), the Chang River Regiment, the Archers Who Shoot at a Sound (shesheng), and the Footsoldiers (bubing). Each regiment had a strength of some eight hundred officers and men. A junior officer, the Captain of the Centre of the Northern Army, was responsible for the overall supervision and discipline of these troops, but colonelcies of the regiments were frequently granted to members of the clans of the imperial relatives by marriage, and during Later Han the senior male of the distaff relatives, with a title such as General in Chief or General of Chariots and Cavalry, often held formal command of these troops. In times of domestic crisis, the Northern Army could be an important political weapon.

The chief purpose of the Northern Army, however, was to act as the central strategic reserve of the empire. These were the elite guards, and although their regular duties concerned the military protection of the emperor's capital, one or more regiments could be sent on active service as stiffening for regular troops, local levies and non-Chinese auxiliaries. Few major frontier campaigns took place without one or more of the five regiments.

The day-to-day and formal guard duties of the emperor's palace and other official establishments were carried out by two other formations. The Gentlemen of the Household were organised in five units, under the command of the Generals of the Gentlemen of the Household for All Purposes (wuguan zhonglangjiang), of the Left and of the Right, Rapid as Tigers (huben) and of the Feathered Forest (yulin). The first three of these were in fact composed of men who had been recommended for office by their local commanderies, and who were serving a period of probation before being appointed to substantive civil rank. The number of men in the three units combined evidently varied between some 700 and 2000, but they could not be regarded as a real military force. The Gentlemen Rapid as Tigers and the Gentlemen of the Feathered Forest, numbering some 1500 and 1700 respectively, were of more practical use. The Gentlemen of the Feathered Forest, in particular, were chosen from the sons and grandsons of men who had died in battle, and also from worthy families of the northwest. It is possible, though there is no firm evidence, that the Feathered Forest may have provided a form of military cadetship similar to that of three civilian units.

The duties of the Gentlemen of the Household were largely ceremonial, and the actual work of guarding the palace, the administrative offices, the imperial parks and tombs, and other places of government importance was entrusted to ordinary guards, conscripted from the empire as a whole, and probably serving for a period of no more than twelve months. These were the men who kept the gates and doors, and acted as escorts to high officials and to members of the imperial family.

Neither the Gentlemen of the Household nor the conscript guards could be regarded as professional soldiers. They took no part in campaigns; nor, indeed, were they ever considered a match for the troops of the Northern Army in any coup d'état. It is likely that each year some conscript guards transferred to the regular units of the Northern Army, but that would represent their first experience of serious military training as part of a disciplined force. The majority of the conscript guards returned to their homes after their period of service and were incorporated into the local militia.
During the Later Han dynasty, there was a distinction between the commanderies of the frontier provinces and those within the empire. In Former Han, the men of all commanderies and kingdoms had been liable for military service, supervised by the Chief Commandant (or Palace Commandant *zhongwei* in a kingdom), which entailed a period of training as a Skilled Soldier (*caiguan*), Cavalryman (*jishi*) or sailor in a Towered Warship (*louchuan*), followed by a year of service at the capital, on the frontier or in the provinces. Thereafter, they returned home to continue service in the local militia, which held an annual exercise and inspection each autumn.

It appears that the system of Later Han was considerably less demanding. We are told that early in the reign of Emperor Guangwu, in 30 AD, among the inner commanderies of the empire the position of Chief Commandant was reduced to Commandant, and the annual military manoeuvres were discontinued. In the following year, the units of Skilled Soldiers, Cavalrymen and sailors were also disbanded, and training was thereafter carried out through the organisation of People's Sections (*minwu*), presumably a form of home guard.

Bielenstein has argued that this change was only short-term, and has pointed out, quite correctly, that the system of liability for conscription remained. However, there are three points which put his full argument into question. Firstly, there are no further references in Later Han material to the Skilled Soldiers or other such units. Second, there are almost no occasions recorded in Later Han where troops from inner commanderies were used for any operations except those dealing with local banditry and minor rebellion. Thirdly, there is a sad and eloquent passage from the *Hanguan yi* of Ying Shao, quoted in the commentary to the Treatise of Officials in *Hou Han Shu*, where this scholar of the second century AD deplores the weakness and lack of training of the local militia, and ascribes the fault directly to the changes made by Emperor Guangwu.

At the beginning of Later Han, as the civil war drew to its close, Guangwu's intention was clearly to reduce the number of men under arms, and to lessen the likelihood of future insurrections within the empire. There is a good deal to be said for the argument that it is better to have an essentially unarmed and untrained population, if you cannot be certain of its loyalty; and the new policy, of course, meant a reduction in the military ability of future bandits and rebels, as well as those of the local loyal forces. From the evidence above, it would appear that this remained the policy of the Later Han government, and although conscription was maintained for light military duties, there was no attempt to restore the Former Han tradition of a nation under arms and an effective militia.

As a result of this change, the men of the inner commanderies had small contribution to make to the military resources of the empire. Already in Former Han, a system of commutation for military service had been established - a development which was inevitable when each man owed a short period of service in a territory as distant as the lands of the Gansu corridor. It seems clear that this continued, and the military tax (*gengfu*) was a notable source of revenue for the military expenses of the government.

It was still necessary, however, to put the men on the ground. On the northern frontiers, of course, every man was liable for active and then militia service in defence of his home, while regular forces were still obtained from the inner commanderies. There is no information as to how these latter were recruited, though it was possibly, as suggested above, by voluntary transfer at the end of the period of conscription. Besides the Northern Army, there was certainly provision for recruitment and training of regular troops outside the capital. In particular, the Encampment at Liyang, near the Yellow River in Wei commandery in the west of the Yellow Plain, which had a complement of 1000 men, is known to have served as a source of supply for the command of the General Who Crosses
the Liao stationed in the north of the Ordos. Similarly, there were the camps of the garrison at Yong and of the Tiger Tooth Chief Commandant at Chang’an established later in the dynasty. These units served as stationary defence positions, but they could also be used on active campaign on the frontier.

Finally, one must consider the problem of the Great Wall: we can be reasonably certain about its physical position upon the ground in the time of Later Han, but it is by no means certain as to when, and in what areas, it was actually maintained as a part of the defensive system of the north.

There is no question that, properly maintained and fully manned, the Great Wall served as an integral part of an effective system of defence, particularly suitable for dealing with a highly mobile enemy such as the northern nomads. In simplest terms, the existence of this artificial barrier regained the initiative for an inevitably slow-moving defence. Where a swift raiding party of main striking force would, in the normal course of events, be able to attack any point in the defensive perimeter and achieve local surprise, the Wall presented an immediate obstacle to the attackers’ freedom of movement. The mounted enemy, faced with the Wall, must either break through one of the gates, or scale the obstacle with ramps, cranes and ropes. In either case, with guards at the gates, pickets on the watchtowers and regular patrols along the line of fortifications, the enemy’s approach would be discovered and information about his strength and movement could be sent back to the main body of the local defence force. So warned, the defence could make adequate preparations to meet the enemy; and when the attackers lost the fight they had again to deal with the Wall as an obstacle to their retreat.

The wooden slips recovered from the desert regions of the north-western frontier of Han, particularly those found at sites along the Edsin Gol, provide impressive evidence of the professional attitude and the administrative effectiveness of the Han garrisons. There are reports of equipment maintained in the watchtowers, both for defence and for signalling, there are records of patrols carried out and incidents investigated, and there are regular files for the men engaged, their daily duties, and the accounts of travellers as they passed through the guard-points and passes.

The dating of the strips does not give a complete record of the occupation of the Wall, but it does appear that the military establishment in the northwest was maintained for most of the Later Han period, and in that region the fixed defence provided by the Wall was evidently the most effective and satisfactory.

Loewe, however, has estimated that some 3250 men may have been required for watchtowers along the Wall from Dunhuang to Wuwei, including the Edsin Gol/Juyan salient; and this figure takes no account of the second line troops, such as those engaged in agriculture or at headquarters, nor for any strategic reserve. On the basis of this estimate, the resources available to the military commanders in Bing and You provinces may not have permitted them to keep so many troops in fixed positions along their section of the Wall, while also maintaining a reserve sufficiently powerful to come to their assistance in time of need. It is not a question of the Wall being an inefficient form of defence: it is rather a matter whether the manpower was available for its effective use.

In the two hundred years of the Later Han dynasty, we may observe a number of policies being applied to the problem of the northern frontier. The problem was set by the geography of the region, and the natural differences between the peoples of the steppe and the economy and society of China. The government of the empire sought to achieve a solution to the problem by political, administrative and military means but, like all governments, its resources were limited, and its policies were often confused by conflicting advice and demands. The achievement of government may be judged by the
record of success with the material at hand, and the pages which follow offer an assessment of the policies and achievement of the Later Han government in the north.