

## Chapter 6

### IMPERIAL POWER AND THE RULING CLASS

The single most intriguing theme discernible in the Empress Wu's regime, at least by modern historians, has been that of social change. Though the debate continues, Maoist historians seem to have reached a broad consensus that her opposition to the aristocracy and to the large-landlord class intensified class struggle both inside and outside the ruling group, and so constituted an important stage in the dialectical process.<sup>1</sup> Western scholars who are interested in the problem have usually taken as their starting point the work of two major scholars. From Naitō Torajiro has come the idea that the late T'ang saw social changes which made it the transitional period between medieval-aristocratic and modern-bureaucratic China,<sup>2</sup> and from Ch'en Yin-k'io the perception of T'ang history prior to the An Lu-shan rebellion as a struggle between two blocs--an entrenched aristocracy and a newly-rising group of examination bureaucrats.<sup>3</sup> Professor Ch'en elaborated his thesis by the division of the aristocracy into contending northeastern and northwestern groups, and by suggesting that the Empress Wu was responsible for the most significant change:

From the establishment of the T'ang by Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung until just prior to the accession of Kao-tsung, those who held the most important civil and military posts in the state were mostly the successors of the Sui, Northern Chou, and Western Wei. This is to say that they were the descendants of the bloc assembled under the banner of Yü-wen T'ai's "Kuan-chung first" policy. From the time the Empress Wu seized power, she destroyed this traditional policy step by step and, because of her ambition to found her own dynasty, she began the destruction of the *fu-ping* system which was the traditional prop of the Kuan-chung bloc. [So] in this period social classes were in a state of flux, rising and falling.

As for the *chin-shih* and other examinations, although established in the Sui, they were unnecessary for the attainment of civil office. Under the Empress Wu, great emphasis was placed upon selecting officials for their literary abilities, and [because] she broke the old rules of selection, the *chin-shih* degree became the object of great competition everywhere. At that time there existed many persons in Shan-tung and Chiang-tso who had devoted themselves to literary pursuits, but lack of membership in the Kuan-chung bloc had disqualified them from rising to official positions. The political revolution of the Empress Wu brought them to court. After this the high positions formerly monopolized by the old [elite] of Wei, Chou, and Sui were necessarily taken and occupied by this newly rising class. The replacement of Li-T'ang by Wu-Chou was thus not merely a political change. It was a social revolution and, seen in this light, was a more significant change than the dynastic succession from Sui to T'ang.<sup>4</sup> . . .

Both these hypotheses are persuasive ones, though the former has proven to be



somewhat more durable than the latter. In Ch'en's work certain weaknesses in premise and definition, as well as internal contradictions, have led to the successful challenge of some of his conclusions,<sup>5</sup> but several of his insights remain valuable, and the emphasis he places upon regionalism, examinations, and imperial policy as a determinant of change seem still to be warranted. Moreover his work raises some questions which might profitably be examined in the present context. Did the Empress Wu, for instance, consciously foment a "social revolution" even in the narrow sense in which Professor Ch'en uses the term? Did her reign see the rise of any new "class"? What role was played by the examination system and the decline of the *fu-ping* in societal change? And finally, what was the nature of the T'ang ruling class and, within it, the relationship between status and office? While the nature of our sources for the early T'ang is such that all statements regarding social mobility contain a certain degree of speculation,<sup>6</sup> partial or interim answers to all these questions are possible.

Of the several contemporary observations on the subject of the T'ang ruling class and its development, that of the genealogist-historian Liu Fang is perhaps the most comprehensive.<sup>7</sup> In his *Discussion of Surnames and Lineages* (*Hsing-hsi lun*),<sup>8</sup> dating from about 719, he wrote that clans and lineages had been a state concern from the most ancient times:

There existed a work called the *Shih-pen* which recorded the names, titles, and lineages of the feudal lords and great officers from the [time of the] Yellow Emperor down to the Spring and Autumn period. . . . After the Han arose Ssu-ma Ch'ien and his father edited the *Shih-pen* [for inclusion in] their work, the *Shih-chi*. They clarified the [origins of the] hereditary houses, following the Chou genealogies, and so came to know the origins of their surnames and clan names. . . .

[Now] when Han Kao-ti had risen and, on foot, had gained control of the empire, he appointed his officials because of their wisdom, and conferred noble rank for merit. . . . He employed [only] those descendants of former princes, dukes and great ministers who were talented, and he rejected those without ability. He made no distinction between *shih* and *shu*,<sup>9</sup> and so for the first time office [rather than lineage] was much esteemed. Still, however, the northeastern *hao-chieh*<sup>10</sup> were transported to fill the capital city. At this time the Chu and T'ien of Ch'i and the Ch'ü and Ching of Ch'u were all [considered to be] the preeminent surnames (*yu-hsing*). . . .<sup>11</sup>

The Wei [dynasty] set up the 'nine rank' system and established [officials called] the 'impartial and upright' (*chung-cheng*) to recommend [potential officials], and they esteemed men of noble descent (*shih-chou*) and looked down upon those scholars of low birth (*han-shih*). Power reverted again to the preeminent surnames. . . .

The Chin and Sung followed this method and so for the first time, surnames (*hsing*) reached the pinnacle of importance. Therefore, the *shih* and the *shu*, the noble (*kuei*) and base (*chien* 賤),<sup>12</sup> were clearly separated once and for all. At that time when officials came to select men for promotion, they were certain to examine their genealogy (*p'u*) and registration (*chi*) and check to see that there was no fraud. Thus every official possessed his genealogical table (*shih-chou p'u*) and it listed the offices [of family members] for generations. . . .

South of the Yangtse [the greatest clans] were [called] the



*ch'iao-hsing* and the greatest were the Wang, Hsieh, Yüan and Hsiao. In the Southeast were the *wu-hsing*, and the greatest were the Chu, Chang, Ku and Lu. East of the mountains (*shan-tung*) were the *chiün-hsing*, and the greatest were the Wang, Ts'ui, Lu, Li and Cheng. In Kuan-chung, they were also [called] the *chiün-hsing*, and the greatest were Wei, P'ei, Liu, Hsüeh, Yang and Tu. In northern Shansi (Tai-pei) were the *lo-hsing*, and the greatest were the Yüan, Ch'ang-sun, Yü-wen, Yü, Lu, Yüan and Tou. These *lo-hsing* were the 'eight clans and ten surnames' and the 'eighty-six lineages and ninety-two surnames' of the time when [the Northern] Wei [emperor] Hsiao Wen-ti moved his capital to Loyang [in 494]. . . . and they called themselves men of Loyang in Ho-nan. . . .<sup>13</sup> [Liu goes on here at some length to explain how the *chiün-hsing* were ranked according to the offices held by family members into four groups, and how this was the true origin of the term 'four surnames' (*ssu-hsing*) later appropriated by the northeastern clans alone. He points out that the Northern Ch'i restricted office to those numbered in the *ssu-hsing*.]

Formerly [during] the Southern Dynasties (Chiang-tso), their system of status for clans and lineages was to consider the first of the ranking surnames in each commandery the 'preeminent surnames.' During the *t'ai-ho* period [477-500] of the Wei, all the 'four surnames' of each commandery were considered 'preeminent surnames.' The same term ['preeminent surnames'] was used for those classified as *chia-men* in the *Lei-li* of the monk T'an-kang<sup>14</sup> of the Northern Ch'i; for the 'clans respected by all' (*ssu-hai t'ung-wang*) in the *chien-te* [572-78] compilation of the Northern Chou;<sup>15</sup> for those called the *mao-hsing* in the Sui compilation of *k'ai-huang* [581-601];<sup>16</sup> and [finally] when the *Shih-tsu chih* was compiled in the *chen-kuan* period of the T'ang, the same term was used for those there classified as the first-rank families. Those whom Lu [Ching-ch'un] calls the *sheng-men* in his *Chu-hsing lüeh*<sup>17</sup> were also considered as 'preeminent surnames.'

Any [classification] which fails to accord with these practices of successive dynasties should not be called 'genealogy' with them. The present-day custom of referring to the Ts'ui, Lu, Li and Cheng as the 'four surnames' . . . certainly does not follow this standard rule.

When culture (*wen*) is in decay, honor is given to false [genealogies]. The Sui was heir to this sort of decay but did not understand why there was corruption and so went against the way of antiquity. [The Sui] abolished the way of local recommendation (*hsiang-chü*) and did not consider persons [for selection] in reference to their place of origin (*ti-chu*). It valued officials only for their administration. The *shih* thus had no locality or village of their own; villages had no officials, and the people lost integrity and their sense of shame. The *shih* lineages were thrown into disarray and the *shu-jen* went beyond their appointed station. . . .

When the people have nothing left to preserve, the *shih* lineages will be destroyed. And when the *shih* lineages are destroyed, the state perishes as a result.<sup>18</sup>

Liu Fang's analysis, impressive in its detail and in its familiarity with a full range of status terminology, is important in several respects. In the first place, it identifies a stratum of local *shih*, a minor aristocracy which was recognized by the state to exist "in every commandery" during post-Han



times and which was, in Liu's view, a crucial factor in the maintenance of social order at a local level. Without them the state would perish and, as a result, they had been an object of concern to the throne since Han times. He points out that although rulers like Han Kao-tsu had successfully asserted their right to define the criteria of status, the practice of respect for lineages distinguished either by nobility or by a tradition of state service was a very ancient one and that as time went on, the growing contiguity between title and office produced a class with a virtually hereditary charisma which was highly impervious to imperial control. The gradual establishment of the ethic of Han Confucianism made such qualities as superior humanity and refinement, scholarship and service to inferiors the hallmark of prestige, and the means of distinction between *shih* and *shu*. There is ample evidence in the period of division that conferral of *shih* status stood beyond the imperial prerogative, and that heredity was an essential element in its attainment.<sup>19</sup> When a high minister of the Sung (420-477) remarked that "between *shih* and *shu* there is a gulf ordained by Heaven,"<sup>20</sup> he was affirming not only the validity and necessity of distinction, but also an hereditary source of charisma beyond definition by man.

Liu Fang refers secondly to state recognition of *shih* status, most notably through the bureaucratic and legal privileges it granted in the nine-rank *chung-cheng* system. Although much could be said about this system and the aristocratic monopoly of power it produced, the important result for present purposes is that it helped to make distinctions within the aristocracy: Liu's elite of "preeminent surnames" and the "blocs" identified by Ch'en Yin-k'o. Genealogical compilation became common practice both for individual clans and for the state,<sup>21</sup> but the motives were different and, as Liu suggests, there arose a parallel divergence between the public and private criteria of status. To him this was a serious matter and, as we shall see, the first T'ang emperors shared his concern.

In specific terms, Liu saw the ideal state as one characterized by *wen*, a word of wide connotation referring both to civil virtue and high culture. Honor, both from above and below, should be bestowed on the basis of *wen*, and its twin foundations were officeholding (*kuan*) and lineage (*hsing*). Moreover, as he suggests in the same essay, the clans of certain areas preserved through the generations different types of virtue:

The people east of the mountains are unsophisticated and honest (*chih* 質), and so they esteem marriage connections. Their sincerity (*hsin*) is worthy of praise. Those of Chiang-tso [the Yangtze valley] are highly cultured (*wen*) and so esteem individual worth. Their wisdom (*chih* 智) is admirable. In Kuan-chung, the people are brave and manly (*hsiung*) and so esteem officeholding. Their perception (*ta*) is admirable. The people of Tai-peï [northern Shensi] are martial (*wu*) and so esteem noble relationships (*kuei-ch'i*). Their breadth [of mind] (*t'ai*) is admirable.<sup>22</sup>

In this statement lies the problem. While great clans could base their claim to status on regional values, genuine centralization was illusory. In other words, a dynasty seeking to consolidate its rule had first to unify the definition of *wen* since this was the acknowledged basis of respect. Ideally, it should itself personify the highest *wen* and enforce conformity upon rival claimants. It seems clear from Liu's statement, however, that intangible and long-standing clan tradition was relatively immune from imperial control, and that the successive attempts by ambitious dynasties to compile state genealogical lists had



failed to achieve their aims. Only by revising this triadic relationship, by emphasizing *kuan* over *hsing* as a component of *wen* and as a claim to the status and perquisites of the *shih* class could a dynasty triumph over regionalism and incipient rivalry. And for the T'ang, the political history of post-Han China and the disintegration which accompanied the fall of the Sui made priorities clear. The following discussion is largely the story of how the dynasty sought to deal with the centrifugal tendencies of the aristocratic elite, and how under Kao-tsung and the Empress Wu a solution was found which ultimately effected a change in the nature of the ruling class in China and so hastened the end of the aristocratic government which had been perhaps the outstanding feature of "medieval" China.

The climate of the court in the early days of the T'ang was highly aristocratic and was seen in that light by others than Liu Fang. Su Mien, in his important encyclopedia (*Hui-yao*) of 803 wrote:

Of the great officials who were founders of the present dynasty, all were of aristocratic clan (*kuei-tsu*). Since the Three Dynasties of antiquity, has there ever been a dynasty [so aristocratic] as ours?<sup>23</sup>

The imperial house, of course, was aware of this phenomenon, but between the first two emperors, Kao-tsu and T'ai-tsung, there was a great difference in attitude. The former, judging by remarks attributed to him, was both confident and proud in his lineage. Speaking once to the scion of a great northwestern clan, he said:

Our clan, the Li, was in antiquity wealthy and influential in Lung-hsi and in my grandfather's time [even] married into the imperial family. When I raised my righteous troops, the whole empire joined me and in a few days, I rose to become Son of Heaven. Looking at the rulers of former times, many rose from humble origins, toiling in the ranks and scarcely able to sustain their lives. You, sir, are also from an eminent clan (*shih-chou ming-chia*) which has successively held pure and illustrious (*ch'ing-hsien*) [posts]. . . . After a thousand years, only the descendants of you and me will be unashamed of their antecedents!<sup>24</sup>

Kao-tsu in this speech makes clear the degree to which a proud genealogy had become the source of pride, satisfaction and even self-respect by the seventh century. In his claim of relationship to the Lung-hsi Li clan--a claim almost certainly false<sup>25</sup>--he also betrays a certain anxiety. For although the wealth, the regional influence, and the status of a former consort clan with its implied concomitant of title and office which he claimed would seem an impressive enough background even for an imperial house, in the early T'ang it was not. The reason for this is the existence of a regional aristocracy whose prestige and pride was much greater. In 632, only a dozen years after his father's boast, T'ai-tsung defined the rivalry as follows:

At the time, the court discussed how the *shih* of the Northeast liked to boast of themselves. Although in successive generations they had declined, they still relied upon their former status (*ti*) and when their daughters married into other clans, they had [to be paid] a bride gift (*p'in-ts'ai*).<sup>26</sup> T'ai-tsung disliked this, considering it very detrimental to the teachings of rectitude (*chiao-i*).

As a result, he decreed that [Kao] Shih-lien, . . . Wei T'ing, . . . Ts'ien Wen-pen . . . and Ling-hu Te-fen<sup>27</sup> should revise and correct the [state list of] clans. Thereupon the genealogies (*p'u-tieh*) of the whole



empire were investigated and checked against historical records to verify their truth. The loyal and virtuous were commended and advanced, while the disloyal and recalcitrant were censured and demoted. The compilation was called the *Shih-tsu chih* and Shih-lien then grouped the clans in ranks and categories (*teng-ti*) and submitted [the work].

T'ai-tsung said, 'For a long time, I have borne no resentment against the Ts'ui, Lu, Li and Cheng [clans] of the Northeast. I consider that over the generations they have declined to insignificance and have wholly failed to produce officials. Yet still they call themselves *shih-ta-fu*, and in their marriages they demand huge sums in money and silk. In ability and knowledge they are deficient, but [still] they esteem themselves. They [are forced to] sell the trees from ancestral graves and rely upon [marriage to] the rich and noble. I cannot understand why the people respect them [so greatly].

Previously, the Ch'i dynasty was restricted only to Ho-pei while the Liang and Ch'en possessed no more than Chiang-nan. At that time, though they had talented men, they were minor insignificant states and not worthy of respect. Yet today the Ts'ui and the Lu, the Wang and the Hsieh are admired.<sup>28</sup> I have pacified the [entire] empire and made one family of all the world. The *shih* of my court are all renowned for their achievements and the loyalty and piety of some is praiseworthy while the learning and talent of others is wide. [For this] they were chosen and employed. [Yet even] those who occupy positions above the third rank seek to become the relatives [by marriage] of those decayed, ancient families, sending them lavish [gifts of] money and silk, paying them homage.<sup>29</sup>

Now when I specially decreed the settlement of clan [rankings], I desired to honor the officials of this court. Why then has Ts'ui [Min-] Kan still been placed in the first rank? . . .<sup>30</sup> Do you gentlemen not respect the offices and titles of my court? You were not instructed to discuss former generations but simply to choose present offices and titles for your ranking.

Subsequently Ts'ui [Min-] Kan was placed in the third rank. The [revised] work [completed in 638] was made up of one hundred *chüan* and was promulgated by decree to the empire.<sup>31</sup>

This important incident, which permits great insight into T'ai-tsung's vision of a united China, has wide implications. He and his father had indeed united the empire into a single family, and he was determined that status should derive from himself as head of that family and should be earned in service to the T'ang. As emperor he could hardly have been unaware of the existence of the four regional super-elites identified by Liu Fang, but he directed his attack only against the clans of the Northeast. His ostensible reasons were their pretensions, their exclusivistic posture which failed to produce central officials, and marriage customs he regarded as detrimental to established morality. It seems unlikely, however, that these exhaust his reasons and, his disclaimer notwithstanding, he was probably aware of the northeastern clans' source of prestige and felt both inferior and insecure before it.

In the seventh century the northeastern *ssu-hsing* quite simply represented the longest, purest, and most uncompromising strain of the Confucian tradition. Centered around the historical birthplace of the sage, they had made *li* 禮, a respect for the Way, the core of their pride, and when North China fell into



foreign hands they had refused both to flee south and leave their ancestral graves untended and, in most cases, to sully their bloodlines by marrying with the conquerors.<sup>32</sup> When Hsiao Wen-ti, for instance, accepted a consort from the Lung-hsi Li clan in 496, he had to compel the same four clans mentioned by T'ai-tsung to provide inmates for his harem and wives for his sons.<sup>33</sup>

For reasons like these, the elite of the Northeast had distinguished themselves from their counterparts in other regions of North China and had added to their prestige by the traditional severity of their clan rules and the value they placed on the maintenance of morality and ceremonial within their families.<sup>34</sup> Their prestige arose, therefore, more from social than bureaucratic causes, and their general unwillingness to enter state service under the foreign regimes which preceded the Sui provided them with the appearance and sometimes the actuality of martyrdom.<sup>35</sup> Reluctance to hold offices in the capital accentuated their regional characteristics, intensified their cohesiveness and exclusivity, and dissociated them both from the exploitative nature of the foreign regimes and from the parasitical character of the collaborating Chinese elite.<sup>36</sup>

We might note, finally, that it was in the Northeast that the T'ang had found the greatest resistance to its dynastic foundation and, as we will see, had reason to suspect the area of separatist tendencies for many years to come.<sup>37</sup> Although Liu Fang had associated the military arts with the clans of Tai-pei, there is ample contemporary evidence to suggest that, as a whole, the Northeast possessed the finest fighting men and that the term *hao-chieh* or *hao-tsu*, which seems to have been a wide generic classification for the great clans in Han times, came to connote such characteristics as self-sufficiency and martial skill, and was reserved increasingly for the people of the Northeast.<sup>38</sup> Both in economic and strategic terms, the area was a key one in the survival of the dynasty and so could not be permitted to remain aloof from the centralizing policies which T'ai-tsung considered so important.

His special treatment of the area sprang therefore from two causes. The greatest clans of the Northeast enjoyed a status in the popular view which was beyond imperial control, and with their superior prestige, marriage revenues and court connections as well as their traditional military power, could threaten not only national unity but the very life of the dynasty. Status fixing by the state was an old solution but, in the newly united T'ang Empire, one with a new importance.

The revised versions of the *Shih-tsu chih*, according to the old *T'ang History*, was greeted with general approval,<sup>39</sup> but there are indications that in its stated aim of equating status with present success in the service of the central government, its effects were minimal. There was no rush of northeastern aristocrats to the capital, and in 642 the emperor was forced once more to attack the same clans, charging that they had abandoned the profession of official. He struck at a key source of their economic viability with a decree forbidding the sale of marriages (*mai-hun*).<sup>40</sup> In the same edict he again commented on the pretensions of the group, and complained that new officials and wealthy families still contended to marry with them, a custom which was now well-established. Perhaps in order to justify what must have seemed a harsh order, he claimed that marriages of this sort degraded the great clans, led to friction among in-laws because of status differences and even caused the "buyers" of marriage to adopt the pretensions of the northeasterners. His deeper motives were perhaps punitive, reflecting both his frustration that the northeastern clans still



remained aloof, and his determination to force them into acquiescence. If this is the case, his tactics were wrong, for as Ssu-ma Kuang remarks of a later ban,

Since [these] great clans (*tsu-wang*) were the object of contemporary respect, in the end the prohibition could not succeed. Some [of the clans] secretly sent their daughters to the [intended] groom's house, and others [permitted their] daughters to grow old as spinsters.<sup>41</sup>

In short, these two measures of T'ai-tsung must have struck the northeastern elite as expressions of regional discrimination on the part of a dynasty whose own origins were northwestern and, as a result, can hardly have persuaded them to contribute their services to it for reasons other than economic necessity. Secure in their social prestige and realizing that if status were dependent on office, the northwestern clans already had a thirty-year head start over them, they seem for the most part to have continued their policy of non-cooperation. Of the northeastern representatives among T'ai-tsung's chief ministers not a single one was of the group of families he identified as objects of his centralizing concern.<sup>42</sup>

I mentioned earlier that Kao-tsung inherited his father's bureaucracy and that the preponderance of northwestern influence in its highest levels has led some scholars to interpret the political struggle over Empress Wu's elevation as a conflict between regional aristocracies. While I have attempted to show the deficiencies of this view, I must also concede that it contains some measure of validity. The fact that it has been so widely discussed indicates at least that the problem of regional jealousy within the ruling class had not wholly been solved. The events following Wu's elevation, most particularly her destruction of the principal northwestern *tsai-hsiang* and the declaration of Loyang as the eastern capital, created a favorable climate for another attempt to conciliate the northeastern elite, and in 659, with a new clan list and marriage ban, the attempt was made.

The immediate inspiration for the revision of the national clan list in 659 was, we are told, the fact that Empress Wu's clan was unranked or "not clearly" ranked in the *Shih-tsu chih*.<sup>43</sup> While this may be true, it seems from such facts as the comparatively low rank of the compilers of the new list<sup>44</sup> and from the extant descriptions of the completed work that the motives for the revision paralleled those of T'ai-tsung two decades earlier. The chief differences between the two works is to be found in their size and scope, in the exact correlation of official and treatise rank in 659 and in the omission in the later work of all but the immediate family of the individual ranked. These differences are presented in tabular form as follows:<sup>45</sup>

Title of Work	<i>Shih-tsu chih</i> (final form 638)	<i>Hsing-shih lu</i> (completed 659)
No. of <i>chüan</i>	100	200
Contents	293 surnames 姓 1,651 lineages 家	245 surnames 姓 2,287 lineages 家
Features	(a) Arranged by rank 等 (b) Imperial clan placed first, followed by the consort families. The Ts'ui	(a) Same. (b) Ranking reputedly decided by the emperor, who also wrote a preface. [The imperial clan probably occupied



Title of Work	<i>Shih-tsu chih</i> (final form 638)	<i>Hsing-shih lu</i> (completed 659)
	clan, which had originally ranked first, was placed third.	a special rank at the top.] In the first rank were placed the four consort families (Tu-ku, Tou, Ch'ang-sun, and Wu), <sup>1</sup> the imperial clans of Sui and Chou (Yang, Yü-wen), <sup>2</sup> the clans of those who had [in the T'ang] held the posts of <i>san-kung</i> , <sup>3</sup> of <i>t'ai-ssu</i> , <sup>4</sup> of <i>t'ai-tzu san-shih</i> , <sup>5</sup> of <i>k'ai-fu-i-t'ung san-ssu</i> , <sup>6</sup> of <i>p'u-she</i> . <sup>7</sup>
		Civil and military officials of the second grade (二品) and [active] civil officials of the third grade ( <i>chih-cheng-shih che san-p'in</i> ) were placed in the second rank. Every [other] official was ranked according to his grade.
	(c) A total of 9 ranks.	(c) Same.
	(d) Aim to distinguish <i>shih</i> 士 from <i>shu</i> 庶.	(d) Inclusion of all who had reached at least the fifth grade in the T'ang period. No relatives of the man ranked, except his brothers, his sons and grandsons, were included.
	(e) Greeted generally with approval.	(e) Since all who had achieved the fifth grade were elevated to <i>shih</i> 士 status, even soldiers, the gentlefolk ( <i>chin-shen shih ta-fu</i> ) were all ashamed to be ranked. They called the work the <i>Rule of Meritorious Service to the State</i> ( <i>Hsün-ko</i> ).
Notes	(1) An observation found in the <i>Comprehensive Mirror</i> , and in the old <i>T'ang History</i> , 189, 3578:1, biography of Liu Ch'ung.	(1) The respective empresses of Li Ping, Kao-tsu, T'ai-tsung, and Kao-tsung. (2) Referred to as <i>hsi-kung</i> and <i>chieh-kung</i> . (3) The posts of <i>t'ai-wei</i> , <i>ssu-t'u</i> and <i>ssu-k'ung</i> . In addition to the Imperial clan, members of the P'ei, Ch'ang-sun, Fang and Li clans had held one of the posts. (4) The heads of the Chancellery, Secretariat and Department of State which were second and third grade posts. (5) The Three Preceptors of the Crown Prince, who were all first-grade officials. Four men had held the post.



Title of Work	<i>Shih-tsu chih</i> (final form 638)	<i>Hsing-shih lu</i> (completed 659)
		<p>(6) An honorary official title of the first class.</p> <p>(7) The two vice-presidents of the Department of State Affairs. Six men not included elsewhere in the first rank would be found here.</p>

The substantive differences between the *Shih-tsu chih* and the *Hsing-shih lu* reflect as much as anything else a different tactical approach to an identical problem. As we have seen, the first work is said to have been greeted with aristocratic approval and, moreover, to have had as one aim the separation of *shih* and *shu*. Both of these attest to its traditional character, and the necessity for a marriage ban four years later suggests that perceptions of status were little changed by it. T'ai-tsung clearly was not anti-aristocratic, nor did he seek by the treatise to weaken or destroy the northeastern clans. He sought rather to woo them into direct service to the T'ang, but his openly indiscreet and hostile attitude and his arbitrary reduction of the Ts'ui clan's ranking could only have had the effect of polarizing the two sides. Moreover, since he decreed that the list was to be a permanent ordinance (*yung-shih*),<sup>46</sup> the proud clans of the Northeast would be forever inferior in the eyes of the state to those whom they regarded as the upstart clans of the Northwest.

The *Hsing-shih lu* was at once more conciliatory and more firm. Like its predecessor, it emphasized state service over family as a determinant of status but even more greatly stressed the individual over the clan. The truly important change lay in the fact, therefore, that heredity was no longer a factor in obtaining *shih* status and that any individual who reached fifth-rank officialdom needed no other qualification to be accounted a *shih*. At a stroke officeholding became more desirable and more necessary, and marriage into one of the great northeastern clans no longer held the same attraction for those who sought rapidly to raise their status.

At the same time, however, the olive branch of conciliation was held out to the Northeast with the collection and burning of all available copies of the *Shih-tsu chih*<sup>47</sup> and the elimination thereby of the clan superiority of the Northwest. Probably for the same reasons, the new work recognized the validity of marriage as status in the high ranking of consort families and removed the imperial clan from competition with the Northeast by creating a special rank for it. The Northeast, moreover, had produced its share of regional officials above the fifth rank<sup>48</sup> and, by providing most of the manpower for T'ai-tsung's Korean campaigns, had probably come to hold most honorific ranks. On these two grounds, its representation in the second work was, in relative terms, likely to have been better than in the first. Although the new list took even less account of genealogy than the old, on balance it was probably more palatable to the northeastern clans.

The same was true of the marriage ban issued four months later. This document forbade the intermarriage of seven surnames (*hsing*) and specified limitations on the bride gift.<sup>49</sup> Pragmatic and free of moralizing, it listed first



the Lung-hsi Li clan, thereby implicitly bonding the imperial family to the six greatest clans of the Northeast who made up the remainder of the list. It tied the bride gift to present official rank, thus providing additional incentive for the aloof clans to seek high capital office. In this way the ban was directed not so much against their economic base as against their exclusive marriage circle and the cohesion which fostered their sense of regional independence.

If this is the correct interpretation of the ban's purpose, and if it succeeded in drawing more of the northeastern elite to the capital, it would seem logical to conclude that there was no real need for enforcement of its specific prohibitions. As we have seen, traditional historians record that the response of the great clans was to marry secretly or to keep their daughters unwed, and recent scholarship has empirically demonstrated that this was indeed the case.<sup>50</sup> In spite of this, there is no evidence until after the Chou dynasty that the throne insisted on enforcement,<sup>51</sup> and the principal reason seems to have been that there was no need to do so.

From all we can gather, the two status measures of 659 seem to have succeeded in wiping clean the slate. By permitting a limited bride gift rather than outlawing the practice as T'ai-tsung had done, Kao-tsung and the Empress Wu were recognizing that the northeastern clans had at least a social claim to superior status. The *Hsing-shih lu* at the same time served notice that status would henceforth be tied principally and definitively to office in the T'ang. In comparison to the *Shih-tsu chih*, it was more in the nature of a *Who's Who* than an *Almanach de Gotha* and so acted as an invitation to the northeastern clans to diversify their claims and compete for status on the same terms as the other regional elites. The fact that the empress, considered by contemporaries to be an easterner and known to favor Loyang over Ch'ang-an,<sup>52</sup> was by 659 being seen almost as an equal partner in Kao-tsung's government, must have served as an additional attraction to the Northeast. It seems more than coincidence, therefore, that before Kao-tsung's death, all but one of the lineages specified in the marriage ban of 659 had provided the T'ang with a chief minister; and in the Chou dynasty the high proportion of these same surnames in *tsai-hsiang* ranks further attests to the success of her reconciliation.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, we might note in this regard the form of what seems to have been the last major attempt by the T'ang at status fixing on a nationwide scale, the *Hsing-tsu-hsi lu* of 714.<sup>54</sup> Though details of the work are scarce, it was altogether a more "professional" compilation than its predecessors<sup>55</sup> and, as much as anything else, reflects a general acknowledgment that the state had won the right to set the criteria of status. The proposal for its composition in 707 remarked, first of all, that "official families (*kuan-mien chih chia*) have changed, rising and falling. . . . Judgments of former times can hardly be used as a rule for the present."<sup>56</sup> Chung-tsung concurred, decreeing that a treatise of eminent clans (*yu-hsing*) be compiled to include "men of high repute and great virtue, of pure occupation and good breeding; [men] whose titles are inherited, of the standard of well-known scholars, whose bravery has been often demonstrated, who have received honorific rank, who are of supreme distinction at this court, and who are honored in court and countryside, their fame united with general admiration. . . . Barbarian chieftains of notable official service should be placed in a separate category."<sup>57</sup> The work was to be based on the *Shih-tsu chih* which seems, therefore, to have escaped total destruction and was completed in 200 *chüan*.<sup>58</sup>



Although it is sometimes suggested that this compilation reflects the "aristocratic revival" said to follow the deposition of Empress Wu, these surviving details seem to indicate that it resembled the *Hsing-shih lu* rather more than the *Shih-tsu chih*. Once again, for instance, the emphasis was placed on the individual rather than the clan, and once again it listed recipients of honorific rank and foreign chieftains--the groups whose inclusion in the compilation of 659 had led to widespread criticism. On this occasion we hear of no such protest and, as a result, might be justified in assuming that in the intervening seventy years, a principle had been successfully established. The *Hsing-tsu-hsi lu* was designed not so much to create as to identify present membership in the *shih* class.

In 714 success and reputation in the service of the T'ang were accepted as the sole criteria of eminence, and scholars, soldiers and "barbarians" were all eligible seemingly without reference to their antecedents. The fact that during the two generations which had passed since the *Shih-tsu chih*, status had come to depend more on office than on clan, on achievement rather than birth, represents a social change of truly grand significance.

It is perhaps the most important historical change for which Kao-tsung and the Empress Wu were responsible. They had done no less than redefine the ruling group, the *shih* class, changing its principal characteristic from "aristocratic" to "bureaucratic," and winning popular acceptance for the new view of societal stratification. One of Kao-tsung's chief ministers summed up the change when he retired from office in 683, reportedly remarking on the three disappointments he had suffered in his life: his failure to win the *chin-shih* degree, to marry a daughter of the northeastern *wu-hsing*, and to be a compiler of the National History.<sup>59</sup> The fact that he was the scion of one of the preeminent clans makes his preferences the more meaningful.

The means by which the change was wrought, most particularly the growth of the examination system, belong properly to the next chapter, but two other aspects of it should be noted here. In the first place, the changes which occurred in the ruling class were as much qualitative as quantitative. Second, and in a directly related process, the new, more highly bureaucratized *shih* began to show signs of melding with its former antithesis, the *shu*, to form a single class of subject in a more "modern" societal configuration. Under Hsüan-tsung the change was embodied formally in law.

To understand these two developments, it is necessary to return to the state registers of status. From the descriptions provided of the two works of the seventh century, it seems abundantly clear that the clans counted in the nationwide elite comprised only a miniscule proportion of the population and indeed as early as the Sung, traditional scholars had pointed out that they were really the elite of an elite, existing above a generalized, locally prominent *shih* class who were also exclusive in their marriages and able to claim both social and bureaucratic preferment.<sup>60</sup> As I already suggested, this situation is reflected only slightly in the state registers, with the clans listed in the *Shih-tsu chih*, for instance, comprising no more than .05 percent of the entire population.<sup>61</sup> Although the *Hsing-shih lu* increased its coverage to 245 clans and 2,287 lineages, the proportion was probably not much greater, and since status ranking was to correspond to official rank and there were over 16,000 *liu-nei* officials at the time,<sup>62</sup> this seems a situation difficult to explain. Even considering the nepotistic nature of the early T'ang bureaucracy, the majority of officials must have



gone unlisted, and from this indirect evidence, it seems reasonable to assume the existence of a much larger *shih* stratum whose lineage made them desirable as prospective officials, but whose social standing was still too low for the national standard of registration.

Until the discovery of the Tunhuang manuscripts, further development of this hypothesis was difficult. Several documents in various collections, however, have recently thrown light on the problem, though there remains a certain controversy over their exact interpretation.<sup>63</sup> These conflicts aside, they constitute an extremely valuable source.

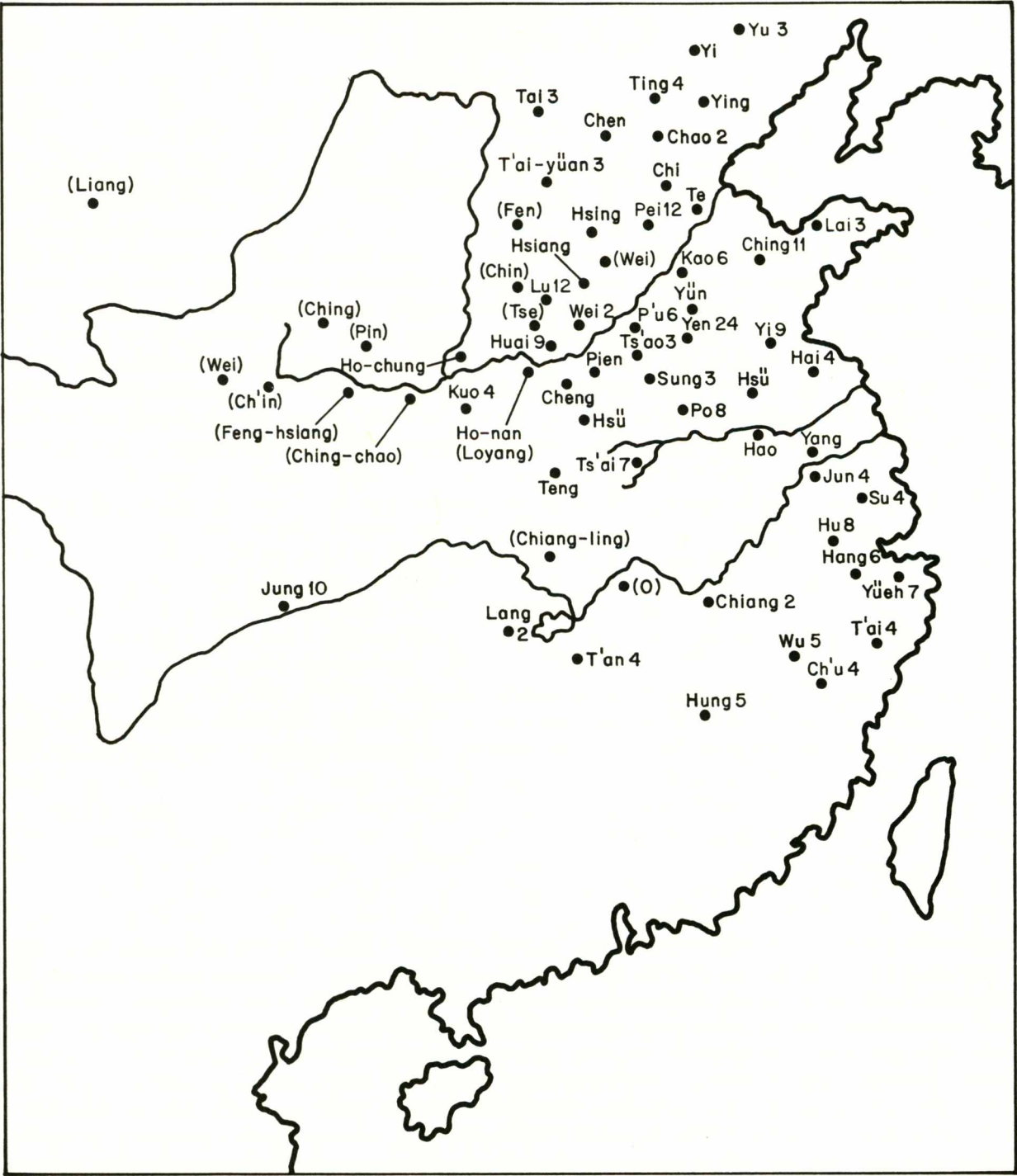
The documents in question, four or possibly five in number,<sup>64</sup> date from the middle of the eighth century and offer detailed information on those clans considered to possess social prominence in the various *chou* and *chiin* of the empire. Collation of them with later geographies and rhyme dictionaries<sup>65</sup> reveals the existence of a second level of *shih* lineages which was perhaps five times the size of the super elite of the *Shih-tsu chih*.<sup>66</sup> This configuration is the chief explanation for the form taken by social development in the second half of the seventh century.

Let me explain further. In the early T'ang, prestige, influence, and the perquisites of rule belonged to the *shih* class, but an inordinate share of social status was monopolized by a tiny, nationally renowned super elite concentrated east of the T'ai-hang Mountains. The following map, based on manuscript *wei* 79 in the Peking National Library, illustrates the regional disparity and shows the distribution of the aristocratic groupings identified by Liu Fang. As I suggested earlier, the northeastern clans were exclusivistic, proud and, largely through marriage practices, self-sufficient. Their concern with genealogy, clan solidarity and Confucian ritual was at least partly an attempt to remain distinct not only from the other regional super elites, but also from a wider stratum of local *shih* which aspired to the same heights. Provided the criteria of status remained unchanged, their security was assured.

The attempt begun by T'ai-tsung to equate status with present office, essentially a measure designed to balance rather than weaken the great clans, changed the situation. Whatever the failings of his policy, the emperor had at least recognized the use to which the local *shih* could be put, recognized their aspirations and their adaptability and thus, it will be recalled, had canvassed the genealogies of the entire empire rather than simply concentrating on the areas where the super elites were concentrated. Kao-tsung and Empress Wu had extended this principle in 659, attempting further to blur distinctions *within* the aristocracy while at the same time conciliating the alienated Northeast. For them the second part of the policy was of greater immediate importance, and until the 670s it reflected the need for unity, for acceptance on the part of an upstart dynasty, and for a cooperative Northeast to support the Korean campaigns. Imperial success in these aims was not total, but a good deal of evidence can be adduced to show that by Kao-tsung's death representation of the national elites was more balanced in the chief ministerial ranks than had been the case in the 650s and, as will be shown later, that they came to dominate such governmental organs as the Chancellery and the Board of Civil Office.<sup>67</sup>

During this same period, however, the bureaucracy was expanding rapidly,<sup>68</sup> and if the regional distinctions within the super elite were being diluted by their common bureaucratization, the group as a whole found itself pressured from





*Distribution of Great Clans During T'ang*  
Locations of *chou* with one or more great clans from Peking *wei* 79;  
locations in parentheses from Ikeda On's reconstruction from *T'ai-p'ing huan-yü chi*.



below by the inferior layer of *shih* lineages who were rising in the bureaucracy through examination and the decreasing imperial emphasis on genealogy. Having committed themselves to court politics and become vulnerable to their vicissitudes, the great clans found themselves on the defensive in the maintenance of the prestige they had so long monopolized. To compensate for their surrender to one form of definition of status in terms of state service, they seem to have responded by intensifying what they still monopolized, the purity of their Confucian tradition.<sup>69</sup>

When Kao-tsung died and the Empress Wu seized control of the government, they found themselves, therefore, in an impossible position. As representatives of the Confucian opposition to a woman ruler and as possessor of great political influence, they became the primary objects of the terror, and over the next decade hundreds of families suffered extinction or eclipse, in many cases taking generations to recover.<sup>70</sup> Though monographic studies on the subject are lacking, it seems safe to assume that the great aristocracy suffered a severe blow under the empress' regime and that had they clung more tenaciously to their regional bases, they might have attained a much higher rate of survival.

This, of course, lies in the realm of speculation and, in any case, it is difficult to see continued aloofness as a viable alternative for them. The message of the state registers and marriage bans was difficult to ignore and, as we will shortly see, from about the time of the examination reforms of 669, imperial recruitment policies were directed largely toward the provincial elite whose self-interest, traditions, and competence made them natural alternatives to the great aristocrats in the highest ranks of officialdom. Lest this group displace them by default, the latter were forced to respond to bureaucratization and, judging from extant lists of high officials, this was as true of the other regional super elites as of the northeastern *wu-hsing*. As we shall see, even the scions of great clans applied with increasing frequency for the state examinations.

These developments served, therefore, not only to initiate change within the aristocracy but also within the bureaucracy. By the Chou and thereafter, officialdom was not only growing but, in the lower ranks at least, its highly aristocratic character was becoming progressively diluted. The super elites, still well entrenched in high office, found themselves pressured from below by the lesser *shih* and at the same time subject to the systematic policies by which the empress attacked the upper ranks of the bureaucracy. There was no need for status registers and marriage bans between 659 and the end of the Chou principally because the great clans had been enticed into a larger and more "egalitarian" bureaucracy and so had ceased to threaten the state from a position of independence. Representative of the emerging pattern is Li Ching-hsüan who was a member of the eminent Chao-chün Li clan, entered the bureaucracy through recommendation, recruited "myriads" each year, mostly from the Northeast, as president of the Board of Civil Office married three times into the northeastern aristocracy, and was disgraced in 680. His whole family was later exterminated.<sup>71</sup>

The second major social change which occurred in the last half of the seventh century, the blurring of the distinction between *shih* and *shu*, was closely related to the policies discussed above and was equally the result of conscious imperial aim. Although the change was not completed until the *k'ai-yüan* period (713-42) and, although it is difficult to say whether T'ang policy generally or the special situation of the Empress Wu was a more important factor in the change, the end of the distinction may be viewed as an event which truly marked the end



to the "aristocratic" epoch.

Until the Sui dynasty it seems clear that the *shih-shu* division had had at least a quasi-legal basis<sup>72</sup> and, as we noticed earlier, T'ai-tsung's *Shih-tsu chih* had as one of its aims the preservation of the distinction. The *Hsing-shih lu*, however, embodied a major departure from this principle and had included in its rankings such groups as the recipients of honorific rank and foreign chieftains who were, in most cases, not of the *shih* class. And from 659 the policy of the throne seems to have sought further to erode the distinction. The principal tactic, as we shall shortly see, was the extension of the examination principle and the wooing of *liu-wai* officials, but after 684 we find a much wider range of specific measures designed to achieve the same end. Several edicts, for instance, called specifically for the recommendation of virtuous men, "whether *shih* or *shu*" to fill official positions, and in 685 talented commoners (*pai-hsing*) were given the right to recommend themselves for posts.<sup>73</sup> During the terror servants and even slaves were given the right to denounce their masters and to travel at state expense to the capital to make their reports, while in the great Khitan rebellion, slaves and convicts were permitted for the first time to enlist in the army and to be eligible, therefore, for the various military rewards.<sup>74</sup> These measures were of the sort responsible for what Professor Ch'en has termed the "social flux" of the empress' period but, generally, were measures of expediency and need not be seen as any more than the most striking examples of an evolving new perception of status dating at least from 659. A systematic analysis of the edicts of the Chou period shows that the term *shih* is almost invariably used in its bureaucratic sense, the connotation shifting from social class to official function.<sup>75</sup> Conversely, the term *shu*, which appears in edicts much less frequently than such terms as *min* or *pai-hsing*, is used for any person who held no rank in the official hierarchy.

The effect of this practice, which included the substitution of a distinction between "free" (*kuei* or *liang*) and "unfree" (*chien* 賤), was soon to be recognized in law and embodied in the *Code of the T'ang* (*T'ang-lü shu-i*) by 737.<sup>76</sup> It seems fair to say, therefore, that the regime of Wu Tse-t'ien marks a definite stage in the evolution of status perceptions in medieval China. In specific terms, it was the state status register she inspired, and her own edicts (*ling*) which were largely responsible for the creation of the simplified, two-level model of stratification upon which the *lü-ling* system of the T'ang was thenceforth to be based.<sup>77</sup>

In summarizing the role of the Empress Wu in the social change which occurred in her era, we must take care not to give her too much credit for acting consciously to achieve this end. While her unorthodox governmental role was clearly a catalyst, she remained in many respects typical of her times. In her regime we find the customary sumptuary regulations directed against merchants and artisans and at least one measure designed to limit the official advancement of such groups as astronomers, musicians, physicians and diviners.<sup>78</sup> We have seen how in 683 she took great pains to embellish her own genealogy, and on other occasions she was not above crude snobbery. Objecting once to the family into which her daughter planned to marry, she asked, "How can my daughter become the sister-in-law to farm girls (*t'ien-she nü*)?"<sup>79</sup> On several occasions she affirmed her belief in the hereditary nature of good and evil character and the effect of geography upon it.<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless she was a pragmatist before all else and because of her background, her Buddhism and her evolving dynastic aims, she was less inflexible than her predecessors in promoting the rise of worthy and talented men.



Finally, the direction of social change and status perception must be related to the most basic of the empress' aims, her attempt to establish first the T'ang, then the Chou in an age when regional and clan-centered traditions were paramount and when dynasties originated in the great clans. This meant that the status claims and the prestige of the super elites not only in the Northeast but everywhere had to be subordinated to those of the state. She and Kao-tsung together took the first step, following T'ai-tsung's lead, but the development of the policy, particularly the patronage of the examination system and the lower stratum of *shih* whose rise it fostered, seems to have been more her own policy than her husband's. This theme we shall discuss in the following chapter.

Once officeholding had become the *sine qua non* for achieved status and the road to high office had been opened more widely, the greatest clans found themselves on the defensive. They possessed, after all, no monopoly on talent. When they finally acknowledged state control of status by their rush to gain office, their invulnerability was ended. As already mentioned, from 684 onward so many suffered execution or the penalty of "eradication of name" (*ch'u-ming*) that entire clans were suddenly plunged into economic hardship and social obscurity.<sup>81</sup>

In spite of this, the empress' policies were not intrinsically anti-aristocratic. She was opposed only to those characteristics of the great clans which she saw as detrimental to state unity and to the full achievement of imperial power and administrative efficiency. In this opposition, however, lay the seeds of the conflict within the ruling class which would be so pronounced a feature of her own dynasty, and which would help to cement the changing perceptions of status which had evolved in the preceding decades. There is little evidence that her regime fostered the rise of any *new* class, but it did facilitate the advancement of an already defined secondary *shih* class and, perhaps of greater importance, it hastened the decline of the proud oligarchy whose monopoly of political power was the outstanding characteristic of post-Han China.