

your light and dispel our ignorance. And yet you put all your faith in the past and turn your backs upon the present, tell us of antiquity and give no thought to the state of the times. Perhaps we are not capable of recognizing true scholars. Yet do you really presume with your fancy phrases and attacks upon men of ability to pervert the truth in this manner? [sec. 10, 2:10a–b]

See them [the Confucians] now present us with nothingness and consider it substance, with emptiness and call it plenty! In their coarse gowns and worn shoes they walk gravely along, sunk in meditation as though they had lost something. These are not men who can do great deeds and win fame. They do not even rise above the vulgar masses.

[From *Yantie lun*, sec. 1, 1:1a–5b; sec. 7, 2:2b–3a; sec. 10, 2:10a–b;  
sec. 19, 4:10b — BW]

## THE REFORMS OF WANG MANG

Though a brief period of prosperity followed the relaxation of Emperor Wu's fiscal policies, the economic health of the nation gradually worsened. Corruption spread through the government from top to bottom. In spite of frequent recommendations for the limitation of land and slave ownership, land and wealth became concentrated in the hands of large official or merchant families. As the peasants were deprived of their land or lost it because of natural disasters, they went into slavery or formed bands of robbers. Government-maintained dikes and waterworks fell into disrepair, increasing the menace of flood and drought. It was when conditions had reached a critical stage that Wang Mang managed to seize power and attempted to remedy the situation by a series of sweeping reforms.

### WANG MANG: EDICT ON LAND REFORM

In 9 C.E. Wang Mang ordered the establishment of an equal landholding system based on the ancient "well-field" ideal. This involved the nationalization of all land, abolition of private landholding and prohibition of the sale of land or slaves. The attempt proved a failure and was repealed three years later. Subsequent proposals for solution of the land problem, which was a chronic difficulty in later dynasties, tended to follow along the lines suggested by these Han reformers, i.e., either simple limitation on landholding or outright nationalization and redistribution. Note how Wang Mang's edict follows the wording of Dong Zhongshu's memorial above.

The ancients set up cottages and wells with eight families to a "well-unit" (900 *mu*). One husband and wife cultivated one hundred *mu* of land, remitting one-tenth of the produce as tax. Thus the state enjoyed plenty, the people were rich, and the sound of hymns of praise arose in the land. This was the way of Yao

and Shun, and it was followed and continued by the Three Dynasties. But the Qin was without principle and increased the levies and taxes for its own use, exhausting the strength of the people with its inordinate desires. It destroyed the institutions of the sages and abolished the well-field system. Consequently there arose those who encroached upon the lands of the farmers, avaricious and vile men, the strongest of them measuring their fields in the thousands, while the weak were left without enough land to stick the point of an awl into. In addition they set up markets for slaves where people were penned up like cattle and horses. In handling common people and servants they usurped the right to punish even by death. Villainous and tyrannical men, with profit as their sole concern, went so far as to kidnap and sell men and their wives and children, profaning the will of Heaven, destroying human relationships, and perverting the principle that man is the noblest creation of Heaven and Earth. . . .

The House of Han lightened the tax on land to one-thirtieth of the produce. However, there were taxes for commutation of military service, which even the aged and ill had to pay. In addition, the powerful and rich families oppressed the people, allotting lands for cultivation to sharecroppers and plundering them by high rents for borrowed lands. Thus, though in name the tax was one-thirtieth, actually it amounted to one-half. Though father and son, husband and wife, year in and year out plowed and weeded, yet the produce left to them was not enough to support life. Therefore the rich, whose very horses and dogs had a surplus of meal and grain, grew arrogant and perpetrated evil deeds, while the poor, without even the dregs of grain to satisfy themselves with, were reduced to despair and turned to a life of crime. Both sank into wickedness, and punishments had to be used and could not be set aside.

Formerly, when I occupied the position of regent, it was my intention to nationalize all land and apportion it into "well-units" according to the population. At that time the empire enjoyed the portentous blessing of the double-headed grain, but because of the unfortunate occurrence of rebellions and banditry, I was forced temporarily to abandon my plans.

Now at this time let the term be altered and the land throughout the empire be designated "king's fields" and slaves be called "private retainers." Neither land nor slaves are to be bought or sold. Those families whose adult males do not number eight, but whose fields amount to more than one "well-unit," shall divide the surplus lands among their near relatives of the nine generations and the people of their townships and boroughs. Thus those who are without lands shall justly receive them according to this system. Anyone who shall dare to criticize the well-field system of the sages, or seek in defiance of the law to delude the populace, shall be cast out beyond the four borders to face demons and evil spirits.

[From *Hanshu* (BNB) 99B:9a-10a — BW]