

Suppression, Cooptation, or Empowerment: Empire and Elites in Early China

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Early Chinese empire grew out of the centralized bureaucratic polities of the Warring States era (453-221 BCE). These polities—most notably Qin, the eventual unifier of the Chinese world—were predicated on the elimination of autonomous foci of social power, especially those associated with the aristocratic elites of the preceding Bronze Age. The first imperial dynasty, Qin (221-207 BCE) was highly aversive toward the elites' power and did its best to subjugate the elites and even sub-elites to the bureaucratic apparatus. Yet Qin's heir, the Han dynasty (206/202 BCE-220 CE), retreated from excessive bureaucratic activism, creating a favorable space for the formation of the stratum of local magnates in provinces. As the magnates' power increased, the Han turned to accommodative tactics, coopting members of the magnate families into officialdom. In the short term this solution allowed a reasonable *modus vivendi* between the imperial court and the magnates, but in the long term it contributed to the profound change in the nature of the elite families on the one hand and their empowerment much beyond the imperial leaders' expectation on the other. In due time it was the excessive power of local elites that contributed decisively to the Han collapse and the empire's eventual disintegration. How to coopt the elites without over-empowering them remained the toughest challenge for the empire's custodians for centuries to come.