

Birth of the Chinese Empire: Han Dynasty Political Practices and Regionalism Threats

Liang Shao

Renmin University of China

Abstract

Scholars usually imply that the Chinese began to take a coercive universal empire for granted since the Eastern Zhou and Qin dynasties. However, by process-tracing and comparative methods, this paper analyzes relevant qualitative empirical materials and finds:

1 In early imperial China, the Chinese initially were not able to take a coercive universal empire for granted because the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas was the predominant tendency right after the Qin dynasty because of the regional subcultures and the territorial identities forming during the Warring States period.

2 Due to the restrictions on officials' native places implemented in the Western Han government, in the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates forming during the Western Han dynasty, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, which prevented the separatism during the Western Han and led to the predominant tendency of reunification during the disunited period before the Eastern Han dynasty.

3 Due to the restrictions on officials' native places implemented in the later dynasties, in the patron-client relations generally existing after the destruction of the medieval Chinese aristocracy during the late Tang dynasty, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, preventing the locally embedded elites from pursuing separatism.

Keywords: China; unification; empire; separatism; patron-client

1 Introduction

Unlike Europe, why Chinese “take for granted a coercive universal empire in China” (Hui 2005, 1)? Specifically, from 221 BC to 1911 AD, China kept repeated, durable, and continental-scale unification under the politically centralized administrative system (Ko and Sng 2013, 470-471; Scheidel 2009, 12-13), why? That great metahistorical question has attracted multi-disciplinary academic attention for a long time (Barfield 1989; Hui 2005; Ko et al. 2018; Lattimore 1967; Pines 2012; Turchin 2009; Zhao 2015a). As a critical part of that great metahistorical question, there is a diverge among scholars on when and how the Chinese began to take a coercive universal empire for granted.

Scholars usually imply that the Chinese began to take a coercive universal empire for granted since the Eastern Zhou and Qin dynasties. Specifically, during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, a series of political reforms brought the new sociopolitical institutions and contracts and new morals, greatly transforming the relations between elites, states, and ordinary citizens, and thus promoting the centralized unification in later history (Chang and Xu 2005; Deng 2012; Hui 2005; Kiser and Cai 2003; Sou 2013; Zhao 2015). Then, the unification of the First Emperor of Qin (r. 221-210 BC)¹ brought the economic, political, and cultural unification, such as “the standardization of script, currency and measurements” (Bodde 1986, 57-60; Chang and Xu 2005, 270; Pines 2013, 227) and the extension of “centralized administrative system of *jun* (prefectures) and *xian* (counties)” (Bodde 1986, 25, 54-55; Chang and Xu 2005, 274), laying “a solid foundation for the lasting unity of China proper”

(Pines 2013, 227), banding the whole people in the Qin empire into an ethnic or national entity, or at least making the political alliances throughout the geographical range of the Qin dynasty in later history easy to appear (Bodde 1986; Pines et al. 2013; Wimmer 2017; Yates 2001). Qin's harsh policies led to its rapid collapse (Hui 2005, 216-218; Wang 1949, 134). Then, the Western Han dynasty naturally inherited, revised, consolidated, and extended Qin's centralized administrative system (Chang and Xu 2005, 274-281; Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 57; Hui 2005, 219; Wang 1949, 135). In 106 BC, Western Han eventually reunited China under one centralized political authority (Chang and Xu 2005, 276). Then it kept centralized united over one century (Lewis 2007, 67). During the disunited period before the Eastern Han, the reunification of China was the predominant tendency (Fan [445]1965, 469; 是時海內豪桀翕然響應，皆殺其牧守，自稱將軍，用漢年號，以待詔命，旬月之間，遍於天下). After the Han dynasty, the Chinese accepted the imperial system of a single and unitary empire as a norm, and the warlords during the disunited periods were accustomed to fighting for uniting China by one centralized political authority (Hui 2005, 222; Loewe 2006, 3, 169).

However, some studies, such as Dull (1983), Lewis (2007), and Pines et al. (2013), imply that in early imperial China, the Chinese initially might not be able to take a coercive universal empire for granted because the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas might be the predominant tendency right after the Qin dynasty because of the regional subcultures and the territorial identities forming during the Warring States period. Specifically, several independent states coexisted over centuries during the Warring States

period, including Qin 秦, Qi 齊, Hann 韓, Wei 魏, Zhao 趙, Chu 楚, and Yan 燕 (Lewis 2007, 9-10), and those states hereafter referred to as “Warring states.” The distinct regional subcultures of and the territorial identities of those Warring states formed during the Warring States period (Lewis 2007, 42-45), serving as the source of the regionalism threat until the middle of the Western Han dynasty (121).

Therefore, this paper first explores whether the Chinese initially were not able to take a coercive universal empire for granted because the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas was the predominant tendency right after the Qin dynasty. If yes, this paper will explore the crucial causal mechanism that prevented the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas from 106 BC to the end of the Western Han dynasty and made the reunification of China become the predominant tendency during the disunited period before the Eastern Han dynasty. Then this paper explores the influence of the same mechanism on later history.

In the second chapter, this paper reviews the prior studies relating to the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas around the Qin dynasty and how the Western Han dynasty prevented the separatism. It then points out its hypotheses and the potential alternative explanations (Confucianism, the Chinese writing system, and the invasions of northern nomads). In the third chapter, this paper explains the logic of the methods (process-tracing and comparative methods) used in this paper. It also introduces its research design and the empirical materials used later. In the fourth chapter, this paper tests its hypotheses, discusses the influence of its findings on later history, refutes the alternative

explanations, and compares its findings with other published studies. In the final chapter, this paper summarizes its research findings and discusses their implications.

2 Literature review and hypotheses

2.1 The separatism of different regionally subcultural areas

The regional subcultures and the territorial identities of Warring states arose from the Warring States period and existed until the end of the Western Han dynasty. During the Warring States period (475-221 BC), the cultural differences and the “us-them” mentality among the Warring states arose (Lewis 2007, 42-45). At that time, people seemed to identify themselves as belonging to the different Warring states (Yates 2001, 358). Besides, people from the different Warring states recognizably differed psychologically, physically, and linguistically (Yates 2001, 358-359). Moreover, in archaeological findings, during the early decades of the Western Han, the cultural identities of different Warring states were still people’s most prior cultural identities (Yu [1999]2002, 184-185). Throughout the Western Han, the distinct regional subcultures, including the distinct dialects, of Warring states, still existed (Liu [1992]2005, 126-127).

Some studies imply that the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas led to the Qin empire’s rapid collapse. “Nationalist or regionalist sentiments seem to have been on an up-swing throughout the Warring States period and to have grown even stronger at the very end” (Lewis 2007, 46). “The predominant tendency of the late Warring States was toward sharper divisions between nations, and that countervailing tendencies were limited to a small segment of the intellectual elite” (Lewis 2007, 46). Then, “the administrative

uniformity imposed by Qin masked the fact that it remained one state ruling others, with a clear division between Qin and its recently conquered rivals” (Lewis 2007, 19). “Some scattered evidence to the persistent ‘banditry’ under the Qin Empire may testify to much stronger resistance of the local population to the conquerors than we currently know about” (Pines et al. 2013, 33). People’s pursuit of restoring “the old multistate world,” rather than Qin’s harsh policies, served as the source of “the political forces that tore the Qin empire” (Dull 1983, 316). During the process of the collapse of Qin, the leaders of rebels fighting against Qin “shared the common political aim of reestablishing the autonomous states that had been overrun, obliterated, and incompletely absorbed into the Qin empire” (Dull 1983, 300). Those leaders “availed themselves of a common desire to maintain old identities as ‘men of Qi’ or ‘men of Chu’ in order to develop their followings” (Dull 1983, 316-317), which “allowed state after state of the preimperial period to be restored by the anti-Qin forces” (Dull 1983, 317) and “produced the collapse of the first empire” (Dull 1983, 317). That was quite like the ethnic and nationalist wars elsewhere caused by the violation of ethnic self-rule (Wimmer 2013).

Some studies imply that China’s reunification under one centralized political authority might not be inevitable right after Qin’s collapse. “Qin’s rapid fall to the rebellious Chu in 206 BC, only fifteen years after it conquered the last Warring State, precipitated a debate about whether a unified empire transcending regional states was indeed possible” (Lewis 2007, 19). During the disunited period around the end of the Qin dynasty (209-202 BC), a unitary empire whose rule stood beyond all local loyalties and above all other authority was not the only way forward (Lewis 2007, 19; Loewe 2006, 37, 169). “China had a second

chance to restore a multistate system because surviving descendants of prior ruling houses sought to revive independence” (Hui 2005, 218).

Besides, some studies imply that the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas might hinder China’s reunification after the establishment of the Western Han dynasty. In the first several decades of the Western Han, many politically independent kingdoms coexisted with the imperial government, partly because the emperors conceded to the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas (Dull 1983, 317; Lewis 2007, 19-20, 67). In 154 BC, when the emperor tried to end those kingdoms’ political independence, a large-scale rebellion against the imperial government appeared (Chang and Xu 2005, 276; Lewis 2007, 20).

Quite interestingly, though the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas was once influential, during the two centuries between Sima Qian (ca. 180-110 BC, Wilkinson 2015, 626) and Ban Gu (32-92 AD, Wilkinson 2015, 626), the source of the regionalism threat changed significantly, from the regional subcultures and identities of Warring states to the locally powerful families and the wealthy merchants (Lewis 2007, 121).

Those prior studies seem to support the following plausible hypothesis:

In early imperial China, the Chinese initially were not able to take a coercive universal empire for granted because the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas was the predominant tendency right after the Qin dynasty because of the regional subcultures and the territorial identities forming during the Warring States period (that hypothesis hereafter referred to as “H1”).

2.2 How the Western Han prevented the separatism

A published nation-building theory benefits us to find the causal mechanism that prevented the separatism during the Western Han dynasty and made the reunification of China become the predominant tendency during the disunited period before the Eastern Han dynasty. According to Wimmer (2017), the relations that bridge “ethnic, racial, and regional divides” (1) “reduce the salience of ethnicity in politics, undermine support for separatism, make violent conflict and war less likely, and eventually lead citizens to identify with the nation and perceive it as a community of lived solidarity and shared political destiny” (1).

That kind of relations existed in the Eastern Han dynasty. At that time, the patron-client ties organized elites (Ebrey 1983). “These patron-client ties were created every time a man took on a teacher, accepted an appointment as a political subordinate, or received a recommendation for office by an official” (Ebrey 1983, 533). “Clients were expected to show loyalty to their patrons, mourning for them if they died and supporting them in political disputes” (Ebrey 1983, 533). Senior officials’ appointments and recommendations “were the primary means of gaining official positions” (Ebrey 1983, 540) until “the introduction of the nine-rank system of recruitment to office in 220” (542). Therefore, patron-client relations generally existed in the imperial government of the Eastern Han dynasty until 220 AD.

Moreover, according to the Eastern Han stelae surviving today, in those patron-client ties, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons (Ebrey 1983, 534). Because those patron-client relations generally existed, and in those patron-client relations, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, the political factions consisting of political elites from the same native place (Liu [1992]2005, 146-150) were hardly able to turn

into the force of separatism. It was quite like the influence of crosscutting cleavages elsewhere (Dunning and Harrison 2010).

Among those patron-client relations, the relations between senior officials and their subordinates formed during the Western Han dynasty. From the beginning of the Western Han, in the Han government, the senior officials could appoint their own subordinates (Yen [1961]1990, 108-109, 221-222). Besides, from 134 BC, the senior officials were asked to (from 128 BC, commanded to) recommend the talents in their jurisdictions as the new senior officials (Hsu 1965, 367-368; Zhou 2006, 102), including their subordinates (Hsu 1965, 369) who were recommended most frequently during the Western Han dynasty (Zhou 2006, 134). Therefore, the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates formed, in which the subordinates were loyal to the senior officials who appointed and recommended them (Zhou 2006, 135-136; 138-142).

Those relations greatly influenced society. They led to the formation and expansion of locally powerful families (the families of local elites) after the reign of Emperor Zhao (r. 94-74 BC) (Hsu 1965, 369-370). As a result, no later than the reign of Emperor Zhao and Xuan (Hsiian) (r. 74-48 BC), the senior officials were more willing to appointing and recommending the individuals born in the locally powerful families (Hsu 1965, 370). No later than 40 BC, the local elites in those locally powerful families “soon had such a firm grip in their home provinces, as well as a fairly strong voice at the imperial court” (Hsu 1965, 370). During the disunited period before the reunification of the Eastern Han dynasty, those locally powerful families led most of the rebel groups (Hsu 1965, 370; Yu [1956]1987, 237-243).

Therefore, during the Western Han dynasty, as long as in the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates, the elites were hardly able to turn into the force of separatism, the Western Han successfully prevented the separatism, and China's reunification had to be a predominant tendency during the disunited period before the reunification of the Eastern Han dynasty. Combining with the above mechanism of how the patron-client relations prevented separatism in the Eastern Han dynasty, the second hypothesized causal mechanism (H2) in this paper is as followed:

In the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates forming during the Western Han dynasty, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, which prevented the separatism during the Western Han and led to the predominant tendency of reunification during the disunited period before the Eastern Han dynasty.

Based on the prior studies, the potential alternative explanations of H2 are as follows:

“Confucianism”: About 140 BC, Confucianism became the “dominant political ideology” of imperial China (Zhao 2015, 262). Then the “symbiotic relationship between the ruling house and Confucian scholars” (Zhao 2015, 14) made China's centralized unification “resilient and adaptive” (14) and thus “survived numerous challenges and persisted up until the Republican Revolution in 1911” (14).

“Chinese writing system”: China's unified writing system overcame the obstacle of dialect difference and thus could enlarge the geographical range of political alliance that usually decides the range of nation (Wimmer 2017).

“Northern nomads”: Since the Han dynasty, the northern nomads often appeared as military threats and thus encouraged the collective actions in China proper, producing

China's repeated, long-lasting, and continental-scale unification (Ko et al., 2018; Turchin, 2009).

3 Method

3.1 Process-tracing

Process-tracing is a method that “looks for the observable implications of hypothesized explanations” (Bennett 2010, 208) to “establish whether the events or processes within the case fit those predicted by alternative explanations” (Bennett 2010, 208) based on Bayesian logic (Bennett 2015). According to “the logic of empirical testing in process-tracing” (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 100), “if we expected X to cause Y, each part of the mechanism between X and Y should leave the predicted empirical manifestations that can be observed in the empirical material” (100). Based on Bayesian logic, van Evera (1997, 31-34) classifies four types of empirical tests based on the uniqueness and certainty of the predicted empirical manifestations. Smoking-gun tests use highly unique but not certain predictions (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 103-104). For the smoking-gun test, “passing this kind of test greatly raises the likelihood that a hypothesis is true” (Bennett 2015, 279).

Therefore, this paper uses smoking-gun tests to confirm the existence of the mechanisms.

Operationalization of the Empirical Test on H1

A prior study claims that territorial identities did not exist during the Eastern Zhou dynasty because “people accepted ‘foreign’ rulers with little psychological aversion” (Zhao

2015, 107). Besides, the wars with the aim “to eliminate another state or to expand one’s territory at the expense of other states” (Zhao 2015, 243) prove the uniting trend in the Eastern Zhou dynasty (242-245, 252). Moreover, Europe kept divided because under the influence of nationalism appearing in Europe, “an invading army inevitably faced popular resistance in the form of noncooperation and guerrilla, which exponentially increased the cost of dominance” (Zhao 2015, 253). Combining with other prior studies, the highly unique prediction of H1 (P-H1) is as followed:

During the disunited period around the end of Qin (209-202 BC), comparing with the native rulers, the rulers from different regionally subcultural areas were more difficult to be accepted. Besides, during that period, the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas caused native people’s popular resistance, making it impossible to reunify China. Furthermore, during that period, compared with the territorial expansions within regionally subcultural areas, the successful territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas appeared much less likely and much more accidentally. Here, “territorial expansion” is defined as a ruler expanding the geographical range directly ruled by him.

Operationalization of the Empirical Test on H2

Based on the reunification process of the Western Han dynasty (Chang and Xu 2005, 276) as well as the formation and expansion of locally powerful families produced by the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates (Hsu 1965, 369-370), the highly unique prediction of H2 (P-H2) is as followed:

Before 106 BC, in some patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons. Along with the geographical expansion of Western Han's centralized political authority, that kind of relations geographically expanded. Besides, from Emperor Xuan's reign to the Western Han's end, that kind of relations generally existed.

3.2 Comparative methods

This paper uses comparative methods to validate the findings in this paper and to eliminate alternative explanations. Comparative methods are based on the logic of "Mill's methods of agreement and difference" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 82). Mill's method of agreement means after examining "all of the instances of Y" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 82), "all potential conditions that are not present in all of the cases are eliminated as necessary conditions" (82). Besides, Mill's method of difference means after comparing "two or more cases that have different outcomes" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 82), "conditions that are present in both types of outcomes are then eliminated as potential sufficient conditions" (82).

When using comparative methods, this paper compares different subunits within the same case and compares the different periods of the same case to make comparable comparisons (Lijphart 1971, 686-689). It also uses the most different system comparison (Przeworski and Teune 1970, 31-46) to compare with other published studies and uses negative cases (Mahoney and Goertz 2004).

3.3 Empirical material

In this paper, the ancient historical texts used are:

Shiji 史記 (Sima 1959; 1993a; 1993b; 1993c); *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* 大越史記全書 (Ngo et al. [1679]2015). They are all considered reliable historical sources (Wilkinson 2015, 625-626, 703-711, 786).

When using the modern secondary historical scholarships as empirical materials, this paper uses different historical scholarships relevant to the same historical period together, if possible, to increase the reliability and to avoid the potential bias in secondary historical scholarships (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 141).

4 Result and discussion

4.1 Test of H1

In the empirical materials, all parts of P-H1 can be observed, which means H1 is highly trustworthy. They are as follows:

Foreign ruler

Empirical materials prove that during the disunited period around the end of Qin, comparing with the native rulers, the rulers from different regionally subcultural areas were more difficult to be accepted.

When two warlords named Zhang Er (張耳) and Chen Yu (陳餘) were born in the regionally subcultural area of Wei (Sima 1993b, 131) but tried to occupy the regionally subcultural area of Zhao (Sima 1993b, 138), one of Zhang Er's retainers advised him:

“You two gentlemen have journeyed from another state and hope to win the loyalties of Zhao, but this is very difficult. Only if you set up the heir of the royal

family of Zhao and support your cause with the claims of justice can you hope to succeed.” (Sima 1993b, 138)

In contrast, the people of Wei collectively recommended Zhou Shi (周市), “a native of Wei” (Sima 1993b, 4), be the king of Wei immediately after Zhou Shi conquered there, though Zhou Shi was not “a descendant of the royal house of Wei” (Sima 1993b, 6, 147).

The first emperor of the Western Han (r. 202-195 BC), Liu Bang (劉邦)², was also a native of Wei (Chen 2011, 39-40). Unlike other places mentioned later, his direct occupation in the regionally subcultural area of Wei was quite easy and stable (Chen 2011, 73). After decades, during the large-scale rebellion against the imperial government in 154 BC, the kingdom located in the regionally subcultural area of Wei also stably stood on the side of the Western Han emperor and served as a crucial role for the success of the imperial government (Sima 1993b, 382).

After Liu Bang became the emperor of Han, to prevent the local elites from launching uprisings with the masses in their native places, he moved all the locally powerful and renowned families in the regionally subcultural areas of Qi, Zhao, Chu, Yan, Hann, and Wei from their native places to the regionally subcultural area of Qin, where the native population became very low after the collapse of the Qin dynasty (Sima, 1993b, 239-240). That policy was initially implemented by the First Emperor of Qin (Ch'in Shih Huang-ti) and inherited by the Han emperors until the Emperor Xuan of Han (Hsu, 1965, 361-362), especially “preceding or following plot or revolt” (367). Besides, Liu Bang made his sons and “brothers of the Liu family” be the kings of the kingdoms in the regionally subcultural areas that he could not occupy directly (Sima, 1993b, 268, 424). He also made an oath with his followers

that “if anyone not of the Liu family becomes a king, the empire shall unite in attacking him” (Sima, 1993b, 271, 378). However, those policies were insufficient to eliminate the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas. Otherwise, Liu Bang would have directly occupied those areas.

Popular resistance

Empirical materials prove that during the disunited period around the end of Qin, the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas caused native people’s popular resistance, making it impossible to reunify China.

When Zhou Shi’s army entered the regionally subcultural area of Qi after he conquered the regionally subcultural area of Wei as mentioned above, he had to retreat to Wei because he was defeated by Qi people led by the warlord name Tian Dan (田儼), who was a native of Qi and had declared himself as the king of Qi (Sima 1993b, 6, 197). Tian Dan then occupied the regionally subcultural area of Qi soon (Sima 1993b, 197). Moreover, after Tian Dan was killed in 208 BC, the people of Qi immediately set up a new native king to block the invaders from other regionally subcultural areas (Sima 1993b, 197-198).

In 205 BC, when warlord Xiang Yu (項羽), who was a native of the regionally subcultural area of Chu (Sima 1993b, 17), attempted to occupy the regionally subcultural area of Qi directly, Qi’s people fought collectively against Xiang Yu, which defeated Xiang Yu’s attempt to occupied Qi (Sima 1993b, 37, 199), like their collective resistance against Zhou Shi mentioned above. In contrast, when Xiang Yu sent his general to occupy the kingdom of Jiujiang (九江), which was located in the regionally subcultural area of Chu (Sima 1959, 775),

the soldiers of that kingdom instantly became the followers of Xiang Yu's general (Sima 1993b, 158).

Similarly, when Liu Bang tried to expand his territory, he also had to abandon directly occupying the regionally subcultural areas except for Qin and Wei many times because the people born there revolted collectively against his occupation, which made it hard to keep the political situation stable, unless the political independences of those the regionally subcultural areas were resumed (Chen 2011, 73-76). Therefore, it was impossible for Liu Bang to reunify China at that time.

Besides, the people of the regionally subcultural area of Qin initially collectively fought against Liu Bang's occupation, like people in other regionally subcultural areas. When Liu Bang first entered the regionally subcultural area of Qin in 207 BC, he had to fight against the collective resistance of the native people there, even after their general had surrendered (Sima 1993b, 102). At that time, though the Qin armies had known Liu Bang "wherever he passed, he forbade his men to plunder or seize prisons" (Sima 1993b, 61), they just "grew careless" (61) instead of surrender. Therefore, Liu Bang still had to take advantage of the Qin armies' carelessness to fight against them until he destroyed them (Sima 1993b, 61).

However, just two months after Liu Bang first entered the regionally subcultural area of Qin (Sima 1959, 773-774; 1993b, 61), an accidental event happened, which was that "the Chu army attacked by night and butchered over 200,000 soldiers of Qin south of the city of Xin'an (新安)" (Sima 1993b, 27-28; 154). That event made it hard for natives of the regionally subcultural area of Qin to band together and fight against invaders later, which was the goal of the Chu army:

“The officers and men of Qin are still very numerous, and in their hearts, they have not surrendered. If, after we reach the land within the Pass, they should prove disloyal, we will be in a very dangerous situation. It would be better to attack and kill them, sparing only Zhang Han, the chief secretary Sima Xin, and Colonel Dong Yi to go with us to invade Qin.”(Sima 1993b, 27)

According to the historical record, the Chu army achieved its goal. After Xiang Yu, the leader of the Chu army, entered the regionally subcultural area of Qin in 206 BC, he “massacred the inhabitants of Xianyang, burning the city and the palaces of Qin, and leaving destruction everywhere he passed” (Sima 1993b, 63-64). However, it turned out that “the people of Qin were filled with despair, but they were so terrified they had no courage to resist” (Sima 1993b, 64). That situation was greatly different from what Xiang Yu confronted in the regionally subcultural area of Qi in 205 BC, where he reproduced what he had done in the regionally subcultural area of Qin mentioned above (Sima 1993b, 37, 199). This time, it turned out that several ten thousand natives of the regionally subcultural area of Qi (most had been Qi’s soldiers before) banded together to fight against Xiang Yu, and Xiang Yu could not put down those rebels (Sima 1993b, 37, 199).

Xiang Yu significantly decreased the population in the regionally subcultural area of Qin, which still kept low even after Liu Bang became the emperor of Han (Sima 1993b, 239). It prevented Liu Bang from having to abandon his occupation in the regionally subcultural area of Qin under the collective resistance of natives, like the situation confronted by Zhou Shi in Qi mentioned above. Similarly, before Liu Bang was able to temporarily occupy the

regionally subcultural area of Chu in 202 BC, he killed at least 80,000 men of Chu (Sima 1993b, 74).

Nevertheless, after Liu Bang became the king of Han in 206 BC, it still took him over a year, until 205 BC, to defeat the warlord named Zhang Han (章邯), who was a native of the regionally subcultural area of Qin (Sima 1993b, 34). As a result, Liu Bang could eventually occupy the whole regionally subcultural area of Qin and raise a force of native soldiers to “man the various fortifications” (Sima 1993b, 68).

Taking advantage of the low population of the regionally subcultural area of Qin, Liu Bang moved over 100,000 persons from other regionally subcultural areas to there (Sima 1993b, 239). Therefore, it became harder for the natives of the regionally subcultural area of Qin to fight against the Han dynasty in the future.

Territorial expansion

Empirical materials prove that during the disunited period around the end of Qin, comparing with the territorial expansions within the regionally subcultural areas, the successful territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas appeared much less likely and much more accidentally. Specifically, though several warlords successfully conducted territorial expansions, Liu Bang was the only one who successfully conducted the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas. Besides, Liu Bang succeeded highly accidentally.

“Table by Months of the Times of Qin and Chu” in *Shiji* (Sima 1959, 759-800) is a detailed record of warlords’ successful territorial expansions around the end of the Qin dynasty (Sima 1993b, 87). This paper surveyed that table and gained Table 1 as follows:

Table 1 Count of successful territorial expansions around the end of the Qin dynasty

Promoters	Count of occurrences (Overall)	Count of occurrences (across subcultures)
Liu Bang	13	8
Tian Heng 田橫	1	0
Tian Rong 田榮	3	0
Xiang Yu	1	0
Zang Tu 臧荼	1	0
Zhao Xie 趙歇	1	0
Total	20	8

Note. Data source: Sima 1959, 759-800.

In Table 1, The column “Promoters” indicates the names of the warlords who promoted the successful territorial expansions. The column “Count of occurrences (Overall)” indicates the count of each promoter’s successful territorial expansions. The column “Count of occurrences (across the subcultures)” indicates the count of each promoter’s successful territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas. The time range is from the time when the rebels of Qin divided all the land of the Qin Empire in 206 BC (Sima 1959, 775;

1993a, 74; 1993b, 33-35) to the time when Liu Bang became the emperor of Han in 202 BC (Sima 1959, 796; 1993b, 75). It does not count the period before the Qin empire was divided because during that period, warlords had to join their strength and fight against Qin (Sima 1993b, 24, 147, 175, 176, 220), so they had not attacked one another frequently yet.

According to Table 1, there were six promoters of territorial expansions. Among them, only Liu Bang successfully conducted the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas. Moreover, he was also the only warlord successfully expanding the territory until the end of “Table by Months of the Times of Qin and Chu” (Sima 1959, 796-800).

Liu Bang’s successful territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas resulted from a series of highly accidental events.

First, as mention above, Liu Bang was able to occupy the regionally subcultural area of Qin accidentally. That place was crucial for Liu Bang’s success because it served as the source of his supplies during his battles against other warlords (Sima 1993b, 94).

Besides, the empirical materials indicate that Liu Bang’s motivation and ability to initiate territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas resulted from some highly accidental events.

Liu Bang’s officers and soldiers came from different regionally subcultural areas, and their desire to return home led to Liu Bang’s motivation and ability to initiate the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas (Sima 1993b, 65, 166, 175, 186). Similarly, Tian Rong, who had gathered up the remnants of Qi’s army and fled away in 208 BC (Sima 1993b, 197), “led his troops back” soon, and then occupied Qi (198). Moreover, Peng Yue

(彭越), who had gathered up the scattered soldiers of Wei before the Qin empire was divided (Sima 1993b, 149), also conquered over ten cities in the regionally subcultural area of Wei later in 205 BC (150). After that, he could also lead his troops back and forth in Wei to help Liu Bang cut another warlord, Xiang Yu's supply lines there (Sima 1993b, 71, 150), which was quite the same as the Spanish guerrillas cutting Napoleon's supplies (Hui 2005, 132). Besides, Xiang Yu also gave Chen Ping (陳平) "the followers of King Jiu of Wei who were in Chu" to attack the king of Yin (殷) (Sima 1993b, 117), whose domain was located in the regionally subcultural area of Wei (Sima 1959, 775; 分魏為殷國). As a result, the king of Yin surrendered (Sima 1993b, 117).

Liu Bang's profit (land) distribution without regionalism preference was why people from the various regionally subcultural areas were willing to serve and fight for him (Sima 1993b, 76, 106, 166, 222-223). However, Liu Bang's profit distribution without regionalism preference was a highly accidental outcome.

Initially, Liu Bang accidentally became willing to distribute profit without the regionalism preference. Though Liu Bang was a native of the regionally subcultural area of Wei (Chen 2011, 39-40), the betrayal of Wei's people against him in 208 BC (Chen 2011, 40-41; Sima 1993b, 56), an accidental event, made him abandon his intimate emotion on Wei's people (Chen 2011, 40-42; Sima 1993b, 56, 82), and let him have to rely on people born in other regionally subcultural areas to continue his political career (Chen 2011, 41-42). Besides, Liu Bang happened to be a refugee from the regionally subcultural area of Wei settling in the regionally subcultural area of Chu, which enabled him to have a social network

with numerous Chu's people and rely on them after that betrayal (Chen 2011, 39-40; Sima 1993b, 52-56).

Then, Liu Bang's profit distribution without regionalism preference was fulfilled well highly unexpectedly. Liu Bang's regime thrived rapidly, which was highly unexpected (Sima 1993b, 87). Because of Liu Bang's genius general Han Xin (韓信)'s merit which was "unparalleled in the world" (Sima 1993b, 178-179), Liu Bang's troops moved across almost all the regionally subcultural areas from 206 BC to 202 BC (Li 2000, 162-164). As a result, when Liu Bang became the emperor, the power elites in his military and regime included the natives from all the regionally subcultural areas (Li 2000, 166-168,172-175). In other words, the sequence of Western Han's elite absorption was initially relatively regionally impartial.

In contrast, Qin had implemented the profit distribution policies according to military merit (Sima 1993a, 92) since 359 BC (Sima 1993a, 24), which was the same as Liu Bang's profit distribution policies (Li 2000, 46). After more than a century, Qin eventually conquered the other six regionally subcultural areas one by one from 230 BC to 221 BC (Sima 1993a, 40-42). Therefore, the sequence of Qin's elite absorption was initially highly regionally unfair. As a result, after Qin's unification, Qin's discriminatory policies on the people of other regionally subcultural areas, its recently conquered rivals, appeared systematically, leading to Qin's rapid collapse (Wang 1986, 22-29).³

Other conquests without a regionally impartial sequence of elite absorption also caused regionalism discriminations. For instance, when the Qin army surrendered to people from other regionally subcultural areas in 207 BC, the discrimination of non-Qins against Qins appeared instantly (Sima 1993b, 27). Similarly, when the regionally subcultural area of Qi

surrendered to the Chu army in 205 BC, the Chu army “burned its cities and fortifications and enslaved its women and children until the men of Qi once more rose up in revolt” (Sima 1993b, 67). Moreover, when the city Waihuang located in the regionally subcultural area of Wei surrendered to Xiang Yu in 203 BC, Xiang Yu “ordered all the men over the age of fifteen to be brought to a place east of the city, where he planned to butcher them” (Sima 1993b, 42).

4.2 Test of H2

In the empirical materials, P-H2 can be observed, which means H2 is highly trustworthy. To be more specific, empirical materials prove that before 106 BC, in some patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons. Along with the geographical expansion of Western Han’s centralized political authority, that kind of relations geographically expanded. Besides, from Emperor Xuan’s reign to the Western Han’s end, that kind of relations generally existed.

Similar to Liu Bang’s policy of moving locally powerful and renowned families out of their native states (Sima 1993b, 239-240), during the Han dynasty, the imperial government implemented a restriction on the local senior officials’ native places, which prohibited them from serving in their native place (Yen [1961]1990, 345-349). That restriction appeared at the beginning of the Western Han dynasty and was strictly enforced continuously from the middle period of the reign of Emperor Wu to the end of the Han dynasty, except for the two disunited periods at the beginning of and the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (Yen [1961]1990, 358). Zhufu Yan (主父偃), who suggested the emperor make the kingdoms

smaller in 128 BC (Sima 1993c, 203-204) and died in 127 BC (Sima 1993c, 205-206), was the last person who did not have to avoid serving in his native place in historical texts (Yen [1961]1990, 347).

The specific content of that restriction is as follows:

Except for the three or fewer commanderies in the Han Empire's capital area, the local government senior officials were prohibited from serving in their native places. The senior officials of the provincial region (zhou 州) governments were prohibited from serving in the provincial regions where their native places belonged; the senior officials of the commandery-level (jun 郡) governments were prohibited from serving in the commandery-level administrative units where their native places belonged; the senior officials of the county (xian 縣) governments were prohibited from serving in any counties located in the commandery-level administrative units where their native places belonged (Yen [1961]1990, 357).⁴

Along with the restriction above, another restriction on officials' native places is that except for the capital area and the frontiers of the Han Empire, a senior official's subordinates should consist of people born in his jurisdiction only (Yen [1961]1990, 351-352, 353, 357). That restriction was strictly and continuously enforced from the beginning to the end of the Han dynasty (Yen [1961]1990, 352), except for the two disunited periods at the beginning of and at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (356-357).

Those two restrictions on native places were disclosed by a modern historian named Yen Keng-wang after surveying all the available native places of Han local governments' administrators in transmitted historical texts (Yen [1961]1990, 345). They were never

recorded explicitly before (Yen [1961]1990, 345, 357) and were verified by excavated texts later (Liao [1998]2005, 74-89).

Under the two restrictions on native places, the local government senior officials had to appoint the subordinates born far from their native places to continue their political careers (Hsu 1965, 369), which was quite like the situation confronted by Liu Bang right after Weis' betrayal. Moreover, similar to Liu Bang's profit distribution, there was no regionalism preference when local senior officials appointed their subordinates because they had to choose natives only.

Therefore, after 128 BC, when a senior official served in different places (Zhou 2006, 100), the elites born far from one another were appointed and recommended by the same person. Thus, in some patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons.

Along with the geographical expansion of Western Han's centralized political authority in 106 BC, the geographical range ruled by the senior officials appointed by the central government expanded (Chang and Xu 2005, 276). Therefore, the kind of patron-client relations mentioned above expanded geographically.

From 128 BC, since the senior officials were ordered to recommend talents, in each year, there were over 200 persons who were selected to be the new senior officials (Zhou 2006, 102). As a result, the length of time that the local government senior officials served in each place became shorter and shorter, which was averagely no more than three years from Emperor Xuan's reign (Zhou 2006, 98-104). Moreover, from Emperor Wu's reign to the Western Han's end, each senior official appointed more and more subordinates, about

500-1000 (Zhou 2006, 136). Thus, from Emperor Xuan's reign to the end of the Western Han, the kind of patron-client relations mentioned above generally existed.

4.3 The influence on later history

The same mechanism of H2 influenced later Chinese history greatly. Specifically, according to the empirical materials, in the patron-client relations generally existing after the destruction of the medieval Chinese aristocracy, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, preventing the locally embedded elites from pursuing separatism.

The importance of patron-client relations “declined with the end of the Later Han, and was not to be attained again until the late Tang” (Ebrey 1983, 541). After the Tang dynasty, the patron-client relations generally existed between the superiors and their subordinates in government and military (Hucker 1966, 45-46), among the examiners and examinees in the civil service examination (Elman 2013, 223; Hucker 1966, 45; Kiser and Tong 1992, 313-314).

Besides, from the Sui dynasty to 1911 AD, all the unitary Chinese empires implemented the restriction prohibiting senior officials from serving in their native places (Chen 1986). Usually, those senior officials' most subordinates were also prohibited from serving in their native places (Chen 1986). Therefore, in the generally existing patron-client relations, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons.

After the Huang Chao Rebellion (874-884 AD) happening during the late Tang dynasty destroyed the national elite coalition existing under the medieval Chinese aristocracy (Tackett 2014, 26, 187-234), the locally embedded elites filled the imperial government by civil

service examination, focusing more on the interest of their hometowns rather than the interest of the central government (Beattie 1979, 72; Hymes 1986, 127-128; Wang 2019, 55).

Moreover, their relatives became the local strongman with local power (Zheng 2008, 183-194). However, because in the generally existing patron-client relations, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, those locally embedded elites and their relatives were hardly able to turn into the force of separatism.

Ancient Vietnam is a perfect negative case validating the influence of the patron-client relations mentioned above. Ancient Vietnam had been a part of China for almost a thousand years (111 BC-544 AD, 602-906 AD; Wilkinson 2015, 15), which means it underwent all changes in China during those years. It was followed by a period over four centuries, from 939 AD to 1407 AD, when the elites born in Vietnam and in other places in the Chinese empires were not able to be loyal to the same patrons (Wilkinson 2015, 15). After that, when the emperors of the Ming dynasty invaded ancient Vietnam in 1407 AD (Wilkinson 2015, 15) and reoccupied there from 1413 AD to 1425 AD (Wilkinson 2015, 15), the local elites led the local masses' separatism wars against China's reunification widely and persistently for decades (Ngo et al. [1679]2015, 457-496), which eventually forced Ming emperor to abandon occupying ancient Vietnam in 1428 AD (Ngo et al. [1679]2015, 496-498).

4.4 Alternative explanations

“Confucianism”

That explanation fails to explain how early imperial China overcame its regionalism threat because the empirical materials indicate that Confucianism initially promoted the

separatism of different regionally subcultural areas by encouraging people's loyalties to native regional lords. Besides, because in the generally existing patron-client relations, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, the object of people's loyalties was changed from the native lords to the patrons coming from far away, stopping Confucianism from promoting separatism.

According to Confucianism, "the most important of all duties was loyalty," and "so deeply was this idea ingrained in official thinking that at times of dynastic overthrow servitors of the old dynasty might choose death rather than serve the new one" (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 68). For instance, in 202 BC, after Liu Bang had killed 80,000 Chu's men, he temporarily occupied the whole regionally subcultural area of Chu except for Lu (魯), Confucius's hometown, where the men were willing to fight regardless of death, to show their strict loyalty to their late lord, Xiang Yu (Sima 1993b, 47). The Confucius duty of loyalty still existed during the Eastern Han dynasty; the only difference was that the object of loyalty became the patrons of the patron-client relations mentioned above, in which the patrons came from far away (Zhou 2006, 112-114, 142-144). Thus, the Confucius duty of loyalty stopped promoting separatism.

As the negative cases, "East Asian countries of the old Chinese culture area," such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, were all guided by Confucianism during and after the Song dynasty (Fairbank and Goldman 2006, 62). However, at the same time, there was no "symbiotic relationship" (Zhao 2015, 14) between the Chinese ruling house and the Confucian scholars in those countries. Moreover, the historical figures in Vietnam even used

Confucianism to prove the ideological legitimacy of their separatism wars against China's reunification (Ngo et al. [1679]2015, 493-496).

"Chinese writing system"

That explanation is not able to explain how early imperial China overcame its regionalism threat because empirical materials indicate that the Chinese writing system could not naturally lead to the expansion of the geographical range of political alliances in Chinese history. Specifically, empirical materials indicate that some countries kept independent from China, though using the Chinese-character writing system. Classical Chinese "served as a lingua franca" in Korea, Vietnam, and even Japan for many centuries, and travelers from those countries could communicate with native Chinese by Chinese script directly (Wilkinson 2015, 55). Chinese character did not lose its prestigious position in Korea until the 20th century and in Vietnam until the 13th century or later (Wilkinson 2015, 56). However, after Korea and Vietnam "gained their independence from China in the tenth century" (Wilkinson 2015, 13), they remained politically independent until the colonial era (14-15), except for the several years when the Ming dynasty occupied Vietnam.

"Northern nomads"

That explanation fails to explain how early imperial China overcame its regionalism threat because the empirical materials indicate that during the Han dynasty, the Chinese became more and more willing to cooperate with northern nomads, which led to the consequence that after the Han dynasty, confronting the nomadic invasions, the Chinese

tended to surrender to the non-Chinese northern invaders instead of collectively fighting against them.

In 200 BC, the wife of the top leader of northern nomads, Maodun, told her husband: “Even if you were now to get possession of the Han lands, you could not occupy them” (Sima 1993b, 187). In contrast, around 87 BC, a person named Jin Midi (金日磾), who was of northern nomadic origin, even “become regent to a newly enthroned young emperor” of the Western Han (Loewe 2006, 76). Overall, as the Han dynasty’s reign continued, the preparation of the intermingling and assimilation between Chinese and non-Chinese nomads after 304 AD started (Fei 1988, 186). Around 235 AD, many Chinese people joined a regime established by Xianbei (a non-Chinese ethnic group) and taught Chinese skills and technologies to Xianbei (Holcombe 2013, 7-8). After 316 AD, non-Chinese nomads invaded northern China and established many non-Chinese regimes (Holcombe 2013, 10). However, confronting those nomadic invaders, “the Chinese defense efforts were essentially matters of self-preservation; there was no hope of driving the invaders away” (Ebrey 1978, 24), and “whenever brief periods of peace intervened, members of the Chinese upper class accepted appointments or titles from the new rulers” (24). As soon as the Xianbei regime Bei-Wei (386-534 AD, also called Northern Wei, see Wilkinson 2015, 729) was established in northern China, Chinese advisors and officials served in it (Ebrey 1978, 24). Later, Chinese locally powerful families tacitly supported the authority of Bei-Wei and were involved in Bei-Wei’s status hierarchy as the exchange of Bei-Wei’s “attracting numerous members of leading families into government service” (Ebrey 1978, 25) and “offering them positions of power and prestige” (25). Until 1644 AD, confronting non-Chinese northern invaders, the

Chinese still popularly surrendered and even helped them fight against other Chinese, such as Wu Sangui (Wu San-Kuei) and numerous Chinese army units helping the Manchu army conquer the rest of China after 1644 AD (Barfield 1989, 267).

4.5 Comparison with other published studies

The confidence in the causal mechanism of H2 increases because the mechanisms similar to H2 appeared elsewhere. Specifically, H2 is a mechanism in which the patron-client relations created cross-regional alliances that bridged regional divides. Similar mechanisms appeared in Senegal (Koter 2013) and India (Dunning and Nilekani 2013). In those two cases, the patron-client relations created cross-ethnic political alliances that bridged ethnic divides.

5 Conclusions

Scholars usually imply that the Chinese began to take a coercive universal empire for granted since the Eastern Zhou and Qin dynasties. This paper, however, finds that in early imperial China, the Chinese initially were not able to take a coercive universal empire for granted because the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas was the predominant tendency right after the Qin dynasty because of the regional subcultures and the territorial identities forming during the Warring States period. Specifically, during the disunited period around the end of Qin (209-202 BC), comparing with the native rulers, the rulers from different regionally subcultural areas were more difficult to be accepted. Besides, during that period, the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas caused native people's popular resistance, making it impossible to reunify China. Furthermore, during that period, compared with the territorial expansions within regionally subcultural areas, the successful

territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas appeared much less likely and much more accidentally. Though several warlords successfully conducted territorial expansions, Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han dynasty, was the only one who successfully conducted the territorial expansions across regionally subcultural areas, resulting from a series of highly accidental events.

Besides, due to the restrictions on officials' native places implemented in the Western Han government, in the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates forming during the Western Han dynasty, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, which prevented the separatism during the Western Han dynasty and led to the predominant tendency of reunification during the disunited period before the Eastern Han dynasty. Specifically, the Western Han government implemented two restrictions on its officials' native places. One restriction prohibited its local senior officials from serving in their native places. The other restriction prohibited its local senior officials from recruiting their subordinates out of their jurisdictions. Under those two restrictions, before the Western Han eventually reunited China under one centralized political authority, in some patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons. Along with the geographical expansion of Western Han's centralized political authority, that kind of relations geographically expanded. Besides, that kind of relations generally existed from Emperor Xuan's reign to the Western Han's end, when the locally powerful families produced by the patron-client relations between senior officials and their subordinates formed, expanded, and then greatly influenced the society.

Moreover, due to the restrictions on officials' native places implemented in the later dynasties, in the patron-client relations generally existing after the destruction of the medieval Chinese aristocracy during the late Tang dynasty, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, preventing the locally embedded elites from pursuing separatism.

This paper then refutes several alternative explanations of how early imperial China overcame its regionalism threat. Confucianism initially promoted the separatism of different regionally subcultural areas by encouraging people's loyalties to native regional lords. Because in the generally existing patron-client relations, the elites born far from one another were loyal to the same patrons, the object of people's loyalties was changed from the native lords to the patrons coming from far away, stopping Confucianism from promoting separatism. The Chinese writing system could not naturally lead to the expansion of the geographical range of political alliances in Chinese history since some countries kept independent from China, despite using the Chinese-character writing system. During the Han dynasty, the Chinese became more and more willing to cooperate with northern nomads, which led to the consequence that after the Han dynasty, confronting the nomadic invasions, the Chinese tended to surrender to the non-Chinese northern invaders instead of collectively fighting against them.

Though the above findings were not able to sufficiently explain the great metahistorical question at the beginning, they matter to that question. First, they show that during early imperial China, Chinese were initially not able to "take for granted a coercive universal empire in China" (Hui 2005, 1) without overcoming the separatism of different regionally

subcultural areas because of the regional subcultures and the territorial identities forming during the Warring States period. Besides, they show how early imperial China overcame the above regionalism threat and thus made the Chinese begin to take a coercive universal empire for granted. Finally, they show how imperial China preventing the locally embedded elites from pursuing separatism after the late Tang dynasty. Overall, since this paper shows that the regionalism threat was once an unavoidable barrier to China's unification, its findings are necessary to the above great metahistorical question.

The above findings also theoretically contribute to the nation-building theory. According to Wimmer (2017), the relations that bridge "ethnic, racial, and regional divides" (1) during the premodern era were crucial to the current nation-building issue. This paper's findings are theoretically significant because they show the process of how the above relations were created in early imperial China.

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Notes

¹ See Qin (221-206 BC), Han (202 BC-8 AD, 25-220 AD), and Xin (9-23 AD) emperors' titles and reign time in Loewe's (2006, 202) study.

² Liu Bang, also known as "Gaozu" (Sima 1993b, 51), "Liu Ji" (Sima 1993b, 51) and "the governor of Pei" (Sima 1993b, 56), was set up as king of Han in 206 BC (Sima 1993b, 34) and became the emperor of Han in 202 BC (Sima 1993b, 75).

³ That means Qin's discriminated policies on its new conquerors were a consequence endogenous to its regionally unfair sequence of elite absorption during its unification process. It disproves the claim that the collapse of Qin was easily avoidable (Sima 1993a, 81-83; 1993b, 227).

⁴ See more about the Han Empire's administrative units in Loewe's (2006, 37-55, 197-201) study.

