

The Characteristics and Evaluations of Wang Mang's Reforms

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Abstract. Reform is a crucial response for states when facing challenges. Chinese history records many rounds of reforms. Particular scholarly attention should be given to the reforms of Wang Mang. This paper focuses on the characteristics and evaluations of it. In an effort to alleviate the serious social problems that had long persisted during the Western Han Dynasty, Wang Mang introduced one of the most extensive and highly controversial reform programs in Chinese history over the fifteen-year existence of the Xin Dynasty. Confucian ideology forms the core foundation of Wang Mang's reform logic, and thus he sought to restore social and political order by reviving ancient institutions. His reforms covered economic reform, political adjustment and social governance. However, most of these measures could not be put into real practice smoothly. Their mismatch with contemporary conditions and poor implementation contributed to the failure of the reforms. The idealistic and archaic orientation of reforms was the ultimate cause of failure. Wang Mang's reform still exerts far-reaching historical influence. The evaluations of it are diverse. Wang Mang's reforms left a lasting legacy, providing enduring lessons for understanding state-led institutional change throughout Chinese history.

Keywords: Wang Mang's Reforms, Wang Mang, Xin Dynasty

1. Introduction

Reform has always been a significant tool for state governance, whether in ancient dynasties or modern countries. Reforms help to deal with changes in productive forces and social needs. It is necessary to explore the past reforms. They can provide insight for later generations into historical and modern socio-political transformation. As one of the most famous reforms in Chinese history, Wang Mang's reforms are known for their broad scope, complexity, and controversies.

By the late Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE), social tensions had become increasingly severe. Wang Mang established the Xin Dynasty in 9 CE to solve the above problems. He proposed a number of reforms after he took power. However, his reforms ultimately failed and worsened the existing divisions among disparate groups of people, causing the rapid collapse of the Xin Dynasty and his own death.

Although scholarship has been devoted to Wang Mang's reforms, most existing studies focus only on specific areas. Common research objects include the newly issued currency system, bans on slave transactions and land redistribution measures. Comprehensive evaluations of Wang Mang's reforms

as an integrated system remain relatively limited. What were the key components of Wang Mang's reforms? How should Wang Mang's reforms be evaluated? These questions will be reconsidered in what follows. This paper takes a systematic perspective to examine Wang Mang's reforms, aiming to present a more objective evaluation of his reforms. Moreover, Wang Mang's reforms can act as a classic case study for understanding China's land system. How Confucian thought was put into real practice in ancient times can also be observed.

2. The characteristics of Wang Mang's reforms

Wang Mang's reforms refer to a series of changes implemented by Wang Mang and his political supporters in the areas of economic institutions, political structures, and social customs. The archaic orientation stood out above all. Institutional systems and social order were sought to be reconstructed on the basis of Confucian classics, a practice commonly described as restoring antiquity to reform the present. The question that naturally follows is this: what are the specific historical facts regarding the reforms?

2.1. Historical background

The Xin Dynasty, positioned between the Western Han and Eastern Han dynasties, was a brief but highly controversial regime in Chinese history. Despite lasting only fifteen years, the large-scale reforms implemented by its founder, Wang Mang, left a profound impact on Chinese history. These reforms were strongly influenced by the Confucian ideals of the time.

By the time of Wang Mang, the influence of Confucianism had expanded beyond the ideological foundation of imperial governance to an almost quasi-religious authority in society [1]. Raised in such an environment, Wang Mang was deeply shaped by Confucian thought. As recorded in the *Hanshu* (Book of Han), Wang Mang studied *Liji*, one of the Confucian classics, from an early age. He consistently modeled his behavior on Confucian ethical principles, such as practicing frugality and personally attending to his sick elder by tasting medicine, demonstrating the virtue of filial piety [2]. What shaped the archaic characteristics of his later reforms was this educational background.

Wang Mang's family background laid the foundation for his rise to power and subsequent reforms. His aunt, Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun, was the wife of Emperor Yuan of Han and the mother of Emperor Cheng of Han. At the same time, providing an important historical context for Wang Mang's rise and reforms was the long-term accumulation of social contradictions in the late Western Han period. Since the mid-Western Han period, land concentration had become an increasingly severe social problem. As peasants lost access to land, many were forced to migrate or into slavery. The gap between rich and poor widened, resulting in intensifying class tensions [3].

In addition to frequent natural disasters and government corruption, dissatisfaction with the Han regime steadily grew. Against this backdrop, Wang Mang seized the throne in 9 CE. He founded the Xin Dynasty. He rolled out a series of institutional reforms.

2.2. The reformer

A pronounced character of Zhou-archaizing imitation was exhibited by Wang Mang and his reform group, with their ideological core being rooted in Confucianism. Both Wang Mang himself and the official class had long been influenced by Confucian education and the ideals of *Zhouli*. After acquiring political power, they naturally sought to restore ancient institutions to reconstruct an idealized social order. Meanwhile, Wang Mang and his team also demonstrated strong idealism. So

firmly were they convinced of the restorative power of ancient institutions and ritual order that they considered it sufficient to resolve the social crisis of the time.

2.3. Key reform measures

It is notable that Wang Mang's reforms were characterized by both a comprehensive scope and a strong revivalist orientation. Drawing upon Confucian classics and ancient institutions, he introduced a series of reforms that affected economic, political, and social structures. The major reform measures discussed in this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Major reform measures of Wang Mang's reforms

Categories	Areas of Reform	Major Contents
Economic reforms	Land reform	Land restriction and redistribution
	Currency reform	Monetary system restructuring
	Five equalizations and six controls	Government market regulation and revenue enhancement
	Prohibition of private slave trading	State labor resource reintegration
Political reforms	Administrative reorganization	Strengthening of central authority and administrative control
	Frontier policy adjustments	Central-frontier hierarchy reinforcement
Social reforms	Standardization of weights and measures	Establishment of uniform standards

2.3.1. Economic reforms

Wang Mang's economic reforms included land reform, currency reform, and regulatory policy reform.

The first major reform implemented after Wang Mang took the throne was the Wangtian system, a state land ownership system promulgated in the founding year of the Xin Dynasty (9 CE). In this reform, all land was nationalized, and private buying and selling of land was prohibited. Families with fewer than eight adult males but possessing more than 900 mu (approximately 60 hectares) of land were required to redistribute the excess to relatives or neighbors. In terms of ideological origins, the system drew on earlier concepts of land limitation and adopted the name of the ancient Zhou "well-field system" (Jingtian Zhi), reflecting its archaic imitation of Zhou institutions. Similar land-limitation proposals had been made during the earlier reigns of Emperor Wu and Emperor Ai of Han, but they were never implemented due to opposition from aristocratic and consort clans. Like these former policies, the Wangtian system failed to be effectively enforced. After its promulgation, it quickly revealed serious practical problems. Due to the lack of clear, enforceable regulations, large areas of land remained under the control of landowning elites. At the same time, land transactions had long-established economic inertia, which led to widespread resistance during implementation. Only three years after its introduction was the system abolished, in the fourth year of the Xin Dynasty.

Alongside land reform, Wang Mang also introduced extensive adjustments to the monetary system. The first currency reform took place in 7 CE, before Wang Mang formally declared himself emperor. In this reform, drawing on the Zhou dynasty concept of "Zimu Xiangquan," Wang Mang minted three new coins, Cuodao, Qidao, and Daquan, and circulated them with the long-established Wuzhu coins of the Han dynasty. He constructed a political atmosphere of archaic restoration and

simultaneously laid an economic foundation for his usurpation. This relied on the sharp gap between nominal and intrinsic value. Although these new coins were only slightly heavier than the Wuzhu coins, their value was far higher than their intrinsic value. This meant that during the transition from the old to the new currency, Wang Mang was able to collect large quantities of Wuzhu coins from the population [4]. The second monetary reform occurred in 9 CE. Wang Mang replaced the old coins with Daqian and Xiaoqian coins. This reform carried clear political symbolism. Abolishing Wuzhu coins and even currencies exchangeable for them served to weaken public identification with the Han regime. In 10 CE, Wang Mang introduced a more extensive and complex third monetary reform, the Baohuo system, also known as the "Five Materials, Six Categories, Twenty-Eight Types" system. Due to the excessive number of coin types and the system's complexity, the Baohuo system significantly disrupted common transactions. The failure of the third reform ultimately led to the fourth currency reform in 14 CE. Wang Mang abolished gold, silver, tortoise shell, and cowrie shell currency, retaining only two types of copper coins: Huobu and Huoquan. In just eight years, Wang Mang implemented four major currency reforms.

The "Five Equalizations and Six Controls" (Wujun Liuguan) system was another important regulatory policy in Wang Mang's economic reform. Its name and theoretical basis were also derived from the Confucian classics *Liyue* and *Zhouli*. The "Five Equalizations" referred to the establishment of Five Equalization Market Superintendents in major cities, where the government directly regulated market transactions, commercial activities, and price levels. The "Six Controls" referred to state monopolies over salt, iron, and wine, as well as taxation on the production of natural resources such as mountains, forests, lakes, and marshes. The "Five Equalizations and Six Controls" system inherited and developed the state intervention policies of commerce and industry from Emperor Wu of Han. Its core purpose was to strengthen state control over markets and key resources, increase fiscal revenue, and restrict the overaccumulation of wealth by merchants.

2.3.2. Political reforms

In the political sphere, Wang Mang's reforms mainly included the prohibition of slave trading, administrative reorganization, and adjustments in relations with neighboring ethnic groups.

In 9 CE, at the same time as the promulgation of the Wangtian system, Wang Mang also prohibited private slave trade. This policy likewise targeted the serious social contradictions of the late Western Han period. The issue of slaves was closely related to land concentration. As land was concentrated in the hands of a few families, many peasants who had lost their land were displaced and forced to become migrant laborers. Most of these migrants were further reduced to private slaves for rich landowners. As these slaves were often not officially registered in the state household system, the growing number of privately owned slaves reduced the labour force and the taxable base for the state, thus lowering fiscal revenue and agricultural output. In fact, since the mid-Western Han Dynasty, the court has continuously given attention to the problem of slaves and tried to impose restrictions. Wang Mang drew experience from previous relevant practices. He aimed to adjust the legal status of enslaved people. He planned to register these people under official national household records again. This policy measure could replenish the workforce needed for farming activities.

According to the *Hanshu*, from the Western Han period to the time of Emperor Ping, there were a total of 103 commandery-level entities, and 1,314 counties and settlements nationwide. On this basis, Wang Mang reformed the division of administrative areas and toponymy, expanding it to 125 commanderies and over 2,200 counties and settlements. Its core objective was to weaken the autonomy of local officials and to strengthen the central government's control over both inland and frontier governance. This institutional arrangement rebuilt the national governance framework from

a system perspective [5]. Indeed, the reorganization of administrative divisions was another important component of Wang Mang's political reforms. In parallel, Wang Mang also reduced and restructured the noble rank system. By reintegrating some former meritorious officials and local powerbrokers into the political system of the new regime, and coordinating this with the redistribution of land and noble titles, the old military and administrative systems were transformed into a component of the Xin dynasty's ruling network. An imperial power-centered control system at the organizational level was strengthened.

Wang Mang also carried out systematic adjustments to relations with neighboring ethnic groups, departing from the relatively flexible approach that had characterized interactions between the Han court and neighboring peoples previously. Drawing on Confucian ideals, he reconstructed a Huaxia-centered political order, emphasizing political unity and the distinction between the Huaxia and non-Huaxia peoples. He applied these ideas to frontier administration and foreign relations. By adjusting the titles granted to certain frontier leaders, He lowered their noble rankings. This arrangement highlighted the clear hierarchy [6].

2.3.3. Social reforms

Wang Mang's social reform was primarily reflected in the standardization of measurement systems and tools.

Wang Mang, in the name of restoring ancient institutions, undertook a systematic reconstruction of existing standard system. He recruited more than 100 scholars knowledgeable in musical theory and pitch standards, and under the guidance of the well-known scholar Liu Xin, organized a large-scale project to study and standardize systems of pitch, weights and measures. This undertaking extended beyond the unification of musical standards to encompass astronomy, calendrical science, and systems of weights and measures [7].

Against the backdrop of intensifying social tensions in the late Western Han period, Wang Mang and his reform group introduced a series of reforms based on Confucianism to restructure society. The above measures included land redistribution, currency reform, economic regulation, the prohibition of slave trade, administrative organization, adjustments to frontier policy and standardization of weights and measures. However, because many of these policies were detached from contemporary realities, they proved difficult to implement effectively and ultimately intensified social tensions. A balanced assessment of the outcomes of Wang Mang's reforms is necessary.

3. The evaluations of Wang Mang's reforms

3.1. Contemporary impacts

Overall, Wang Mang's reforms were generally viewed as failures. Although the intention behind his reforms was to help with the social turmoil of the late Western Han period by reorganizing the administrative structure, the policies proposed were unrealistic and were attempted to be implemented through very extreme and unorthodox means, without enough political or social backing.

Wang Mang's land and slave policies were intended to address long-standing issues of the Western Han. However, in reality, they provoked strong resistance from both landowners and landless peasants classes. The frequent and complex currency replacements of the monetary reform severely disrupted the economic order, hindering transactions and increasing administrative burdens

[8], and brought problems such as private coinage, inflation, and currency depreciation, resulting in bankruptcies, unemployment, and intensified social unrest [9]. As for commercial regulation, the "Five Equalizations and Six Controls" system had certain theoretical merits, yet under the corrupt political environment of the late Western Han, it was instead exploited by officials and wealthy merchants to oppress ordinary people. Adjustments in relations with neighboring ethnic groups led to frequent wars and provoked the peasant uprisings that led to the fall of the Xin Dynasty.

Some of Wang Mang's initiatives still had achieve limited success. At that time, Wang Mang reformed the administrative system and centralized state power. In terms of influence upon later generations, the standardization of weights, measures, and calendrical systems was later incorporated into the *Hanshu*, serving as an essential reference for research on the ancient Chinese system of weights and measures.

3.2. Historical evaluations

3.2.1. The failure of the reform

Historians generally view Wang Mang's reforms as failed because of the rapid collapse of the Xin Dynasty after only 15 years of existence and its inability to address social issues.

Specifically, Wang Mang introduced an excessive number of reforms within a short period, leaving social groups in constant uncertainty and disruption. Meanwhile, many of his policies lacked consistency and were frequently revised, which led to inefficient implementation. Wang Mang underestimated the complexity of implementing such large-scale reforms and relied excessively on administrative decrees and harsh penalties. For example, the Wangtian system aimed to restrict the concentration of land by means of state intervention, but due to the power of landowning elites and the impracticality of the system itself, it could not be effectively enforced.

Of special significance is the influence of their strong idealistic and archaic orientation. Many scholars argue that it is the fundamental cause of the failure of Wang Mang's reforms. The realities of social and economic development were neglected, while attempts were made to solve contemporary problems through the restoration of ancient institutions. The attempt to regulate society according to an idealized vision of ancient institutions was unrealistic and went against the general direction of history. Wang Mang's reforms were less effective in restoring the ideal social order he envisioned, but they were much more destructive to existing systems of production and economic activity [10].

3.2.2. Diverse perspectives

Wang Mang's reforms have sparked intense debate among historians, and evaluations of them have also varied over time. Therefore, this article categorizes multiple perspectives on the evaluations.

Most of the traditional historiography considered Wang Mang in bad light due to his usurpation of the Han Dynasty and the subsequent collapse of the Xin Dynasty. Many historians believe that he was a political opportunist and usurper who came to power by manipulation. They thought that his call to restore old institutions was, in fact, an effort to halt social progress. Some scholars have also pointed out that Wang Mang's economic and political reforms were for his own enrichment rather than the benefit of the people, and that he used propaganda and self-presentation to consolidate his power by extracting resources from the population [11].

Entering the modern era, as Western ideas were introduced into China, traditional perspectives were challenged. Prompting scholars like Hu Shi and Gu Jiegang were among the first to reexamine

Wang Mang's reforms. The exclusively negative judgments were transcended, with attention shifted to the social ideals and institutional experimentation embedded in Wang Mang's policies. Hu Shi, for instance, characterized Wang Mang as a "socialist," viewing his land and economic measures as an early form of socialist practice. A group of scholars who adopt Marxist research perspectives also treat Wang Mang as a reformer striving to ease class conflicts and redistribute resources. In this light, Wang Mang was seen as a politician whose aspirations outstripped his time, even hailed as one of the few statesmen in Chinese history with lofty political visions. Yet this revisionist wave has drawn considerable criticism too. Labeling Wang Mang a socialist or a modern-style reformer is contended by many researchers to impose anachronistic frameworks onto ancient realities. They argue that parallels between his policies and modern institutions are reductive and overstate their progressive nature, while neglecting policy failures and social unrest.

It is necessary to assess the merits and shortcomings of Wang Mang's reforms more fairly and in context. It is well-known that, when faced with the problems of social and class conflict in the late Western Han Dynasty, Wang Mang attempted to solve these problems by means of institutional reform, and some of his policies addressed real social issues. However, the fact that many of his policy designs drew from earlier intellectual traditions and reform proposals revealed their lack of entirely original innovations. It is inappropriate to overstate the historical significance of his reforms by applying modern concepts detached from their context.

Altogether, it was Wang Mang who was undoubtedly a reformer whose efforts ultimately failed. Nevertheless, the institutional experiments and historical lessons associated with his reforms continue to provide valuable insights for later generations.

4. Conclusion

This paper, from a comprehensive perspective, provides a systematic review of the characteristics and evaluations of Wang Mang's reforms. Wang Mang's reforms took shape in a time of intensifying social conflicts. Land resources gathered in the hands of a small number of people, and tensions between different social classes grew sharper. It was Wang Mang's reforms that aimed to reconstruct an idealized social order and political structure through a series of institutional reforms modeled on ancient institutions. These reforms spanned land systems, monetary systems, slavery, commercial regulation, administrative divisions, frontier policies, and the standardization of weights and measures, demonstrating integrality and revivalism. However, mismatches between institutional design and the current socioeconomic structure, along with the lack of stable implementation mechanisms and effective policy coordination, led to the eventual failure of most reform measures. Accelerating the collapse of the Xin Dynasty was their failure to achieve intended goals and their further intensification of social contradictions. Based on the above results, the historical evaluation of Wang Mang's reforms is not unified. Some scholars have criticized the defects in his policies; others believe that he intended to tackle social problems and reform the old institutions. Wang Mang's reforms are a typical historical case and have thus been of great significance for the study of large-scale reforms in Chinese history and the general history of institutional change.

It is the systematic study of Wang Mang's reforms that serves as the main focus of this paper, which helps to understand the history and reality of Chinese reforms. Certain limitations of this paper are acknowledged. In terms of sources, it relies primarily on transmitted historical texts and existing secondary literature. There are few archaeological materials and primary sources available. In terms of analysis, the internal connections among reform measures and an organized comparison of various scholarly interpretations remain to be further explored.

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