

Aristocracy and the ruling elites

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Abstract: In crude classifications, ancient Rome and China both transitioned from aristocracy to monarchy. Yet the absolute monarch needed the cooperation of a loyal and competent ruling elite to govern effectively. The Roman elites were wealthy landlords. The Chinese imperial elites were Confucian literati. Both succeeded to establish mutually beneficial relations with the emperor, consolidating his power and growing their own privileges as they worked together to hold the people in place. The peculiar characteristics of the Roman and Chinese ruling elites, which colored the characteristics of the empires, were legacies of pre-imperial aristocracies.

The secular elite in many ancient societies are loosely called aristocrats. In the classical sense, “aristocracy” carries some connotation of the best, and “oligarchy” often implies rule of the rich. Combining a power elite with major components of a social elite, a cultural elite, and an elite of wealth, an aristocracy enjoys great privileges and licenses, which it jealously guards. Aristocrats deem themselves superior in status and virtue, and treat inferiors haughtily if not oppressively. They need not have hereditary ranks. Rome’s senatorial aristocrats were nonhereditary, as were imperial China’s literati-officials who constituted an “ideological aristocracy”. However, even those without heritable ranks rely heavily on blood tie to accrue prestige over generations.

Strong family bounds were common to the Roman and Chinese aristocrats. Chinese feudal aristocrats had heritable ranks, fiefs, and ministries. The Roman did not; everyone had to win elections for magistracies. However, because of the restriction on candidacy, a small number of core families controlled government over centuries, even as the country expanded tremendously. A study of the Roman ruling circle found “new men” accounting for only about one fifth of all the consuls elected in the last 150 years of the Republic, and they tended to be local aristocrats from conquered territories.¹

Chinese feudal aristocrats were organized around the family, with relatives serving individual family cum state. Because the realm fragmented into hundreds of rivaling states, aristocratic power was greatly diffused and fraught with internal disputes. The Chinese cherished private feelings and made

the love of relatives the prime political principle. The Romans too cherished feelings; camaraderie of aristocrats was so strong they tolerated defeated commanders in politics, even when military victory was the highest aristocratic glory.² In addition, Republican Romans developed a strong public spirit, which the Chinese lacked. The Roman aristocracy enjoyed the advantage of a corporate organization, the Senate, which served a single state. The Senate concentrated aristocratic power and instituted laws to resolve disputes. The most important rules were the regular elections of magistrates who wielded active power and the passages of bills by the popular assemblies. By allowing the people to be the arbiters in aristocratic competition, they simultaneously mobilized the people's pride and patriotism.

Aside from the Senate, the Roman aristocracy had another power base, wealth. Official census classified all citizens according to their wealth. The wealthiest echelon constituted the "senatorial order". Belonging to it was the foremost criterion to stand for the Senate and magistracies. Laws defining absolute property rights were only one manifestation of the uncompromising way in which Roman aristocrats guarded their wealth. When agrarian reforms in the late Republic tried to mitigate skyrocketing economic inequality by distributing public land to poor citizens, aristocrats who had appropriated the land as their own reacted violently and murdered the reformers, including the Gracchi brothers and their followers. Stories of would-be tyrants also circulated to justify the drastic measure: Consul Cassius proposed legislation to distribute land to the people. Maelius bought grain for distribution to the poor during a famine. Manlius, who had saved the Roman capitol from the Gauls, used his own money to rescue debtors from debt-bondage. None showed indication of instigating riot. Their efforts at poor relief alone were enough for accusations of demagoguery. All three were killed execution style, Cassius allegedly by his own father.³ These stories helped to deter anyone with similar ideas.

Aristocratic collective rule was the deepest tradition of the Roman Republic. When military dynasts threatened it, civil wars resulted. After Augustus finally defeated the Republicans, he suppressed the aristocracy by destroying the political power of its corporate organization; the Senate continued only as a shell. Yet he retained the senatorial order and further elevated its wealth qualification. The plutocratic characteristics of the Republic grew in the Empire, where agrarian reforms disappeared and poor citizens lost the civil rights they won in the Conflict of the Orders.⁴

As Rome expanded, it systematically selected local aristocrats and propped up the wealthy to control the masses. The wealthy shared common economic interests. By uniting economic and political interests, Rome was able to cream off elites from local communities and using them to rule for it. Solidarity of the wealthy ruling elite was a cornerstone for *Pax Romana*.

Lacking a corporate organization, Chinese feudal aristocrats maintained their sense of identity through ritual, etiquette, and knowledge of a small set of classics that would become the Confucian Canons. Basking in elegant affability among peers, they became impractical and headed for decline. Meanwhile, the advent of Iron Age, economic development, and intense interstate competition brought abundant opportunities that stimulated diverse intellectual activities. Able commoners rose on merit to challenge aristocrats. Among the “hundred schools” of the warring-states period, Confucians and Legalists left the most influential legacy. Originating as masters of ceremony, Confucians idealized the past, tried to rehabilitate the feudal aristocracy, and styled themselves as virtuous masters of rulers. Their ideal of rule by man envisioned good governance following automatically once the ruler attained personal virtue. They won plush patronage but little power in these demanding times. In contrast, Legalists gained power because they were capable organizers and administrators dedicated to solving present problems. They led land distribution programs to promote independent farmers and built up bureaucratic institutions to centralized power. The rule by law they introduced included regulations that suppress aristocratic abuses.⁵

Based on institutions developed by century-long Legalist reforms, Qin unified China. The First Emperor abolished the feudal aristocracy and ruled the empire via a centralized bureaucracy, with officers promoted on ability and merit. The rational decision was ahead of its time. Meritocracy requires a talent pool large enough to staff the large bureaucracy and cohesive enough to provide long-term stability. The aristocracy used to provide the default talent pool. With it gone, and without public education, an elite vacuum was created under the emperor. Equality under the law was unpalatable to the ruling elites and dangerous to the emperor. Elites embittered by the loss of privileges contributed to the fall of the Qin Dynasty.⁶ The Han Dynasty experimented with ways to siphon elites for its service. Enshrinement of Confucianism as state ideology was the crucial step toward success. Government offices and the power and wealth they entailed would entice all brain power into studying the Confucian Cannons. To protect the privileged status they received from the emperor, the “ideological aristocrats”⁷ would happily deploy their doctrines of rule by man to serve their master.⁸

The circulation of elite well served both the empire and the ruling elites, but at heavy social costs. The wealth criterion of Rome sacrificed the welfare of the poor masses. The ideological criterion of China sacrificed the nation’s intellectual vitality.

¹ K. Hopkins. *Death and Renewal*. Cambridge (1983), pp. 112; see also 32, 38, 55. P. A. Brunt. *Nobilitas and novitas*. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 72 (1982), pp. 1-17.

² N. Rosenstein, N. *Imperatores Victi*. University of California (1990), pp. 3-7.

³ A. Lintott. *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*. Oxford (1999), p. 36. M. Crawford. *The Roman Republic*. Harvard (1993), p.24.

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- ⁴ P. A. Brunt, P. A. *The Fall of the Roman Republic*. Oxford (1988), pp. 54, 62. M. Rostovtzeff. *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. Oxford (1957), p. 63. C. Wells. *The Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. Harvard (1992), pp. 214, 246.
- ⁵ Y. Pines. *Envisioning Eternal Empire*. University of Hawaii (2009), pp. 123-135. S. Y. Auyang. *The Dragon and the Eagle*. Routledge (2014), sections 2.8-2.9.
- ⁶ Auyang, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, pp. 127, 135-137.
- ⁷ 阎步克. 《士大夫政治演生史稿》. 北京大学出版社 (1996), p. 494. 钱穆. 《国史新论》. 台北东大图书 (1985), p. 128.
- ⁸ Auyang, *The Dragon and the Eagle*, section 6.4.