merchant.

The distress of the farmers represented economic opportunity to the great houses of the land: descendants of the pre-Qin feudal aristocracy, Han imperial relatives enfeoffed as kings or marquises, and high-ranking officials. These were all families who had parlayed political connections into material wealth in the form of landed estates. They also invested in business enterprises. Wealthy merchants joined the ranks of the landed elite by investing their business profits in property. These powerful families had access to education, officeholding, and even to the emperor himself.

The emperor was theoretically at the apex of all hierarchies: the "solitary man," the Son of Heaven, pivot of Heaven, Earth, and Man, the high priest of the empire. Anyone who showed disrespect or disobedience could be punished, as in the case of a drunken marquis who sang during a sacrifice at the imperial temple and was sentenced to commit suicide for the offense of "great disrespect."[44] Emperors did not, of course, run the empire by themselves. They were assisted and in some ways restricted by a whole body of officials who controlled the administration.

These included some thirty thousand officials in the central government: the chancellor and ministers with specialist responsibilities, and some hundred thousand in the commanderies and fifteen hundred counties of the empire. These men had earned their positions in the civil service on the strength of their scholarship or their moral reputation and had either been recommended by other scholars or officials or (in a minority of cases) had passed some form of testing. In their roles as advisors, policymakers, and administrators, high-ranking imperial officials could and often did exercise significant influence and control over the actions of emperors.

These officials bore the titles of their respective offices in the duly established organs of government, such as "Director of the Great Granary" and "Chancellor," and enjoyed the salaries appropriate to their ranks. In addition, there were those men who had been given honorary titles such as "Palace Attendant" or "Marshal of State" who served as personal assistants and advisors to an emperor. In time their position was regularized and they became members of a "Secretariat" which could at times make decisions independently of the established officials, including the chancellor. In addition, the emperor was often advised or overridden by empresses, empresses dowager, and, in time, eunuchs. None of these people could perform a mature emperor's ritual functions for him: there could be only one Son of Heaven, one man playing the role of emperor, from whom all authority flowed. Often

enough, the most powerful people in Chang'an were the imperial consorts and their families.

There was, of course, considerable competition among imperial women for the position of empress and mother to the heir apparent. Like any husband, the emperor could have only one official wife or empress at a time, but he could demote his empress and promote another consort to that post if he chose to do so. In some notorious instances, serving empresses were known to assassinate or arrange for the assassination of rivals and of the male children of rivals in order to maintain their position.[45] As we have seen in the case of Empress Lü, imperial consorts also worked to get the men of their natal families ennobled and appointed to key posts in the bureaucracy and the military. Empress dowagers were able to choose the next emperor from the many sons, brothers, nephews, and cousins of the Liu imperial clan. They often chose men (or better yet children) who could be easily controlled. Powerful men who were not heirs to the throne but desired to manipulate imperial power used the same techniques. In addition, as we shall see, heirs and also the uncles or brothers of heirs could use illegitimate and bloody means to gain the throne.

The manipulation of emperors was a dangerous game. If a consort fell out of favor with an emperor, her family would be thrown out of power. When a powerful woman such as Empress Lü died, rivals would quickly attack her family members. Later on, competition between Wudi's Empress Wei and her rival, the concubine Lady Li, led to five days of pitched battles in the streets of Chang'an. Thousands were killed, and in the end both the Wei and Li clans were nearly wiped out. Emperor Wu himself stayed safely out of the city in his summer retreat until the violence was over.[46]

The powerful great houses of the Western Han participated in these struggles to control the throne, often marrying daughters into the imperial family as an investment. And so it was that in the ninety-two years following Emperor Wu's death, the great families accumulated more and more land and more and more power. Overextended and short of resources, the imperial government pulled back from the dizzying heights of Emperor Wu's activist and expansionist policies. Empresses dowager and men of their families managed the empire and enriched themselves in the process. Finally, in 9 CE, the inevitable happened. The leading members and supporters of an empress dowager's clan decided that there was no need for the Liu imperial house at all. In a simple coup, Wang Mang, a nephew of the Grand Empress Dowager Wang Zhengjun, took the throne as the first and only emperor of the Xin dynasty. The name itself, "Xin," Chinese for "new," represented new hopes for a new beginning.