

A tyrant or a hero: a study of emperor Wu of Han 's historical images in song dynasty

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Abstract: Emperor Wu of Han had two images—a tyrant and a hero—in Song Dynasty, which are connected not only with his own complex personalities, but also the revival of Confucianism and military confrontations among several nationalities at the time. Since Song scholars idealize those times of the Three Generations and monarchs of Yao and Shun, mainstream ideology regarded Emperor Wu of Han as a tyrant like the First Emperor of Qin. Nevertheless, Song monarchs and Xin dang and Nandu officers, from the view of political consideration and for the purpose of overcoming crisis, highlighted his image of a hero in a biased and utilitarian manner. The mainstream ideology which looks upon Emperor of Han, a monarch of significant achievement, as a tyrant, is a manifestation of the traditional Chinese mentality of honoring benevolent governance and denouncing domineering rules. This also historically reveals why China adheres to the idea of peaceful development.

Keywords: Emperor Wu of Han, Song Dynasty, historical images, benevolent governance, domineering rules

1. Introduction

Contemporary film and television media have crafted an image of Emperor Wu of Han as a man of extraordinary wisdom and unmatched accomplishments, leading many to regard him as the epitome of ancient emperors. However, historical assessments of Emperor Wu often differ significantly from contemporary perspectives, and can even present a stark contrast. This paper uses the evaluations of Emperor Wu by Song Dynasty Confucian scholars to illustrate his historical image during that era and to discuss the reasons for these views, with the aim of enlightening modern audiences. The focus on Song Dynasty Confucian scholars' evaluations is chosen for two main reasons: firstly, the Song Dynasty has left behind a wealth of documents and historical materials; secondly, compared to earlier periods, the critique of Emperor Wu became a popular subject of discussion during the Song Dynasty, with numerous comments and evaluations emerging.

The well-known debate between Zhu Xi and Chen Liang regarding Emperor Gaozu of Han and Emperor Taizong of Tang highlights their differing perspectives; Zhu Xi advocated for moral judgment, whereas Chen Liang prioritized practical achievements, leading to a stark opposition in their assessments of imperial rulers. This instance effectively discloses the divergent viewpoints of Song Dynasty Confucian scholars when appraising historical personalities. A single ancient emperor may embody various dimensions, and evaluations can significantly vary when viewed from distinct value orientations.

Emperor Wu of Han embodied two starkly contrasting facets. Internally, he implemented the "Edict of Grace," which curtailed the power of the feudal kingdoms, established the Central Court to diminish the chancellor's authority, and appointed provincial governors to monitor localities, thereby reinforcing and solidifying central authority and imperial power to an unprecedented extent. Culturally, following the policy of "dismissing the hundred schools of thought and exclusively honoring Confucianism," Confucianism was established as the orthodox ideology, leading to an unparalleled political and cultural consolidation within the Han Empire, creating an era of grand unification and prosperity. In foreign affairs, commencing from the second year of the Yuan Guang era (133 BC), Emperor Wu initiated military campaigns against the Xiongnu. After three significant wars, the Xiongnu were severely weakened, fragmented into five divisions, and no longer posed a threat to the Han Dynasty. The expansion into the

Western Regions, the conquest of Korea, the pacification of the Min Yue, and the subjugation of the southwestern territories were among the martial achievements of Emperor Wu. From this perspective, Emperor Wu of Han can rightfully be deemed a "great sovereign."

Conversely, Emperor Wu of Han was marked by personal indulgence and excess, coupled with a relentless pursuit of military expansion, engaging in numerous large-scale conflicts, particularly the enduring war with the Xiongnu, which inflicted tremendous hardships on the populace. To accumulate wealth for his own desires and to fund his foreign campaigns, Emperor Wu entrusted Sang Hongyang with the management of finances, employing strategies such as currency system reforms, monopolization of the salt and iron trades, price regulation, and various forms of taxation to exploit the populace, resulting in the bankruptcy of innumerable commoners and wealthy families; on the battlefields, he also led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of Han soldiers. From this perspective, Emperor Wu of Han could indeed be labeled a "tyrant."

The dualistic evaluations of Emperor Wu of Han were present even before the Song Dynasty. Some praised Emperor Wu, such as Ban Gu, who commended his "extraordinary talent and grand strategy" [1], and Cao Zhi, who hailed his accomplishments as surpassing "a hundred kings" [2], both of whom lauded Emperor Wu's intelligence and achievements. On the other hand, the prominent Confucian scholar Xia Hou Sheng during the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han criticized Emperor Wu for "killing a multitude of soldiers and civilians, depleting the financial resources of the people, indulging in extravagance without restraint, draining the nation's wealth, causing the populace to be displaced and the population to diminish by half... lacking in virtue and failing to benefit the people" [1]. This criticism approaches an assessment of a tyrant. Song Dynasty Confucian scholars also held starkly contrasting views on Emperor Wu, based on their differing value systems: the mainstream ideology, which prioritized moral values, regarded Emperor Wu as a tyrant; the other perspective, which valued utility, acclaimed him as a mighty ruler. The two divergent portrayals of Emperor Wu during the Song Dynasty were brought to light through their polarized appraisals.

2. Tyrant: the mainstream ideology's disapproval

The Song Dynasty witnessed a resurgence of Confucianism, with the prevailing intellectual movement aspiring to return to the virtues of the Three Dynasties and to lead rulers to the exemplary standards of the sage-kings Yao and Shun. Emerging from the turmoil of the Five Dynasties, early Song Confucian scholars were deeply affected by the painful recent historical memories of tyrannical rulers and social unrest. Despite the Song's initial national strength not matching the grandeur of the Han and Tang dynasties, these scholars did not confine themselves to the status quo. Instead, they harbored an ambitious ideal to surpass the Han and Tang and to emulate the illustrious Three Dynasties. In their eyes, the age of the Three Dynasties and the rulers Yao and Shun were the true models to pursue and learn from, while the Han and Tang dynasties and their rulers were not fit to be followed. Zhu Xi stated: "From the founding of our country, there has been a reverence for rites and a veneration for the classics, with an aspiration to revive the virtues of the Two Emperors and the Three Dynasties, which has already outstripped the Tang." [3] The decline and chaos of the Five Dynasties period spurred the Confucian scholars of the early Song Dynasty to cultivate a mindset of world salvation and improvement, aiming to fundamentally transform and elevate the society into a realm of benevolence and virtue that surpasses the Han and Tang and rivals the Three Dynasties. The Han and Tang dynasties were deemed unworthy of imitation because the personal virtue (inner sage hood) of their rulers could not compare to that of Yao and Shun, and the collective virtue (outer kingship) of the states also fell short of the Three Dynasties. Cheng Hao (1032-1085) remarked: "The governance of the Three Dynasties was in accordance with the natural order. Since the Two Han, it has all been about those who dominate the world." [4] From the moralistic viewpoint of Song Confucian scholars, when compared to the idealized ambiance of the Three Dynasties, the Han and Tang indeed were not worthy of emulation.

Under the influence of this prevailing intellectual movement, Song Dynasty Confucian scholars evaluated ancient emperors using two standards: individual goodness (inner sage) and the goodness of the state (outer king). They adopted a perspective that prioritized internal virtues over external conquests, moral values over military force, and a human-centric approach. By appraising the characters of ancient

emperors, they sought to establish a benchmark for imperial behavior, thereby setting the moral standards and exemplary models for rulers of their time, and defining the trajectory for the country's development.

The personal integrity of a monarch in a traditional nation is intimately connected to the destiny of the state, with the monarch's individual virtue and the state's collective well-being being tightly intertwined. In essence, a ruler lacking exemplary personal qualities cannot achieve benevolent governance. The Song Confucian scholars' general assessment of Emperor Wu of Han was that he was "greedy" (or "indulgent to the point of extravagance" "arrogant and debauched"), and the specific criticisms included: "exhausting the world's resources with extreme luxury" "waging wars to seek glory in distant lands" "eagerly embracing the false promises of immortality from alchemists" [5], which is to say, indulging in opulence, being overly ambitious, and foolishly pursuing eternal life. Although greed is just an issue of the monarch's personal character, when this personal trait is reflected in the entire nation, it becomes a problem with the goodness of the Liu Han dynasty as a state. The outcomes of Emperor Wu's greed were the depletion of the people's wealth, the slaughter of numerous soldiers and civilians, and endless harm. Domestically, many ministers did not have a good end, the populace lived in hardship, and innumerable soldiers perished in foreign territories; externally, the wars of expansion brought catastrophes to other ethnic groups, even leading to the extinction of entire nations. Thus, Emperor Wu, as a ruler of his era, faced issues with both his personal virtue and the state's collective virtue. In fact, Ji Fang, a loyal minister of Emperor Wu of Han, had already indicated that Emperor Wu's insatiable desires were in opposition to the way of Yao and Shun: "Your Majesty has many desires within but practices benevolence and righteousness on the outside, how can you imitate the governance of the Tang and Yu dynasties!" [1] An emperor with insatiable desires like Emperor Wu must undertake grand projects and cannot implement the tranquil way of governing as Yao and Shun did. Emperor Shenzong of Song (1048-1085) had a clear understanding of this: "The sovereign's actions should not have desires that harm politics." [6] Based on the recognition of the detrimental effects of Emperor Wu's insatiable desires, in terms of the emperor's virtue and the model of an ideal ruler, Song Confucian scholars advocated that the emperor should restrain himself and cultivate his personal life, taking the rulers of Yao and Shun as examples to follow; in political thought, Song Confucian scholars continued the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, insisting on valuing internal governance over external expansion, valuing virtue over military force, and maintaining a humanistic stance. Valuing internal governance over external expansion means adopting the principle of benefiting the country and its people for governing the country, focusing on maintaining domestic order and the welfare of the people, not easily starting border disputes, nor expanding territory. They believed that the Xiong nu were in a place outside the realm of civilization, and that acquiring their land was not arable, and their people could not be employed, thus it was of no benefit to take it. To conquer the Xiong nu at the expense of domestic economic decline and the displacement and death of the people was not worth it. On the issue of dealing with foreign aggression, they advocated "to punish and resist when they come, and to prepare and defend when they leave" [1], opposing the long-term warfare of Emperor Wu's aggressive militarism, believing that Emperor Wu's determination to annihilate the Xiong nu made the originally just war lose its legitimacy. Valuing virtue over military force means adopting a policy of moral influence in dealings with foreign tribes, not stubbornly deciding the outcome by force. Confucius advocated being cautious about war, "If distant people do not submit, then cultivate civilization and virtue to attract them" (The Analects of Confucius, Ji Shi), rather than easily resorting to war. Mencius believed that "If a ruler loves benevolence, he will have no enemy in the world... The word 'punitive' means to be upright, each wants to correct themselves, why use war at all?" (Mencius, Jin Xin Xia), also emphasizing winning people over with benevolence and righteousness. Cultivating virtue and practicing benevolence has a certain order, that is, from near to far, from inside to outside, first practicing benevolent governance in the country to benefit the people, and then treating the barbarians with propriety, teaching them with virtue, to win over distant people with a gentle approach. Emperor Taizong of Song (939-997) said: "Governing the country lies in cultivating virtue, and the four barbarians should be outside the scope of consideration." [6] Although this was an excuse for his failure in the Liao campaign, it also reflected the Confucian ideological tendency to value internal governance over external expansion and virtue over military force. The fundamental concept and destination of Song Confucian scholars' emphasis on internal

governance over external expansion and virtue over military force is humanism, regardless of the race, people should have the right to live and dignity.

This distinct position shaped the Song Dynasty's intellectual mainstream to adopt a primarily critical stance towards Emperor Wu of Han: Emperor Wu was not a virtuous and wise ruler but rather a despot similar to Qin Shi Huang. Even then, the phrase "Qin Emperor and Han Wu" was used together, becoming a byword for tyranny in the common vernacular.

By at least the time of Emperor Renzong of the Song Dynasty (1010-1063), Emperor Wu of Han had already become a paradigm of what an emperor should not be. Duan Shaolian (994-1039), a prominent official during Renzong's reign, stated that Emperor Wu could by no means be taken as an example for emperors to follow: "Moreover, Emperor Wu of Han, known for his arrogance, extravagance, and debauchery, certainly should not be emulated. As a subject, one should aspire to guide the ruler to be like the sage kings Yao and Shun, not like Emperor Wu of Han!" [6] Yu Jing (1000-1064), based on the principle that "ancestors have achievements and the clan possesses virtue," pointed out that Emperor Wu "although he expanded the territory, lacked virtue and did not benefit the people. It is already fortunate not to have received a derogatory posthumous title; to honor him as part of the clan, might it not be a deviation from righteousness?" [7] Xu Ji (1028-1103) observed Emperor Wu's harsh and cruel reign, where many of his appointed ministers met unfortunate ends, and more explicitly denounced "Emperor Wu of Han as a tyrant." [8] Such direct and unambiguous criticism of Emperor Wu as a tyrant actually reflects the widespread consensus among Song Confucian scholars.

Moreover, this consensus was unequivocally spoken by Emperor Zhezong of the Song Dynasty (1076-1100), and is beyond question:

Su Zhe discussed the imperial examination strategy questions, citing the instance of Emperor Zhao of Han altering the legal systems of Emperor Wu. Emperor Zhezong was enraged and said, "How dare you compare Emperor Wu with our late emperor?" Su Zhe descended from the hall to wait for punishment, and everyone was too afraid to look up. Chun Ren spoke calmly, "Emperor Wu was a man of great talent and grand strategy, and historical records hold no derogatory remarks about him. Su Zhe's comparison of him to our late emperor is not a form of defamation. At the start of Your Majesty's personal governance, the way you promote or demote high officials should not resemble the way one would berate servants."... Emperor Zhezong said, "People speak of the Emperors of Qin and Han." Chun Ren replied, "What Su Zhe discussed pertains to the affairs and the era, not the individuals themselves." Emperor Zhezong's countenance then softened a bit. [9]

As recorded in the "History of the Song Dynasty," Volume 339, "Biography of Su Zhe," the discussion of the imperial examination policy questions occurred in the early years of the Shao sheng era. During the Yuan feng period, many old officials of the same faction cited the instance of Emperor Zhao of Han altering the legal systems of Emperor Wu of Han to argue for the legitimacy of the Yuan feng reforms. Although Su Zhe (1039-1112) might not have intended to compare Emperor Shenzong of Song to Emperor Wu of Han, by this time, Empress Dowager Xuan ren had already died, and it was imperative for Zhezong to carry out the Shao sheng narrative, thus he could not tolerate the slightest criticism of the late Emperor Shenzong. What Zhezong said, "People speak of Qin Huang and Han Wu," shows that the common view of the Song people was to discuss Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han together, and their greatest similarity lay in their severe punishments and relentless warfare. For Zhezong, the reason why it was intolerable to compare Emperor Wu to his father Shenzong was precisely because Emperor Wu's image in the minds of ordinary people was definitely not that of an enlightened ruler. Shenzong repeatedly deployed troops against the Western Xia during the Xining and Yuan feng periods, resulting in more than 600,000 soldiers and civilians killed in the battles of Lingzhou and Yongle, which many at the time considered wrong, indicating a certain degree of similarity between Emperor Shenzong of Song and Emperor Wu of Han. This point has touched the sensitive nerves of Emperor Zhezong of Song, and Emperor Zhezong's "fury" clearly demonstrates that Emperor Wu's image in the minds of ordinary people is that of an unmitigated tyrant, and the saying "Qin Huang Han Wu" clearly reveals this meaning. What Fan Chun ren (1027-1101) said, "Emperor Wu had great talent and strategy, and history has no negative comments," was merely to mediate the situation. It is neither a historical fact nor his true evaluation of Emperor Wu. His statement, "What Zhe discussed was the matter and the time, not the person," implies

that Su Zhe's comparison of Emperor Shenzong of Song to Emperor Wu of Han was based on the similarity of the situation and events, rather than a personal evaluation of the two emperors. This also indirectly reflects that, like Emperor Zhezong, Fan Chun ren saw the image of Emperor Wu in his heart as that of a tyrant.

Upon reviewing historical texts, numerous remarks can be found that equate Emperor Wu of Han with Qin Shi Huang as tyrants. For instance, Sima Guang (1019-1086) remarked on Emperor Wu, "The differences between him and Qin Shi Huang are minimal... He had the failings of the perished Qin but escaped its fate" [10]. Fan Zu Yu (1041-1098) also stated, "When later ages discuss emperors who engaged in endless warfare and imposed harsh punishments and severe laws, they inevitably mention Qin Shi Huang and Emperor Wu of Han. It is because the First Emperor was ruthless, and Emperor Wu was similarly so." [11] Lin Zhiqi (1112-1176) likewise observed, "The actions of Emperor Wu were hardly distinguishable from those of the First Emperor" [12]. In terms of the wanton use of military force and the resulting misery of the populace, Emperor Wu of Han and Qin Shi Huang bear a striking resemblance. These comments collectively reveal that in the common perception of the Song people, Emperor Wu was a figure of a tyrant akin to Qin Shi Huang. The reason why the mainstream intellectual community of the Song Dynasty repeatedly used the historical figure of Emperor Wu of Han to convey critical sentiments was to establish the virtues and paradigms for the monarchs of their time. By criticizing negative examples from history, they hoped to shape the moral standards and exemplary models for the Song emperors, fulfilling the ideal of emulating the sage kings Yao and Shun and aspiring to guide their monarchs towards the virtues of Yao and Shun.

3. The mighty ruler: an affirmation based solely on utilitarianism

Emperor Wu of Han indeed possessed personal qualities that bore resemblance to those of Qin Shi Huang, yet the assessment of him was more intricate in comparison. At the very least, when it came to venerating Confucianism and enforcing cultural governance, Emperor Wu outstripped Qin Shi Huang, a fact that naturally garnered the commendation of Song Dynasty Confucian scholars. Moreover, a more critical point is that Emperor Wu staunchly counterattacked against the Xiongnu and secured a dominant position in conflicts with foreign tribes; his imposing military might in taming the barbarians was especially able to elicit the affirmation of certain intellectuals during the Song era. Throughout the three-century span of the Song Dynasty, which was in a state of opposition with the Liao, Western Xia, Jin, and Mongols, it persistently struggled to achieve military superiority and was perpetually dogged by a severe national crisis. The emergence of Neo-Confucianism was intended to establish the inherent foundation of moral values to address the cultural crisis instigated by Buddhism and Taoism. However, the sense of peril engendered by the national crisis also coerced the intellectual currents of the Song period to preserve a requisite space for the presence of utilitarianism. Even if it could not subjugate foreign tribes as Emperor Wu had done, it was a legitimate demand to sustain the nation's robust stance amidst the confrontations among various ethnic groups. Consequently, while the royal way was broadly esteemed, the hegemonic way was not entirely repudiated; the significance of the hegemonic way was also repeatedly highlighted by individuals in diverse stations confronting different scenarios. This focus on the hegemonic way and the heroic portrayal of Emperor Wu of Han is partial and utilitarian, and might not even align with his own consistent propositions. Given that it is partial and utilitarian, this form of validation is also temporary and unstable. When roles and contexts undergo minor alterations, they might also revert to the mainstream ideology.

Within this utilitarian ideology that endorses hegemony (martial power), there exist at least three distinct groups: the emperors, the reformist bureaucrats, and the officials from the Southern Crossing of the Yangtze. They were certainly cognizant of the tyrannical aspects of Emperor Wu of Han, yet they offered an alternative explanation for his aggressive military campaigns, endeavoring to alleviate the perception of Emperor Wu as a despot and create space for utilitarianism within the realm of practical politics. To put it another way, driven by pragmatic political considerations, they felt compelled to accentuate the image of Emperor Wu as a mighty ruler in a partial manner to validate the essential nature of utilitarianism. The prosperity or decline of a nation is indeed closely tied to the depth of its moral values, a perspective that Su Shi (1037-1101) articulated: "The survival or extinction of a country hinges

on the profundity of its moral character, not on its military might; the longevity of its history is contingent upon the richness of its cultural practices, not on its material wealth or poverty." [13] However, in comparison to morality, military affairs present a more pressing concern. Consequently, the emperors of the Song Dynasty, driven by the desire to underscore the significance of military strength, found it necessary to accentuate the image of Emperor Wu of Han as a formidable ruler, thereby granting some recognition to his martial achievements, despite their opposition to his militaristic tendencies. In contrast to other officials who prioritized utilitarianism, the Song emperors generally held more balanced views. They acknowledged the positive aspects of Emperor Wu of Han while continuing to critique his negative traits. Emperor Zhenzong of Song (968-1022) remarked, "In ancient times, Emperor Wu, consumed by his ambitions on the frontiers, acted on his momentary desires, neglecting the fatigue and decline of the central kingdom, which is indeed not admirable. Yet, by the reign of Emperor Xiao Xuan of Han, the realm was at peace, and the barbarians from all directions sought to serve as officials, a testament to the enduring influence of his might." [6] After criticizing Emperor Wu of Han for his policies that led to the exhaustion of China, he echoed Ban Gu's arguments in the "Book of Han - The Biographies of the Xiongnu" and attributed some of the credit for the submission of the barbarians during Emperor Xuan of Han's reign to the residual might of Emperor Wu's military campaigns. The reason why Emperor Zhenzong of Song acknowledged the residual might of Emperor Wu's military campaigns was related to the context of the Song Dynasty's unfavorable military conflicts with the Liao and the Tangut. As a monarch, although Emperor Zhenzong of Song had no intention of territorial expansion, he had to demonstrate his emphasis on military affairs. Emperor Shenzong of Song had a more pointed critique of Emperor Wu: "Emperor Wu of Han was utterly heartless, causing troops to march thousands of miles for the desire of a single horse, with more than seventy marquises, treating human lives as if they were mere thatch, which is why the population was halved. Human life is of utmost importance, the great virtue of heaven and earth is to nurture life, how could it be treated in such a manner!" [6] The term "utterly heartless" shows that in Emperor Shenzong's view, Emperor Wu was no different from a tyrant. However, despite his condemnation of Emperor Wu for "treating human lives as if they were mere thatch," he did not completely reject Emperor Wu because of this, but believed that "it is necessary to test the troops," highlighting the necessity of warfare, indicating that Emperor Shenzong also had a certain degree of recognition for Emperor Wu's martial achievements. Regrettably, despite his resolve to address the border issues in the west and to avoid leaving troubles for future generations, the battles of Ling Zhou and Yongle still resulted in the death and injury of more than 600,000 soldiers and civilians, repeating Emperor Wu's errors. Emperor Xiaozong of Song (1127-1194) admired the martial might of Emperor Wu: "During Emperor Wu of Han's reign, the martial might was so formidable that it deterred regions thousands of miles away, how could it be withstood!" [14] At the same time, he criticized Emperor Wu of Han for his excessive use of military force. Despite the Confucian-influenced public opinion pressuring the Song Dynasty monarchs to criticize Emperor Wu's militaristic tendencies, as emperors with a particular concern for the nation's dignity and security, they were able to moderately affirm his martial prowess while still offering criticism. When they highlighted the heroic image of Emperor Wu, they held expectations of bolstering military strength and alleviating border issues. However, there were exceptions. Emperor Gaozong of Song, who was known for his fear of the enemy (1107-1187), stated: "Emperor Wu of Han, following the wealth and prosperity of Emperors Wen and Jing, exhausted the resources of the entire nation without being able to subdue the Xiongnu; later, as the five Chan Yu fought for the throne and destroyed each other, Emperor Xiao Xuan, with military capabilities less than thirty or forty percent of Emperor Wu's, was still sufficient to bring the Xiongnu into submission." [15] For the same historical event, Emperor Gaozong of Song provided a starkly different interpretation from other emperors. In his view, Emperor Wu of Han's wars against the Xiongnu were not successful; the Xiongnu were not defeated through warfare but rather brought about their own demise through internal strife. This was essentially his way of refuting the pro-war faction's stance against the Jurchens and justifying his own policy of reconciliation with the Jurchens. Consequently, the heroic image of Emperor Wu, which was affirmed by other emperors, was effectively dissolved by his perspective.

The reform-minded officials, united by the cry to enrich the country and strengthen its military, also leaned towards a positive interpretation of Emperor Wu's military campaigns to accentuate his image as a

formidable ruler. Wang Anshi (1021-1086), the leader of the reformist faction, was originally a mainstream Confucian scholar for whom the ideal era and imperial model were the Three Dynasties and the sage kings Yao and Shun. He once said to Emperor Shenzong of Song: "Your Majesty should follow the examples of Yao and Shun; why would you emulate Emperor Taizong of Tang?" [9] It was clear that Wang Anshi's paradigm of imperial excellence was Yao and Shun, certainly not Emperor Taizong of Tang, nor Emperor Wu of Han. However, he exhibited actions that starkly contradicted this, as documented in Shao Bowen's "Wen Jian Lu": "Later, Anshi authored 'Daily Records,' expressing disdain for his ancestors, especially Renzong. Each time he referred to Emperor Wu, it revealed his contempt for Renzong." [16] The people of the Song Dynasty often remarked that Renzong humbled himself in his peace negotiations with the barbarians. In dealing with foreign tribes, Emperor Renzong prioritized peace without compromising the dignity of the Song Dynasty, which was quite distinct from Emperor Wu's militaristic approach; yet in Wang Anshi's view, this seemed to reflect weakness and cowardice, far from the conduct of the mighty Emperor Wu, which he greatly despised. The reason for such glaring contradictions was entirely in line with his aim of encouraging Emperor Shenzong to pacify the Western Regions. Although Wang Anshi's core philosophy was Confucian, his personality was stubborn and unyielding, and he was resolute not to submit to foreign tribes. Thus, even though he advocated learning from Yao and Shun, he could affirm the image of Emperor Wu as a mighty ruler. Another reformist official, Zhang Zao (dates unknown—1093), who rose to the rank of Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, cited Emperor Wu's militaristic actions as proof of "persevering with a steadfast heart, and ultimately achieving success": "Emperor Wu waged war for over thirty years... the soldiers and horses were nearly all lost, but with a steadfast and patient heart, he ultimately succeeded. Now Your Majesty is benevolent and sage, and should only train the troops to strengthen the national power, so that driving them out can be done without regret." [6] His mindset was completely aligned with Wang Anshi's, both lavishing praise on Emperor Wu to encourage Emperor Shenzong to wage war against the Western Xia.

During the tumultuous period between the Northern and Southern Song dynasties, when the Central Plains were occupied and the nation was on the brink of a life-or-death crisis, the urgent calls for national salvation and resistance against the Jurchen Jin dynasty superseded the mainstream moral judgments, further highlighting the image of Emperor Wu as a formidable ruler. In response to Emperor Gaozong's policy of appeasement towards the Jin after the retreat to the south, the Neo-Confucian scholar Hu Yin (1098-1156) upheld the banner of revering the sovereign and expelling the barbarians, refraining from moral judgment on Emperor Wu: "Ever since ancient times, when China was at its zenith, figures like Emperor Wu of Han and Emperor Taizong of Tang would conquer and obliterate the barbarians at the frontiers... only ceasing after expending all their military might. Such is the origin of the rituals and righteousness of China. Even with the strength to bully the weak, it is still like this. Now, to expect the noble and benevolent elders of the Jurchen to act in such a manner, is there any rationale?" [17] According to Confucian doctrine, as the progenitor of propriety and righteousness, China should "cultivate cultural virtue to draw them in." Even if it fails to attract the barbarians, as Emperor Taizong of Song suggested, "the four barbarians should be beyond our concerns," to rely on power to oppress the weak in such a way contradicts Confucian teachings. However, the tragedy of the nation's near collapse led the great Confucian Hu Yin to angrily break with traditional Confucian advocacy, disregarding propriety and righteousness, determined to eradicate the Jin dynasty before finding satisfaction, the valiant aspect of Emperor Wu received the utmost affirmation. The image of Emperor Wu as a tyrant for his militaristic campaigns was subdued, while the image of a mighty ruler who dominated the barbarians was accentuated. Driven by the national emergency, Confucian scholars had transcended conventional Confucian thought to offer theoretical backing for the war effort. Subsequently, the debate between Chen Liang and Zhu Xi, attempting to acknowledge the contributions of Emperor Gaozu of Han and Emperor Taizong of Tang, and resolutely refusing to dismiss them entirely as Zhu Xi did, can be seen as a continuation of the same mindset among officials post-Southern Crossing. The reason they are referred to as post-Southern Crossing officials is that, like their predecessors, they harbored ambitions to expel the Jurchens and restore the territories of the Northern Song dynasty.

The accentuation of Emperor Wu of Han's portrayal as a formidable sovereign is intricately tied to the exigencies of the times, a temporary measure that is one-sided and utilitarian, rather than a moral

judgment. Song dynasty emperors, as the rulers of a nation, often found themselves caught between the principles of virtue and the realities of power, needing to critique Emperor Wu's militaristic tendencies while simultaneously recognizing his image as a mighty ruler from a military standpoint. Reform-minded officials were driven by the aspiration to confront the Western Xia and reclaim the ancient borders of the Han and Tang dynasties, whereas officials post-Southern Crossing were intent on expelling the Jurchens and restoring the territories of the Northern Song. It was this interplay of subjective desires and external pressures that led them to affirm his martial prowess, even while they may not have held an entirely positive view of Emperor Wu overall. To comprehend the Song people's assessment of Emperor Wu's campaigns against the Xiongnu, we must situate it within the broader context of the Confucian revival of the Song era. In periods of political stability, the Song critics often judged Emperor Wu's military actions through the lens of Confucian ideals, advocating for a focus on internal governance over external expansion, prioritizing moral virtue over military might, and embracing a humanistic philosophy. However, in times of national emergency when demands for a robust military and calls for salvation were fervent, certain Song scholars, while not necessarily endorsing Emperor Wu in his entirety, were effusive in their admiration for the aspects of his rule that exemplified strength and authority. In essence, the image of Emperor Wu as a mighty sovereign would become more pronounced during periods of acute national crisis.

4. Conclusion

The Song Dynasty Confucian scholars' dualistic assessments of Emperor Wu of Han have resulted in his polarized portrayals as both a despot and a mighty ruler. In reality, both the tyrannical and mighty ruler aspects were inherently present in Emperor Wu, yet due to differing value selections, the Song Confucian scholars showed a tendency to favor one portrayal while discarding the other. The prevailing ideology of the Song Dynasty regarded Emperor Wu as a despot similar to Qin Shi Huang, but influenced by the times, especially propelled by the imperatives of enriching the nation and strengthening its military, as well as the cry for national salvation, the Song emperors, the reformist officials, and the officials post-Southern Crossing have all placed emphasis on the aspect of Emperor Wu's image as a mighty ruler. It is within this tension between moral judgment and utilitarian judgment that Emperor Wu's image is fully manifested, allowing an era to achieve a relative equilibrium between morality and utility. Moral evaluations are essential as the mainstream, but utilitarian evaluations should not be entirely abandoned as a complement. The enduring stability and security of a nation depend on profound moral values that foster virtuous customs, while utilitarian pursuits in wealth and military strength form the material foundation that protects the nation from invasion and annihilation. Within the Confucian value system that prioritizes moral values, it is entirely necessary to appropriately incorporate utilitarian values (instrumental values). The discourse on the balance between righteousness and profit is timeless, but as times evolve, a moderate tolerance for utility should be upheld.

Under the stimulus of the painful history of the past century, the despotic side of Emperor Wu of Han, known for his harsh laws and endless military campaigns, has also been selectively forgotten. This form of forgetting continues to some extent even today, which is why there was a surge in the popularity of TV dramas about Emperor Wu, while the critical voices that seek to restore the historical context seem to be somewhat absent. It is essential for us to understand the full historical account of Emperor Wu and to appropriately revive the voice of Confucianism, in order to maintain a relative balance against the one-sided adulation that arises from a lack of comprehensive understanding in the present day.

5. References

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