

Governance and Turmoil in Shu: Official-Citizen Interactions and Local Order during the Li Clan's Rule in Shu

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Abstract

During the Yuankang era of the Western Jin, the Guanzhong region was devastated by years of continuous warfare and epidemics, forcing a large number of residents from the Qin and Yong prefectures to become refugees and move to Bashu in search of sustenance. During this period, the Li clan gradually unified refugees across different social strata, eased tensions with the local population of Shu, and established the Chenghan regime that held control over Bashu. Under the influence of policies, religious practices, and other factors implemented by the rulers, the fragile relationship between the Li clan and their subjects underwent many trials, yet it enabled Chenghan to maintain its control over Bashu for more than forty years. Ultimately, the collapse of this relationship accelerated the downfall of Chenghan.

Keywords

Chenghan; Bashu; Official-Citizen Interaction; Local order.

1. Introduction

At the end of the Western Jin dynasty, the people of Guanzhong were forced to become refugees in Shu due to war and famine. Among them, the Li clan of the Cong people gradually grew powerful, establishing the Chenghan regime as one of the Sixteen Kingdoms, which had a profound impact on the Jin dynasty and the history of the southwest. Academic research on the Li family's Chenghan regime mainly includes: Ren Yi's *The Primary Study of ChengHan Power*, which examines the official system, territorial and administrative systems, as well as the ethnic and geographical distribution within the territory; Yang Shiqi's article *A Study on the Evolution of Relations between the refugees and the aborigines in the Cheng Han Regime* focuses on studying the relationship between refugees and the indigenous people of Bashu; Fan Shuangshuang and Gao Ran's *Cheng-Han State Power Structure and Destruction Textual Criticism* examines the relationship among the Li family, the six major clans, and the great clans of Shu on the Chenghan regime, and delves deeply into the relationship between refugee groups and the great clans in Shu. However, scholars have not explored much about the interactions between the Li family and the grassroots before and after their rule of Shu. Therefore, the author takes the interaction between officials and civilians during the Li clan rule over Shu as a starting point, employing historical document analysis to explore the patterns of official-civilian interaction between refugee groups and the people of Shu during the Li clan rule from the perspectives of political interaction, policy implementation, and religious integration, as well as their impact on the evolution of local order, in order to contribute to related research.

2. The Interaction Between the Li Clan's Rule in Bashu and the Refugees from the Six Commanderies

After the displaced people from the Six Commanderies entered Shu, they gradually rallied around the Li clan—led by the Li Te brothers—under the combined influence of the Li clan's efforts to win them over and external pressures, and their influence grew accordingly. The Li

clan's efforts to unite the displaced people from the Six Commanderies can be broadly divided into three groups: the Li clan of the Cong people, who belonged to the upper echelons of the displaced population; other influential clans; and the lower-class displaced people from the Six Commanderies.

The Li clan of the Cong people was the original force consolidated by the Li family before their migration to Bashu. This group had a strong sense of kinship identity and close geographical connections, demonstrating significant cohesion. *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governance* records that during the late Han period, when Zhang Lu controlled Hanzhong, "the Li clan of the Cong people went from Dangqu in Baxi to rely on him." [1] By the 20th year of Jian'an (215 CE), Cao Cao, the Emperor of Wei, conquered Hanzhong. The Li family of the Cong people, leading over five hundred households, submitted and were appointed as generals, and relocated to Lueyang. Later, the Li family continued to develop locally, and by the time of the brothers Li Te, "all possessed both literary and martial talents, were skilled in riding and archery, naturally chivalrous, and enjoyed the support of many local factions." [2] This group formed the initial foundation upon which the Li clan relied after entering Shu, and it also constituted its backbone. Under shared external pressure, the leading clans of the Six Commanderies banded together for mutual protection, with the Li clan emerging as a prominent force, though tensions persisted amongst them. Upon first entering Shu in search of sustenance, Li Xiang led the sons and followers of the leading clans of the Six Commanderies, along with their forces, to pledge allegiance to Zhao Qin, thereby largely completing the rallying of their forces. After the Li clan overthrew Zhao Qin's rule, the imperial court awarded honours and rewards based on merit, bestowing titles upon Li Te and other leaders of the displaced people from the Six Commanderies, as well as the armed forces under their command. However, these appointments were secretly shelved by Xin Ran, the Governor of Guanghan, causing the people of the Six Commanderies to harbour a grudge against him and turn him into their common enemy. Subsequently, Xin Ran placed a bounty on the heads of Li Te and his brothers. Li Te broadened the scope of the bounty, lumping together "the chieftains and powerful figures of the Six Commanderies—the Li, Ren, Yan, Zhao and Shangguan clans, as well as the Di and Sou peoples" [3]—in order to unite the forces of the Six Commanderies and exacerbate the conflict between the displaced people of the Six Commanderies and Xin Ran. It can be observed from this that: firstly, regarding the displaced people, at this time, the leading families of the six commanderies were not unified, but only shared a loose geographic affiliation and had not formed a strong core. Secondly, Xin Ran's prior attempt to seize the property of the displaced people's leader affected a broad range; later, as the Li Te brothers rose in power, they became a key target of attack. Regardless of whether Xin Ran's actions were aimed at dividing forces or provoking internal conflict, the outcome ultimately contributed to the cohesion of the displaced people in the six commanderies, "Thus the displaced people were greatly fearful, and those who submitted to Te increased in number, exceeding twenty thousand within a month. Li Liu also gathered several thousand people." [4] Under Li Te's leadership, the refugee forces defeated the armies of Luo Shang and Xin Ran, and the Li clan emerged as the generally recognized leader among refugees across the six commanderies. However, when Luo Shang launched a counteroffensive later, Fu Cheng and Wei Bo, who had previously surrendered to the Li clan, defected to support Luo Shang. This demonstrates that some leaders of prominent refugee families still harbored their own agendas and were not fully united.

The Li clan's efforts to unite the common people of the Six Commanderies were driven partly by their own initiative and partly by pressure from the authorities. During the Yuankang era of Emperor Hui of Jin, consecutive years of famine struck Guanzhong, turning the people of the Six Commanderies—including Lueyang and Tianshui—into displaced refugees, "tens of thousands of households sought refuge in the Hanchuan region in search of grain". [5] Whilst the displaced people were travelling to Shu, the Li Te brothers came to the aid of those from the Six Com-

manderies, providing relief to the elderly and the infirm, and thus won the hearts of the people. Subsequently, as the local authorities in Ba and Shu persistently urged the displaced people to return to their places of origin, this led to a situation where “everyone was filled with grief and resentment, not knowing what to do”. [6] Li Te, however, repeatedly sent envoys to pay their respects to Luo Shang, the Governor of Yizhou, requesting an extension of the deadline; this action caused “the displaced people to be deeply moved and to place their trust in him, and most of them sought refuge with Te”. [7]

3. The Relations and Interactions between the Li Clan and the Grassroots Population in Bashu

Since the year 298 CE, when the Li brothers entered Shu, and in 301 CE, when they established Mianzhu as their main base to control local territories, Li Xiong ascended the throne in 306 CE with the state named Da Cheng. In 338 CE, Li Shou deposed Li Qi to proclaim himself ruler and changed the state's name to Han. By 347 CE, Han had fallen. In the span of nearly half a century, the fragile relationship between the Li clan's refugee group and the local populace underwent several changes. Based on the policies the Li clan implemented toward the people before and after seizing Shu, as well as their effectiveness, the periods can roughly be divided into five stages: an initial deterioration period, a mitigation period, a fluctuating period of coexistence between confrontation and stability, a period of rising goodwill, and a collapse period.

3.1. The Initial Phase of Deterioration

In the initial stage, from the year 298 CE, the Li Te brothers entered Shu with refugees from the Six Commanderies, and by 301 CE, Li Te heeded the advice of his elder brother Li Fu and halted. The Li family held a refugee mentality and plundered extensively in Shu, resulting in the deterioration of relations between officials and the populace. In the first year of Yongkang (300 CE), Zhao Qin, then the Inspector of Yizhou, wanted to assert control over Shu for survival. He therefore opened the granaries and distributed grain to alleviate the plight of the refugees and win their hearts. The Li Te brothers, as influential descendants of prominent families among the Six Commanderies refugees, were easier to win over compared to the native aristocratic forces in the Bashu region; moreover, the two sides shared regional ties, which facilitated their cooperation. The alliance between the Zhao and Li clans at this time represented a collaboration between external forces aimed at exploiting the local population. The following year, due to fear of Li Xiang's increasing power and influence, Zhao Qin used an excuse to have him killed. Li Te broke with Zhao Qin over the death of his younger brother Li Xiang and ultimately marched into Chengdu, looting and pillaging. At this point, the armed refugee Li forces who had migrated into Shu focused on immediate short-term gains without any intention of long-term management of the region, leading to a severe deterioration of relations between the parties.

3.2. The Period of Mitigation

In the year 301 CE, Li Te, following the advice of his elder brother Li Fu, acted accordingly, and by 303 CE, Li Te had died in battle. The relationship between officials and the populace eased somewhat, yet overall, tensions remained high. Li Fu, who stayed behind in their old hometown of Lueyang, did not initially accompany Li Te and the others into Bashu. In the first year of Yongning (301 CE), Li Fu arrived in Shu and said to Li Te, “The Central Plains are in turmoil and there is little to return to.” [8] Consequently, Li Te shifted his focus from being a marauding bandit to establishing a regional fiefdom; he altered his strategy towards Shu and began to implement a policy of long-term governance, winning over the hearts of the people with the aim of putting down roots in Shu. Li Te “honoured the virtuous and removed the incompetent; military and civil administration were conducted with rigour; the people of Shu were greatly pleased.” [9]

3.3. The Period of Fluctuation Characterised by both Conflict and Stability

From 303 CE, when Li Te died in battle, to 314 CE, when the territory of the Da Cheng regime was largely stabilized, was a period of fluctuating relations between the two sides, with opposition and stability coexisting. The strict military and political discipline of the Li faction did not last long, and the plundering and devastation caused by the wars inflicted significant harm on the people of Shu, bringing the relations to a freezing point, to the extent that the Shu populace fled their homeland in search of survival. After the deaths of Li Te and his second son Li Dang, the armed refugee forces were severely weakened, while officials and soldiers came from outside to besiege them, creating a critical situation. At this time, the Li refugee leaders did not implement Li Te's previous policies of calming the people and promoting harmonious coexistence, resulting in the Shu populace dispersing to other regions, and the extent of their exploitation reflects the living and productive conditions of the people at that time. The raiding and plundering by the refugee forces caused considerable harm to the people of Shu, sharpening the conflicts between them. Relations between the two sides subsequently improved, and Fan Changsheng, the leader of the Five Bushels of Rice Sect in Shu, played a certain role in this. Historical records state: "Changsheng was skilled in astronomy and the occult arts; the people revered him as a deity." [10] "Xian served as the Chief State Preceptor and used unorthodox methods to bewitch the common people; many people worshipped him." [11]

3.4. The Period of Amicable Ascendancy

From the year 314 CE, when the realm was largely pacified, until Li Shou turned to a life of extravagance, the Li regime underwent two changes of leadership and harboured latent crises; nevertheless, relations between the authorities and the people were generally on an upward trajectory, characterised by goodwill. During this phase, with the Li regime's territorial control firmly established, relations between the Li faction and the populace were largely harmonious. Owing to the earlier period of warfare in Shu, which had led to mass displacement and economic decline, the region was in dire need of reconstruction and development. Coupled with appropriate policies from the ruling class, relations between officials and the people developed favourably. *The Book of Jin* commented on Li Xiong's reign, stating: "He imposed light taxes to pacify the people and reformed customs, and enforced simple laws to win the favour of the newly subjugated territories." [12] By the early years of Li Shou's reign, "Shou inherited Xiong's policy of leniency and frugality; having recently seized the throne, he continued to follow Xiong's governance". [13] Overall, relations between the authorities and the populace remained relatively harmonious.

3.5. The Period of Collapse

From the time Li Shou turned to a life of extravagance and bloodshed until the fall of the Han regime, the already fragile relationship between the authorities and the people broke down completely. The collapse of this relationship began with Li Shou's cruel oppression and exploitation of the populace. In the year 340 CE, Wang Gu, a Court Attendant of the Great Han, paid a visit to the Later Zhao. Upon his return, he spoke at great length to Li Shou of the Later Zhao's splendour and magnificence, and of how King Hu of Zhao ruled his subjects through violence; this stirred in Li Shou a desire to emulate him. Consequently, the conscription of the populace for labour intensified abruptly, and the burdens of corvée labour became overwhelming. Relations between the Li clan's group of displaced people and the people of Shu deteriorated rapidly. By the time Li Shi ascended the throne, his incompetence and indiscriminate use of criminal law led to a loss of loyalty both within and outside the court. At this point, the Great Han regime had reached its end.

4. The Evolution of Official-Citizen Interactions and Local Governance in Shu during the Li Regime

After the refugees entered Shu, influenced by the circumstances of the time and the policies implemented by successive Li rulers, the Li refugee group gradually grew in strength. Although their fragile relationship with the local populace experienced many vicissitudes, both sides jointly sustained the Chenghan regime's forty-year-long rule in Bashu. Later, due to the rulers' cruelty and incompetence, as well as the failure to address the regime's entrenched problems in a timely manner, the relationship between the two sides completely collapsed, accelerating Chenghan's demise.

The improvement in the Li clan's relations with the local populace was primarily the result of the combined efforts of three parties: the displaced Li clan, the former local officials, and the local populace. Firstly, the Li clan implemented conciliatory policies to proactively improve relations with the local populace. Appropriate policies by the ruling class—recruiting displaced people, granting them land, and relaxing control over the populace—led to a positive development in relations between the two sides. Secondly, the former officials of Shu took the opposite approach; in their struggle against the Li clan of displaced people, they continually diminished their own influence on the balance of power, thereby turning public opinion against themselves. Thirdly, there were religious factors. Historical records state that “the people of Ba practised Taoism, placing particular emphasis on the teachings of Laozi”;^[14] the Fan Changsheng faction and the Li clan of displaced people found common ground immediately, raising the banner of religion, which made it extremely easy for them to win over the populace. Religion played a significant role in easing the tensions between the people of Shu and the Li clan, fostering positive relations between the two sides and turning a potentially perilous situation into one of stability.

The already fragile relationship between the Li clan and the populace deteriorated to the point of a complete breakdown; the causes lay partly in the distinct characteristics of the Li clan and the people of Bashu, and partly in the common dynamics between rulers and the ruled. Firstly, the Li clan's acts of plunder and pillage showed little sign of abating as the situation unfolded, severely damaging the interests of the local populace and exacerbating the conflict between the two sides. Secondly, there were differences in temperament between the displaced people and the Shu people. The displaced people were resolute and fierce, whilst the Shu people were timid; yet, despite the Shu people's advantage of having lived in the region for generations, the displaced people ended up taking the upper hand. The particular nature of these character differences to some extent accelerated the deterioration of relations between the two groups. Thirdly, the war served to intensify the conflict between the two sides. Years of continuous warfare in Shu had severely devastated local production and livelihoods; this not only increased the burden on the common people and fuelled their hostility towards the outsiders, but also affected the Li clan's supply of provisions and military resources, as well as the stability of their power base. Fourthly, there were flaws in the policies implemented. Li granted special privileges to Fan Changsheng, the religious leader who had aided him in establishing his separatist regime, “exempting his retainers from military service and ensuring that all taxes were paid directly to his household”.^[15] It is evident that, under the Chenghan regime, retainers were generally subject to the dual oppression of having to pay state taxes whilst also performing labour duties for their master's household. Further exploitation of the retainer forces and competition with the regime for the population were inevitable, and both would directly or indirectly worsen relations between the Li regime and the populace. Furthermore, the imperial court's failure to provide officials with their stipends was bound to undermine the regime's cohesion to some extent, whilst simultaneously increasing the burden on the people and raising the likelihood and feasibility of officials taking advantage of the situation to levy

exorbitant taxes and oppress the populace. Fifthly, a series of problems stemming from land consolidation at that time were already beginning to emerge, becoming one of the latent causes for a shift in the people's attitude towards the Li regime; however, as the Great Cheng regime was generally in a period of growth and expansion, these issues had not yet come to the fore.

Under the influence of numerous factors, both internal to the Li clan and external, its relationship with the people gradually broke down. In November of the second year of Yonghe (346 CE), Huan Wen, a general of the Eastern Jin dynasty, led his forces to attack the Great Han regime; for the already teetering Han regime, this proved to be the final straw that broke the camel's back.

5. Conclusion

A comprehensive examination of the relations between the Li-led refugee group and the grassroots populace, as well as the changes in local governance, shows common conflicts between incoming refugees and native residents, along with the belligerent nature of the Li-led refugees. During the over forty-year period of Li's dominion over Bashu, fragility was the prevailing theme. Within this context, although the relationship between the two parties was influenced by shifts in the refugee group's policies toward the populace and by the passive or active choices of the people, both sides collectively sustained the Chenghan regime in the Bashu region for more than forty years amid the tumult of the Two Jin periods, which is noteworthy. At the same time, the estrangement of the Li-led refugee group from the prominent Shu clans and their fragile ties with the grassroots populace planted the seeds for the eventual collapse of the Chenghan regime.

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