

Imperial regent Wang Mang intended to restore the social order that had existed in China in the past but had become corrupted during the Han dynasty. His land reforms included the “well-field system” of equal land ownership, so-called because the Chinese character for *well* is written as two vertical lines crossing two horizontal lines, creating nine equal compartments. Thus one *well unit* is 900 *mu* of land (one *mu* is 0.165 acres), subdivided into nine compartments. Eight families inhabited 100 *mu* each, remitting the produce of the ninth compartment to the state. Wang Mang's attempts at reform failed within a few years, primarily because of opposition from large landholding families.

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## From the History of the Former Han Dynasty

By Ban Gu

### WANG MANG'S EDICT ON LAND REFORM

The ancients set up cottages and wells with eight families to a “well-unit” (900 *mu*). One husband and wife cultivated one hundred *mu* of land, remitting one-tenth of the produce as tax. Thus the state enjoyed plenty, the people were rich, and the sound of hymns of praise arose in the land. This was the way of Yao and Shun and it was followed and continued by the Three Dynasties. But the Qin was without principle and increased the levies and taxes for its own use, exhausting the strength of the people with its inordinate desires. It destroyed the institutions of the sages and abolished the well-field system. Consequently there arose those who encroached upon the lands of the farmers, avaricious and vile men, the strongest of them measuring their fields in the thousands, while the weak were left without enough land to stick the point of an awl into. In addition they set up markets for slaves where people were penned up like cattle and horses. In handling common people and servants they usurped the right to punish even by death. Villainous and tyrannical men, with profit as their sole concern, went so far as to kidnap and sell men and their wives and children, profaning the will of Heaven, destroying human relationships, and perverting the principle that man is the noblest creation of Heaven and earth....

The House of Han lightened the tax on land to one-thirtieth of the produce. However, there were commonly taxes for commutation of military service which even the aged and ill had to pay. In addition the powerful and rich families oppressed the people,

allotting lands for cultivation to sharecroppers and plundering them by high rents for borrowed lands. Thus though in name the tax was one-thirtieth, actually it amounted to one-half. Though father and son, husband and wife year in and year out plowed and weeded, yet the produce left to them was not enough to support life. Therefore the rich, whose very horses and dogs had a surplus of meal and grain, grew arrogant and perpetrated evil deeds, while the poor, without even the dregs of grain to satisfy themselves with, were reduced to despair and turned to a life of crime. Both sank into wickedness, and punishments had to be used and could not be set aside.

Formerly, when I occupied the position of Regent, it was my intention to nationalize all land and apportion it into “well-units” according to the population. At that time the empire enjoyed the portentous blessing of the double-headed grain, but because of the unfortunate occurrence of rebellions and banditry, I was forced temporarily to abandon my plans.

Now at this time let the term be altered and the land throughout the empire be designated “king's fields” and slaves be called “private retainers.” Neither land nor slaves are to be bought or sold. Those families whose adult males do not number eight, but whose fields amount to more than one “well-unit,” shall divide the surplus lands among their near relatives of the nine generations and the people of their townships and boroughs. Thus those who are without lands shall justly receive them according to this system. Anyone who shall dare to criticize the well-field system of the sages, or seek in defiance of the law to delude the populace, shall be cast out beyond the four borders to face demons and evil spirits.

Source: de Bary, William Theodore. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Edict on Land Reform”, *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.