Beginning c. 120 BCE, the imperial government of Han China adopted a number of measures that were intended to co-ordinate parts of the working efforts of the population and to enrich the resources of the empire. Accompanying costly military ventures that were designed to free the northern commanderies from the fear of invasions, and later to extend Chinese influence into the remote parts of Central Asia, a number of actions were directed so as to affect the economy. These included the imposition of a government monopoly on the minting of coin; measures to stabilise the price of staple goods and to provide for their more effective distribution; and the establishment of monopolies of state to control the production and distribution of salt and iron, and of alcoholic products.

These measures met with a mixed reception, arousing criticism both when they were introduced and in the succeeding centuries. Traditionalists reacted against enforcing controls on the population; they could not agree that imperial governments should properly engage in activities that were more correctly to be left to tradesmen. On the other hand those who initiated these plans believed that they would add greatly to the much depleted imperial revenue, facilitate expansionist moves and bring benefit to the poorer members of the population. The debate between those who advocated a laissez-faire policy and those who favoured a systematic control of the economy has continued in China's history ever since Han times, giving rise to acrimonious argument and ordered criticism, some of which is fortunately preserved in writing.

In treating the monopoly of iron products, Dr. Wagner is able to call on a combination of different sources of information, both literary and material, to an extent that is possible only rarely. The Standard Histories (Shiji, Han shu and Hou Han shu) tell of the ways in which iron workings had been handled before the monopoly was instituted, giving rise to large private fortunes; they record the proposals and counter proposals of officials; and they include names and locations of the official agencies that existed in CE 2 and 140. A fortunate find of a set of administrative documents at Yinwan 尹灣, dated between 15 and 10 BCE, provides detailed accounts, hitherto unknown, of the ways in which two of the agencies were staffed. Occasionally an epitaph inscription of an official adds to our information, as do references in a manual of algebra (Jiu zhang suan shu 九章算術). Above all there exists a written account of a debate that was ordered to be held in 81 BCE in which contesting parties presented their cases for or against the retention of the monopolies, in the light of the social, political
Reviews and economic implications. This highly valuable document (the Yan tie lun 銀鐵論) is couched in dialogue form; it concerns the ideological principles that were at stake, the value of the monopolies in practical terms and matters such as the quality of the products turned out by the government’s agencies.1

To these there may be added a rich variety of material items. Inscriptions on iron wares testify to the inspections or supervision that officials actually carried out. Archaeologists have identified no less than forty-four sites as ironworks, some perhaps dating from Warring States times. There is a concentration of twenty-three of these in modern Henan; some lay at a considerable distance from central China (two in Xinjiang, one in Inner Mongolia). As might be expected the scope and quantity of the discoveries vary greatly, as does the extent of the reports on the sites.

Dr. Wagner takes full advantage of this rare chance of linking such widely differing sources of information. He does so in full recognition that in no aspect is the literary evidence comprehensive and that the material finds are too widely scattered, both in time and place, to be regarded as normal or regular examples of the handiwork of man. He is to be congratulated on the care with which he avoids the pitfalls of easy generalisation, and on the caution with which he presents his evidence and conclusions. Of particular value are the two appendixes in which he lists a total of forty-five official agencies, with their locations, and the forty-four known sites of foundries or other workings. That these two lists do not correspond is not to be expected. Some of the agencies were set up in Former, some in Later Han; some of them may have lasted only for limited periods of time. Overall there remains the question of how effectively the Han governments were able to impose their controls, and how free individual entrepreneurs were to set up private undertakings. Dr. Wagner suggests (p. 66) that the absence of evidence for small scale bloomeries may be due to the state’s elimination of such works, but as he points out examples of these may yet await discovery. Certainly it cannot be shown that Han governments maintained the monopoly without interruption from 117 onwards, nor does the author try to do so.

A few points may be added to this study:

1. Behind the whole debate that concerned the retention of the monopolies there lurked the generally accepted distinction between two categories of production; i.e., the basic work (ben 銀) of agriculture and sericulture, and the ancillary occupations (mo 耕) of mining, manufacture and trade. While some writers, including Mengzi, recognised the interdependence of the two,

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1 In addition to the translations of parts of this document into English by (a) Esson M.Gale, and (b) Baudry-Weulersse et al., a translation of the whole work into Russian has now been published by J.L. Kroll (Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg, vol. I, 1997, vol. II, 2001).
there remained a fundamental insistence that the ancillary work must take second place to agriculture.

2. Dr. Wagner makes excellent use of the famous account of the debate of 81 BCE, and explains the circumstances in which this record was compiled (pp. 18-20). This was at a time of reaction against ideas of controlling the working energies of the population, and it is clear that the document is biased in favour of the critics and against the defendants of the monopolies. The critics are given more space than the defendants; it is the defendants, as portrayed, who were worsted in the arguments and sometimes reduced to silence.

3. The *Yan tie lun* is cited (p. 48) as a source for the suggestion that, following the establishment of the monopolies, 'much of the unskilled work was taken over by convict labourers'. The text of the passage from that book\(^2\) actually reads *zu*tu 卒徒, i.e. conscript servicemen and convicts, and the inclusion of the word *zu* is of some importance. Able-bodied males between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-six were obliged to render one month's service each year, when they were put to work in their home commanderies or counties, as directed by local authorities; criminal sentences to hard labour could last for several years. It follows that if the foundries were to be kept in operation, the supply of conscript servicemen would need replacement at regular and frequent intervals. The need to arrange for these turn-overs of manpower may possibly be one reason to account for situating the foundries close to the towns; for these housed the headquarters of the provincial authorities who would thus be well placed to direct conscript servicemen to the ironworks.

4. Attention is drawn (p. 54) to a fragment of a manuscript found at Dunhuang, cited by Yü Ying-shih as mentioning a prohibition on the export of weapons,\(^3\) but on inspection of a photograph of the piece, this is by no means certain. The fragment is far too small to determine its context. The readings are not agreed, as may be seen by comparing those of Chavannes and Luo Zhennu, and the meaning is not clear. There is no way of determining whether the text was based on one of the Han Statutes (*Lü* 律) or Ordinances (*Ling* 令).

This book is well researched in a professional manner, examining and assessing the relative evidence that concerns a particular form of economic activity in Han times. It is an excellent example of the way in which a study of historical

\(^2\) See p. 23, *Yan tie lun* 36 (Wang Liqi, revised edition, pp. 429-30); it may perhaps be suspected that the text of the critic's riposte is defective.

writings and archaeological funds can be co-ordinated, each type supplementing and enriching the other.