

Evolution of Ancient Chinese Village Governance

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Abstract

Agricultural civilization lasted for nearly five thousand years in ancient China. The long agricultural civilization era and the rich village governance experiences have been second to none. To study the evolution of ancient Chinese village governance can help dig the wisdoms of ancient Chinese, and even offer some references to the contemporary world.

Key words: Ancient China; Agricultural civilization; Village

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INTRODUCTION

Villages are the hometown of cities, and village governance has been a time-honored topic. As one of “The Four Great Ancient Civilizations,” China is the only one whose history and culture has never been interrupted. It has many precious experiences to offer in terms of village governance. Ancient China can generally be divided into two stages. In the first stage, the first state, Xia, appeared, followed by Shang, Western Zhou and Eastern Zhou.

The stage lasted from 21 B.C. to 221 B.C. and was called the “slave society.” In the second stage, the first unified central government, Qin, emerged. For the following 2,131 years, China was a “feudal society” and the feudalism ended along with the downfall of the Qing dynasty. The major difference between the two society systems lies in their land ownership. In the slave society, slaves are property of slave owners without land ownership. However, in the feudal society, peasants are the nominal owners of land, but must pay certain taxes and fulfil certain obligations. “Ancient Chinese village governance” in this paper mainly refers to the village governance style in the second stage. In the first stage, slaves exist as a special production tool, and slave owners manage slaves just like how they manage production tools.

1. ANCIENT CHINESE VILLAGE GRASSROOTS MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

1.1 Basis of Ancient Chinese Village Social Governance System—“Xiang-Li System”

“Xiang-Li System” refers to two grassroots local administrative institutions set up in areas below the county level. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, there were several “Xiang” under the administration of a county; several “Li” under the administration of a “Xiang;” and several “Shi-Wu” organizations. The county-level officials were assigned by the national government, while administrations of the Xiang and Li level were recommended by local masses and were responsible for the local social management and tax levitation. Thus, the latter was called “Zhi,” “Se Fu,” “San Lao,” “You Jiao,” etc.

During the Three Kingdoms, two Jins and Northern-Southern Dynasties, the “Xiang-Li” System of the Qin and Han Dynasties were inherited, but “Cun” emerged. Administrators of “Cun” were called “Cun Governor,”

“Lu Governor,” etc.. However, “cun” was still a territorial concept, and was a geological community naturally formed. It coexisted with the “Xiang-Li” System, but was not a national grassroots management organization.

During the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Xiang and Li organizations were further improved according to the requirement of regime governance. In the Sui dynasty, every 100 households were defined as a “Li,” and every five “Li” were defined as a “Xiang.” The administrator of the “Li” was called “Li Governor;” the administrator of “Xiang” was called “Xiang Zheng.” During the Tang dynasty, two grassroots organizations, “Lin” and “Bao,” under the administration of “Li” were set up. Every four households formed a “Lin;” every five “Lin” formed a “Bao;” every five “Bao” formed a “Li;” and every five “Li” formed a “Xiang.” The administrator of “Lin” was addressed as “Lin Governor;” the administrator of “Bao” was addressed as “Bao Governor;” the administrator of “Li” was addressed as “Li Zheng;” and the administrator of “Xiang” was addressed as “Qi Lao.” (Wei, 1989, p.48) The grassroots governance system of the Tang dynasty was stricter compared with that of the Sui dynasty, since the two-level village governance system was developed to a four-level one.

During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdom periods, the village social governance mainly carried forward the “Xiang-Li” System of the Sui and Tang dynasties.

1.2 New Development of Ancient Chinese Village Social Governance System: “Bao-Jia” System and Its Varied Forms

In the early Northern Song dynasty, the “Village Military System” was introduced so as to safeguard and maintain the newly-built regime. The military of the Northern Song dynasty could be divided into “Imperial Guards,” “Xiang Force” and “Militia.” The first two were national regular armed forces. Militias were temporarily recruited in villages, who were engaged in cultivation during the farming season, drilled during the slack seas and designated to fight during the wartime.

In the middle of the Northern Song dynasty, Premier Minister WANG An-shi launched a reform due to excessive national financial burdens, expanding bureaucracies, abuse of the “Village Military System” and weakening of military strength. Reform was called “Political Reformation by WANG An-Shi.” The “Bao-Jia” system was implemented. Ten households were defined as a “Bao;” 50 households constituted a “Large Bao;” and ten “Large Bao” formed a “Du Bao.” Every “Bao” had a “Li Governor;” every “Large Bao” had a “Large Bao Governor;” and every “Du Bao” had a “Bao Zheng” and “Deputy Bao Zheng.”¹ The government required all people within a “Bao” should supervise each other. If one

¹ 167th volume of *History of the Song dynasty: Record of Civilian Officials* (7).

person violates against the law while the others fail to report to authorities in time, the innocent in the same “Bao” would be punished according to the severity of the crime. This is the well-known “Collective Punishment System” in history.

Based on the tax submission situation, WANG divided every 30 tax-paying households as a “Jia.” The administrator of the “Jia” was “Jia Governor,” who was responsible for collecting taxes and implementing “Young Corps Law.” According to “Young Corps Law,” the government lent loans of young corps to peasants, and peasants should grow corps to pay off the loans. After the failure of the reformation, many policies were abolished, but the “Bao-Jia” System remained and was even carried forward by the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties.

In the early Yuan dynasty, the “Hoe Association” featuring mutual help among neighbors was organized by farmers to meet requirements of agricultural production. Similar to agricultural cultivation cooperatives, the “Hoe Association” advocated sharing of agricultural tools and labors. Based on the “Hoe Association” System, the government combined the naturally-formed community, “Cun,” and the labor associations to form a “Cun Association System.” In a “Cun,” every 50 households were defined as an “association.” The “Association Governor” was responsible for organizing agricultural production, sideline production and other production and operation activities. The system was kept even by the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Rulers of the Ming dynasty realized the importance of the old, who boasted rich experiences. During the Ming and Qing dynasty, the old were regarded as moral models and monitoring supervisors. At the same time, the systems of the Song and Yuan Dynasties were inherited, and “Xiang Yue,” “She Xue” and “She Cang” System were implemented nationwide. In other words, code of conduct was jointly discussed in the level of “Xiang.” Schools and material warehouses were carried out in the “She” level (Jin & Shi, 2002, p.34). In the Qing dynasty, based on the “Bao-Jia” System, “Cun-Jia” System was implemented. Every ten households were defined as a “Jia;” every 100 households were defined as a “General Jia;” “Cun” and “Jia” were functionally combined to integrate advantages of both “Bao-Jia” System and “Cun-She” System.

2. CORE OF ANCIENT CHINESE VILLAGE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM—PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM AND FAMILY SYSTEM

Appearing in the Xia dynasty, Patriarchal System was developed in the Shang dynasty and finally established in the Zhou dynasty. Successive dynasties of Chinese feudal society witnessed its gradual development. It referred to the distribution of resources and rights according to the blood relationship. Its initial objective was to ensure

the royal lineage and the nobility to inherit the right of governing the state and owing great riches. With the development of the era, governors of successive dynasties deepened and reformed the patriarchal system, including the regime, the clan authority, the theocracy, the authority of the husband, etc..

Family System is a social organization and management system based on the blood relationship. The striking characteristic of Family System is that the means of production are owned by families, and that governments, laws and moral education aim at protecting families. Everything of a family is governed by the patriarch. Family System and Patriarchal System supplemented each other. In essence, the former is the basis of the latter, and the prerequisite of the family property inheritance system.

In ancient China, Patriarchal System and Family System played an important role in the village social governance. Since the economy in the feudal society featured the self-sufficient small peasant economy, peasants' production life was relatively stable, requiring no exchange of bulks. In this way, the development of commodity economy was restricted and a large number of people were confined to land. In terms of rescue and relief work, distribution of public goods and large-scale engineering construction, if people could not be efficiently organized and responsibilities, powers and interested could not be distributed according to certain rules, basic social production and reproduction would be impeded. Therefore, it was necessary to organize peasants in certain form. Worship of blood relationship, ancestors and historical experiences was undoubtedly the best bond to the civilized agricultural countries and the inland countries. Once clansmen and families were formed, they were no longer just religious organizations, but more like political, economic and cultural organizations, which were closely connected with people's production life. The concept of "Family-Governed Monarchic Country" and religious concepts derived from the religious awareness could consolidate the national governance and contribute to the harmony and unity of national power and social grassroots. The concept of "Family-Governed Monarchic Country" emphasized that the whole country was owned by a king, and the king was the son of the heaven, who was designated by the heaven to govern a country. Theoretically and systematically, the concept of the right to rule was given by the heaven. "Divine Right of the King" was conducive to political governance. Patriarchal ideas clarified the natural governance and attachment relationship between the clan and clansman. The blood relationship and the property distribution relationship ensured the stability of the form of the organization and were conducive to the formation of a mutually restricted and promoting force with the government.

3. "SHI-SHEN" GOVERNANCE

"Shi-Shen" is obviously made up of two parts, namely "Shi" and "Shen." The former stands for literati originated during the Northern and Southern Han Dynasties, who were notable families and great clans holding official positions and prestige for generations. "Shen" stands for squires, which mainly include three kinds of personnel: a) middle and lower landlords and intellectuals with some knowledge but not entering the officialdom; b) former government officials who was retired at home or officials not appointed for a long time; c) clan or family seniors or other personages with high prestige or profile. Though not being officials, they were familiar with the officialdom and social management; had an identity different from that of the masses; and enjoyed special treatment. Relying on their edge over economic, political, cultural and social resources, they were neither masses nor officials. On the one hand, they played the role of brokers of the government powers; on the other hand, they undertook the responsibility as "popular will be leaders."

"Shi-Shen" governance was the basis of ancient Chinese village governance. Government powers of successive dynasties in ancient China failed to completely integrate itself deeply into the village grassroots society. The governing institutions were not found below the county level. Taxes that the government relied on for survival and officials appointed for governance, soldiers for external expansion—all of them came from "Xiang" and "Li." In order to fill the authority gap in "Xiang" and "Li," the willpower of rulers was not omnipotent. The will of social elites and the masses must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, conflicts would be generated in a vast governing area. "Shi" and "Shen," trusted and loved by the masses, identifying themselves with the governing ideas or even coming from the ruling group, became the trustable and optimal candidates for rulers and the masses (Zhu, 2004, p.17). "Shi-Shen" could be appointed to manage villages without payment, which could cut the national financial expenses, call upon "Shi-Shen" to open their purse and put forth their strength; improve the supply level of public products; mobilize the masses to participate in social public affairs based on public trust.

In order to ensure the uniformity of "Shi-Shen" and rulers in governing village society, the imperial examination system was launched in China after the Sui and Tang dynasties. Through the imperial examination system, rulers could spread thoughts, theories and political ethics recognized by them to the whole society; cultivate squires' loyalty towards the country and responsibility towards the public; and educate the public to obey the ruling of governments and rulers. On the other hand, village elites could be dug to join the ruling group to improve the overall qualities of officials.

4. NATIVE CHIEFTAIN SYSTEM

Chieftain is an official position. Set up in the Yun Dynasties, it was mainly conferred on tribal heads of ethnic minorities, who pledged eternal loyalty to the central regime. Royal governors of the feudal society used the native chieftain system to solve the policy issues in the minority area, and politically admitted the position of the ethnic minority heads without interrupting in the original production and living style of ethnic minorities. Village governance was managed by the chieftain in accordance with the customs and habits of various ethnic minorities. The central regime and the ethnic minorities constituted a symbolic governing relationship. In these ethnic minority areas, people lived under the rule of chieftain for generations. They just listened to the order of chieftain, and did not recognize and obey the order of the central governance.

5. ANCIENT CHINA VILLAGE GOVERNANCE SYSTEM AND CAUSE ANALYSIS

The emergence of any system is not accidental, but has a profound historical background and practical causes. In ancient China, the superincumbent ruling power of the national regime and the endogenous patriarchal clan system of the village society were integrated with each other to constitute an institutional basis for traditional Chinese village governance and finally form a dynamic balance, namely "double-track politics." The superincumbent "imperial power" and the spontaneously-launched "Clan Power" and "Shen Power" were paralleled to each other and interacted with each other to form a diversified village governance model. "Royal Right Stopped at the County Level" (meaning that the state political power didn't play a role below the county level) was a complete description of village governance. By analyzing the village governance system in ancient China, the author finds out the following influencing factors:

5.1 Influence of the Agricultural Civilization and Production Mode

Agricultural society was formed in China at an earlier date due to its favorable geological position, land, temperature, rainfall, etc.. Despite of fierce collision with the nomadic culture of ethnic minorities, the intensive inclusiveness of the Chinese culture and the ultra-stability of the agricultural civilization helped the agricultural culture dominate in the late Qing dynasty. Agriculture emphasized on land, water conservancy and labor intensiveness, so land distribution was a major national event. Therefore, the change of dynasties had a close bearing on land. In the ancient times featuring backward technical conditions, conservancy must rely on the cooperation of accurate mechanisms. Thus, it was a must to effectively organic

the public. Adequate labors are a basic prerequisite of agricultural development. In order to turn out more riches, peasants must be bound with the land. Since agriculture is characterized by repeated circulation, emphasis on experiences and self-sufficiency, village society is characterized by ignorance of education, science and technology, slow economic and social development and periodical development changes. Thus, the basic self-governance system featuring low cost, fast response and long duration became the first choice.

5.2 Influence of Social Riches and National Officials Surviving on National Finance

Due to low added-value of agriculture and the embezzlement of landlords, merchants and officials, the government's financial power was limited and could not support too many government officials. From the perspective of cutting the administrative cost, the central government had no ability to build a more standard political authority institution below the county level. Many village public affairs should be addressed by peasants themselves. In this way, clans, families and Shi-Shen gradually became the actual managers.

5.3 Influence of Traditional Ideology and Culture

As a civilized country with five thousand years of history, China boasts profound traditional ideology and culture with a far-reaching influence. Confucianism worshipped by rulers of successive dynasties is a representative. It emphasizes on the role of "ceremony." "Ceremony" means rules. Both the king and the masses must adhere to rules restricting their behaviors. The idea was reflected as the respect for interests of various parties in the benefit game. "Ceremony" was a method to divide interests of various parties, and consolidate the current order. Though there were numerous tries to change the village governance model, the final traditional ideology and culture was still in the upper hand. The agricultural governance pattern over the past two thousand years or so was not fundamentally changed.

5.4 Influence of Transportation Conditions and Communication Techniques

Despite of a vast land area, ancient China was backward in terms of its transportation conditions and communication techniques. The central government had no ability to conduct precise management of every place. The most efficient and cost-saving method to immediately solve all these problems in such a big country was to implement "self-governance." Through the imperial examination system, the central government unified the ideology of the public, especially "Shi-Shen" with that of the central government. Through Confucianism, the central government restricted behaviors of "Shi-Shen" with the requirements of "ceremony." At last, the central government focused on major affairs and relaxed their control on minor ones by entrusting specific tasks

to “Shi-Shen” and endowing “Shi-Shen” on part of the government power.

To sum up, influenced by the idea of “Grand Unification,” feudal rulers of successive dynasties holding the traditional concept that “kings have long arms” hoped that they could expand their territory, so they emphasized greatly on village governance. However, restricted by social and economic development level, inconvenient transportation, backward technical level and self-launched resistance, national power failed to directly integrate itself into the grassroots social organization. Therefore, “Xiang-Li” System, “Bao-Jia” System, “Native Chieftain System” and systems of the kind joined hands with clans, families and “Shi-Shen” to govern the village society. Affected by natural geology, small-scale peasant economy and traditional education, village society often saw a family

living in certain for generations without making large-scale migration. Thus, ancient Chinese governance was relatively stable. Despite of serious natural disasters and large-scale wars, few villagers moved. This contributed to the survival of the village governance model for more than two thousand years.

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