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The King's Power Dominating Society— A Re-examination of Ancient Chinese Society

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Abstract

In terms of social formation, the most important characteristic of traditional Chinese society was how the king's power dominated the society. Ever since the emergence of written records, we see that ancient China has had a most prominent interest group, that of the nobility and high officials, centered around the king (and later the emperor). Of all the kinds of power exerted on Chinese society, the king's was the ultimate power. In the formation process of kingly power, a corresponding social structure was also formed. Not only did this central group include the king or emperor, the nobles, and the bureaucratic landlords, but the "feudal landlord ecosystem" which was formed within that group also shaped the whole society in a fundamental way. As a special form of economic redistribution, corruption among officials provided the soil for the growth of bureaucratic landlords. At the foundation of this entire bureaucratic web was always the king and his authority. In short, ancient Chinese society is a power-dependent structure centered on the king's power. The major social conflict was therefore the conflict between the dictatorial king's power and the rest of society.

Keywords

king's power – landlord – social classes – despotism – social form

A long-held and popular theory claims that the economic base determines the social superstructure. In this scenario, power relations belong to the super-

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structure and political forms are a result of the concentration of economic resources and processes. Unlike that theory, the idea of “the king’s power dominating the society” centers on how dictatorial power operated as a system and controlled ancient Chinese societies. A narrative of history based on this idea will be different from a narrative formed on the theory of base and superstructure, sometimes with a total reversal of cause and effect in describing some specific historical processes.

Such a shift in theory and the resulting narratives do not simply come from my own arbitrary decisions, but is a result of many years’ accumulation of academic research. It first started with Mr. Wang Yanan’s outstanding idea. In his book, *A Study of Chinese Bureaucratic Politics*, he made an insightful argument about political power determining the economy. He wrote, “The absolutely dominant power of the emperors and kings in Chinese dictatorial bureaucratic politics was established on the basis of absolute control of land, which was the basic productive means for the whole society, and furthermore on the exploitation of the surplus of agriculture labor and the possession of the products of the labor. The dominant power showed its economic power through the control and possession; it showed its political power through taking the control and realizing the possession.”¹ However, Mr. Wang’s argument took the perspective of economics and its starting point was the landlord system (which is different from the estate ownership system).

For that reason, although Wang started the argument for “the dictatorial power dominating the society,” it is still within the framework of “the king’s power dominating the society” for the following reasons. First, the idea of “the king’s power dominating the society” looks at history from the perspective of political power instead of economics (the landlord system). An absolute kingship or monarchy is not a concentration of economic relations led by the landlord system. On the contrary, the society was dominated and controlled by the power from above. Second, this idea does not typically invoke the concept of “bureaucratic politics,” for the dictatorial ruler was the only true central agent of politics. Though a ruler needs and depends on a group of bureaucrats to realize his rule, bureaucrats are not active agents of politics for they are only servants of the ruler. Therefore, there was no room for independent “bureaucratic politics” or “scholars’ politics” or “yeomen politics.” Although a ruler could take forms other than a king or an emperor—for instance the emperor’s mother or powerful ministers or eunuchs—the system was the same.

1 Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo Guanliao Zhengzhi Yanjiu*, China Social Sciences Press, 1981, p. 166, p. 122.

In the concept of “the king’s power dominating the society,” “the king’s power” here is despotism in essence. The reason I use the term “the king’s power” is because the concept of “imperial power” was not introduced in China until the Qin Dynasty, while the concept of “the king’s power” had been used throughout the history. Furthermore, “the king’s power,” monarchy, imperial power, and feudal despotism all have similar meanings. Of course, the king’s power in different historical periods had different features.

Here, I am introducing a concept of “kingly-powerism,” which refers to both a social system and an ideology. It is neither a social form nor a power network, but a social system of control and operation. It can be divided into three levels: first, the power system centered around the king’s power; second, the social structure built upon this power system; third, the ideology that accompanies these two levels. Its specific content can be summed into the following eight aspects. First, ever since the emergence of written records, ancient China has had a most prominent interest group, a group that centered around the king and the nobles and later developed into a group that included the king, the nobles, and the bureaucrats. Although its members kept changing, the structure of the group was very stable. It was this interest group that controlled the society. Second, the king’s power was a special entity that was based on social economy but also went beyond social economy. It was a result of competition through military power or violence, which is a non-economic means to get hold of economic production. The statements, “The one who wins the war becomes the king,” and “(one) wins the world on a fighting horse,” both described such a process. This kind of political power can also be seen as military or violent power. Third, in a society ruled by king’s power which was based on violence, it is not that the economic factors determine the division of power, but that division of power determines social and economic distributions. Fourth, among all of the social structures (power structure, economic structure, hierarchy structure, kinship structure, etc.), the king’s power structure was the most dominant. Fifth, of all the kinds of social powers (political power, clan power, paternal power, husband power, religious power, trade association power, economic subject power, etc.), the king’s power was the ultimate power. Sixth, in daily social life the king’s power works as a social hinge, especially in the aspects of personal control, taxation, levies, military service, and some economic monopolies. Seventh, all social and political chaos ended with a return to the king’s power system. Eighth, the idolization of the king’s power was the core of the ideology and culture, and “the kingly way” was the representation of social rationality, morality, justice, and fairness.

I A Dictatorial Empire: The Result of Politics Determining Economic Activities

Despite the quaint claim that a ruler “wins the world by having the right way,” there is a consensus that dictatorial empires were built upon violence or the fulfillment of a movement that had military power as backup. However, the academic field has different opinions about the reasons an empire comes into existence, and most scholars take mainstream historical materialism as the theoretical lens. For example, to answer why the Qin Dynasty unified China, scholars have sought answers from politics, economics, culture, nationality, and history, yet have never reached agreement about the main cause of the unification. Of all views, the most popular explanation was that Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, followed the people’s will. He satisfied the people’s wishes and unified China to solidify feudal relations of production and to advance the development of productive forces. This explanation helped to construct an idealized image of Qin Shi Huang.

Such explanations can be inspiring. However, they are all deductions based on a certain theory and they lack analyses of specific historical processes and supporting historical facts. As a matter of fact, as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, the three ideas of “making the king respected, expanding the land, and strengthening the military”² had been closely integrated with each other. All of the fast-moving wars during the Warring States Period were launched to compete for land and population. The strong states would not stop until they had annexed the weak. Some kings, thinkers, and lobbyists at that time kept talking about unification, or in their words, “a hegemon,” “the course of the hegemon,” “the emperor” “make the world one,” “stabilize the world by making it one,” “the son of heaven,” “annex the world,” “eliminate all the other states,” “annex other kings,” “swallow the whole country,” “become an emperor and rule,” “control other vassals all across the country,” “there are only four sides of the earth, and within that all people should belong to a same country,” “the whole world should be one,” etc. All these different sayings reflect the same theme: all the local rulers should fight to be the ruler of the whole country.

Qin Shi Huang was one of these ambitious local rulers. What made him different was that he was moving faster than anybody else on the same track. Dun Ruo said: “If the King of Qin becomes the emperor, the rest of the world will have to pay tribute.”³ Other lobbyists at that time all understood that Qin

2 *Zhanguo ce. Zhao ce er.*

3 *Zhanguo ce. Qin ce si.*

“won’t stop until all soldiers of other states are dead and all people become Qin’s subjects.”⁴ After the unification, Qin Shi Huang himself made it clear that “within the frontiers, all land belongs to the emperor, and all people are the emperor’s subjects.”⁵ His words are absolutely in accordance with other people’s analysis of him. Therefore, the unification by Qin and the establishment of a dictatorial nation was a result of power determining economic activities.

If we broaden our historical perspective, it is not difficult to notice that not only the Qin Empire, but every dictatorial empire in ancient Chinese history was the result of politics determining economic activities. It is more accurate to say that the dictatorial power system was a result of power determining economics, especially distribution, than to say that it was a result of some kind of land ownership system (state ownership or private ownership). The amount of resources distributed was related to the amount of power possessed, and that is why people were desperate to pursue power. The feudal unification and the centralized dictatorial power were formed in the fight for power. Of course, it was not a personal or duel-like fight, but a group activity that was centered on the ruler and based on the military and bureaucracy. A dictatorial power system formed by military might has two most obvious characteristics: it transcends economics, and it is a military bureaucratic entity that centers on the king. By transcending economics it ignores economic laws and sometimes even goes directly in the opposite direction; by being a military bureaucratic entity it has endless desire and exercises brutal exploitation of social wealth. Centralization of power was the means to the end of usurping economic interests. Therefore, economic relationships would certainly be transformed during the process of power centralization. Or in other words, political power was not necessarily a centralized representation of economic forces, but rather the dictatorial empire was a result of politics determining economics. The high centralization of political power has no direct relation with economic forms, such as forms of land ownership. Political power had its own independent existence that directly controlled the means and products of production. In many historical circumstances, centralized politics did not come after the means of production became owned by the state. On the contrary, highly centralized politics would directly appropriate means of production and take ownership of them for the state, or for private ownership by the nobles.

4 *Zhanguoce. Weice san.*

5 *Shiji. Qinshihuang benji.*

II The King's Power, Social Stratification, and the Shaping of the Whole Society by "The Feudal Landlord Ecosystem"

Is social stratification a natural result of economic activities, or is it created by power dynamics? Generally speaking, social stratification in Chinese history was a result of both factors, but the dominant class was formed by power distribution and thus was a derivative of power. Not only was the group including the emperor, the nobles, and the bureaucratic landlords created by political power, but the "feudal landlord ecosystem" which was formed within that group also shaped the whole society in a fundamental way.

A *On the Formation of the First Generation of Landlords*

Ancient China became a feudal society (for the time being we will still use this concept) no later than the Warring States Period. How did the landlords in the Warring States Period come into existence? Academia has been applying the theory that productive forces determine the relations of production and the theory of base and superstructure, and has ascribed the emergence of the new landlord class to private land reclamation, which was caused by reforms in productive means. However, the first generation of landlords in China in fact did not emerge as a result of the natural expansion of small-scale peasant economy and annexation of land, which has been the dominant opinion in the academic circle. Instead, those landlords arose through the transformation of the group of "vassals, gentlemen ministers, bureaucrats, big households with nobility, yeomen, etc.," and this groups' identity was predominantly political. Therefore, the conclusion that political power determines economics is derived by studying history.

Specifically speaking, the ways that political power determines economics can be divided into four aspects: the dominant role of politics in land transfers; hierarchical control of society; politics determining production distribution; and the status of each class of feudal landlords.

i The Dominant Role of Politics in Land Transfers

During the Spring and Autumn Period it became a fashion to acquire land. A special phenomenon during the process of land acquisition at that time is worth noticing, which is that it was through political rather than economic methods that land changed hands. In other words, the land transfers were not carried out through equal exchange or by selling and buying, but were derivatives of political and military activities. And thus arose a strange phenomenon: land transfers without a land market.

At that time, land transfers were mostly conducted between vassals and gentlemen ministers. The following are the ways they exchanged land among each other.

The first way was by enfeoffment, which means the superior grants the land to his inferior. There were many different kinds of enfeoffment at that time, including “to grant,” “to reward,” “to authorize,” “to order,” “to give,” “to return,” “to support,” etc.

The second was by fighting. There is no principle here; it only depends on power. The fighting could be between a king and his minister, or between vassals and gentleman ministers. In the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Guoyu*, fighting over land was also called “invasion,” “entering,” “acquiring,” and “dividing,” and the land acquired after invasion was called “*jiang*,” meaning territory.

The third was redistribution of land by moving the local people. For example, “Qiji, the prince of Chu, moved the state of Xu to the territory of Yi, which actually was Chengfu. He then added the land of Zhoulai and Huaibei to Xu; Wu Ju granted land to Xunan. Randan moved people of Chengfu to the territory of Chen, and gave Chen the land of Pu and West Xi as compensation. He also moved people living outside of Fangcheng to Xu.”⁶

The fourth was by demanding. Demanding is different from invading, for it relies on politics instead of violence. “Zhibo asked Han Xuan for land. . . and was given a land of ten thousand households,” he then “asked for land from Zhao.”⁷

The fifth was using land as means for political purposes. To break the alliance between Zheng and Jin, Chu “sent an envoy to meet with prince Cheng to establish alliance with Zheng, promising him the land in Ruyin.”⁸

The sixth was that some people volunteered to give back some of their enfeoffed land for a number reasons. Such actions were called “to give as a gift,” or “to deliver.” For example, Qi Yin “delivered” some of his land to other nobles in return for asylum. Chen Huanzi defeated the Luan and Guo, and could have taken their land, but he took Yan Ying’s advice and decided to “give to other nobles as a gift.”⁹

The seventh was the exchange of land for political needs. “Count Zheng asked to offer sacrifice to Duke Zhou instead of Mount Tai, and to exchange the area of Beng near Mount Tai for the area of Xu in the state of Lu.”¹⁰ This kind of

6 *Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong jiunian.*

7 *Hanfeizi. Shuolinshang.*

8 *Zuo Zhuan. Chenggong shiliunian.*

9 *Zuo Zhuan. Xianggong ershijiunian; Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong shinian.*

10 *Zuo Zhuan. Yingong shiyinian; Zuo Zhuan. Yingong banian.*

exchange was also considered as borrowing. According to *Zuo Zhuan* chapter *Huangong Yuan Nian*: “Count Zheng used a piece of jade for the deal of land of Xu. This was because he wanted to achieve the purpose of offering sacrifice to Duke Zhou and exchange Beng with Xu.” Although it looked like an exchange on the surface, the political purpose was the real cause.

The eighth was the nobles or the administrators reallocated the land with administrative orders. For example, the state of Jin “changed the old land allocation.” Zheng Zisi “reformed and made each field bordered with a trench.” Zichan continued Zisi’s reform. The state of Chu also “wrote down the land and fields, and measured the forests.”¹¹ All these were reorganizations and reallocations of land through administrative orders.

The ninth was through selling and buying. “The minorities live on the prairie, and they treasure goods over the land, therefore they sell the land.”¹²

Except for the ninth way, almost all means of land transfer were realized through political and military means instead of economic means. The reason is that land ownership was affiliated with politics, and the centralization of political power led to land ownership.

By the time of the Warring States Period, with the power centralized around the ruler, the ruler also controlled the allocation of land ownership. By granting land as fiefs to the nobles and officials, the ruler thus created a group of elites and landlords. At the same time, he also granted a lot of land to the peasants and made them registered affiliates of the state controlled by the state. These peasants were also called the state’s agricultural slaves.

ii The Control Over Society by the Hierarchical System

A hierarchical system undoubtedly is established upon certain economic bases, but the direct cause of hierarchy is political. The extent of influence of a hierarchical system signifies the level of control over personal freedom by political power. When a hierarchical system not only determines people’s social status but also their economic status, it means people have very limited freedom beyond the political scope. The more the people are subordinate to political power, the less likely it is for them to become economic agents.

The Spring and Autumn Period was an era of wars, and the hierarchical system that centered around the King of Zhou was under attack. For some people, this led to more freedom, but the hierarchical system itself did not go into decline. All the people at that time were still living within the hierarchy.

11 *Zuo Zhuan. Xigong shiwunian; xiangong shinian; xiangong sanshinian; xiangong ershiwunian.*

12 *Zuo Zhuan. Xiangong sinian.*

Therefore, except for the ultimate ruler, everybody else was a political subordinate, inadequate to constitute an economic agent. In such circumstances, it was impossible for economic activities such as buying and selling land to be independent from political intervention. A lot of famous ministers at that time, who had huge wealth and many followers, not only lost all their wealth but sometimes would be reduced to slavery when they lost political battles. For example, famous nobles Li, Shao, Qing, Yuan, Gu, Ji, Qing, and Bo in the State of Jin were all “reduced to slaves.”¹³ It was a common phenomenon during the Spring and Autumn Period that political status determined one’s economic status.

During the Warring States Period, an important development in the hierarchical system was the implementation of the entitlement system among the military, the officials, and also the commoners. The *Yantielun* chapter *Xiang* cites *Zuo Zhuan* and explains: “That commoners can be entitled also was not started by Kaiping, but dated back to the Warring States Period.” During the Warring States period, distribution of wealth was closely tied to the entitlement system. A higher title gave one access to more assets, land, and servants. The entitlement system not only determined people’s social status but also controlled people’s economic life. Therefore, many people deemed it among the ruler’s most important powers and duties to confer titles. It was considered one of the “three treasures” and “six powers”¹⁴ for the king to rule the country.

If we focus on the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, we can see that the feudal landlords were composed of such people as the vassals, gentlemen ministers, bureaucrats, noble households, yeomen, etc. Most of them did not become prosperous through economic means, but through violent fighting and political power. Although they did not create a feudal economy based on the feudal economic relations, they had great influence over the fate and existing form of feudal landlords. Therefore, the emergence and survival of feudal landlords went beyond the sphere of economics.

iii Politics Determining Distribution

The distribution of social production is a very complicated matter. Seen from the situation in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, distribution was mainly carried out through three forms: state taxation, labor

13 *Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong sannian.*

14 The “three treasures” were “orders, money, and rewards” (*Guanzi. Zhongling*). The “six powers” were “power to make live, to kill, to make rich, to make poor, to make superior, to make inferior” (*Guanzi. Renfa*). The most important power was the power to grant or deprive salary and rewards.

levies, and state spending. State spending, the budget for the king's living expenses, and salaries and rewards for officials were all determined by politics. Salaries for officials included their income for working, while rewards for officials were counted as additional gifts. Although listed as separate items, they were often mixed. Some rewards were counted as salary. For example, the King of Wei rewarded Gong Shuzuo "a hundred acres of fields, and counted it as salary."¹⁵

If taxation is the primary redistribution, then state spending, the king's expenses, and officials' salaries can be seen as the main content of secondary distribution. During the Warring States Period, there were three main types of salaries and rewards for officials: the first was fiefs, which were very popular; the second was grain; and the third was currency. Besides these, clothing and treasures and jewels were also granted as rewards. Many officials with their salaries and rewards became landlords in the Warring States Period.

In summary, during that time, economic principles were not the first things considered in distribution and re-distribution of social wealth. There were still some people who managed to become landlords through economic means, but they were not the majority.

iv The Status of Different Classes among the Landlords

In the Warring States Period, the vassals were the biggest landlords, and they acquired almost all of their wealth through political and military means. The second class was titled lords. They were a special class among the feudal landlords, second only to the vassals. According to historical records, there were a little more than one hundred of them. There were two ways to become a titled lord in the Warring States Period. The first way was through military achievements. As stated in *Guanzi*: "When other states are attacking us, those ministers who can come up with good strategies to benefit the state should be granted land and title; those who fight and achieve victories on the battlefields should also be rewarded and entitled."¹⁶ The second way was through kinship. For example, Su Qin once said: "the fathers and brothers of nobles can also be titled."¹⁷ Besides these two ways, in the Warring States Period someone could become a title lord because of his personal fame. Essentially, entitled lordship was a form of redistribution of power and wealth. As well, it also happened that some high officials and those who were appreciated by the king were given fiefs as salary or reward. The growing number of less prominent officials,

15 *Zhanguo. Weiceyi.*

16 *Guanzi. Kuiduo.*

17 *Zhanguo. Zhaoce'er.*

their descendants, and yeomen undoubtedly also belong to the group of landlords, and many of them lived upon fiefs and income from bestowed fields. Clearly, all these landlords' wealth was maintained through political power.

In summary, the first generation of landlords in Chinese history came into existence mainly through political moves. It is a historical fact that the first generation of landlords acquired their status through non-economic methods.

B *The Origin of Landlords in Qin and Han Times, and How the Power-Centered "Feudal Landlord Ecosystem" Shaped the Society*

Starting from the Qin and Han Dynasties, the creation of feudal landlords was still primarily through political privilege and power-based redistribution. The occasional buying and selling of land was not based on a free and fair market. Generally speaking, there were three ways of becoming big landlords.

First, violence and political maneuvers created big landlords. War, illegal and violent invasion, and legal political distribution were different forms by which politics determined the economy. In those processes, it was not that profit was transformed into land ownership, but that violence and privilege were transformed into land ownership.

Second, land was acquired through the combination of political violence and buying and selling. Forcing others to sell land was a popular way of annexation. It was not buying and selling in a fair and equal market, but rather deals made by coercive force. By forcing others to sell, land lost its character as goods, and the price was merely symbolic. Therefore it was more like robbery under the name of buying. In this process, political violence played the dominant role.

Third, people bought and sold land. In this process, land buying and selling appears free, but in reality there were no social conditions for a real free market in the feudal era, and the buying and selling of land was a less common phenomenon. Most land was already controlled by non-economic forces before it entered the market. The limitations on personal freedom were a big obstacle to the commoditization of land. When an agricultural producer was not free himself, the land he occupied could not enter the market, for one's land could not be freer than its owner. Although some buying and selling of land looked fair on the surface, a deeper investigation reveals that political violence rather than natural economic law was the real force behind those deals. A lot of historical records show that people were forced to sell their land when heavy taxation drove them to the point of bankruptcy, for they had no other option than to sell land. Although it is possible that in a market buying and

selling can be free, the determining factor behind these deals was still political violence.

Therefore, it is fair to say that the middle and upper level of feudal lords came into being through political means. Although their numbers were limited, they were the center of the landlord class and thus shaped the characteristics of the feudal landlords group. Political privilege was more decisive than economic advantages for those who became landlords.

In ancient China, an effective way for landlords to expand their property was to collect profit through acquiring land. An even more effective method was to acquire land by taking advantage of official power. Therefore, the most effective way for one to become a landlord or expand his property was to become an official, and to become an official one had to get educated. Thus, the tripartate of literati, bureaucrats, and landlords became an ecosystem that centered on acquiring political power. This ecosystem encompassed the economy, politics, and culture. Culture or education can be directly transformed into political power, which then can be directly transformed into economic profit. A lot of phenomena in the feudal society were closely related to this ecosystem.

First, the existence of this ecosystem was one of the fundamental causes of the expansion of the bureaucratic group and the increasing power of feudal landlords.

Second, the fate of each landlord was closely related to this ecosystem. On one hand, this ecosystem was the social circle of most landlords, especially the middle and upper class of landlords. On the other hand, this ecosystem also broke the strict boundary between higher-status and lower-status landlords, and also opened a channel between the rich and powerful and the poor and inferior. A feudal landlord could not maintain his class status in the long-run just by being rich, but had to rely on this ecosystem. Some big households and families after the Eastern Han Dynasty maintained their prosperity for a long time mainly because they kept up a strong web of relations within that ecosystem.

Third, the activity of this ecosystem also helped boost the development of feudal culture. Since at that time people sought education in order to become officials, and literature and culture were subordinate to the needs of the officialdom, political ethics and culture were highly developed and became the mainstream of ancient Chinese culture, which played an important role in upholding feudal rule.

Fourth, since most feudal bureaucrats were scholars, the bureaucrats were the most cultured social class. Furthermore, with the expanding bureaucratic organs and competition among political ideas, the politics of ancient China

were imbued with rationality. Although the king and the emperor and the gods were enshrined and respected in temples, most critical political decisions were made through rational argument instead of invoking the divine. In dealing with critical political matters, the officials would enter a quasi-intellectual competition and come up with different solutions to compare and debate. In another way, the ancient Chinese politics was very flexible. The bureaucratic system itself was to some extent flexible, and the changing of officials also made changing policies possible. Besides this, it is also worth noticing that in bureaucratic politics the officials also resorted to schemes and tricks in competition for power. Conspiring created partisanship, and therefore the history of ancient Chinese bureaucracy was also a history of rivalry among different parties. Although some of those fights were about right and wrong, most of them occupied the moral gray zone.

Fifth, the activity of this ecosystem of the feudal landlords, especially those in officialdom, was characterized by its prevalent hypocrisy. Like Ming Dynasty historian Li Zhi said: “(the officials) in public claim their advocacy of *dao*, but privately they do everything for wealth and social status.”¹⁸ On the surface, the feudal landlords all claimed themselves as followers of Confucius and Mencius, pursuing the values of benevolence and propriety, morality, peace and love, and devotion to the people. But the real situation was quite different, with corruption and abuse of power prevalent. Of course, this kind of hypocrisy was not unique to the Chinese feudal bureaucratic landlords. All exploiting classes in any society share this hypocrisy. However, in comparison, the Chinese bureaucratic landlords are more striking and more adroit at playing the two-faced character.

Sixth, since the landlords lived by collecting land rent and employing the labor of the commoners, the officials lived by collecting tax, ensuring social stability, and acquiring wealth by taking advantage of political power, and the mainstream culture was a bureaucratic culture which served to uphold the king's power, the center of this ecosystem was feudal politics, leaving the society's economy in a subordinate position. Economics only became valuable when it served the feudal politics, or else it became superfluous. When it came to the economy itself, more attention was paid to distribution than production.

The activity within this ecosystem created a huge group of feudal bureaucrats. It also developed a highly sophisticated feudal bureaucratic culture and cultivated many feudal bureaucratic landlords. This ecosystem attracted almost all of the human talent into the official sphere. It played a key role in safeguarding the feudal rule, but exerted very little positive influence on the

18 Chapter Two, *Xufenshu*.

development of social economy. It was one of the fundamental reasons that Chinese history saw such little progress for such a long time.

C *Corruption: The Soil for the Growth of Bureaucratic Landlords*

To investigate the question of social distribution in ancient China, it is necessary to conduct research into the relationship between corruption and social distribution. By corruption, I mean the phenomenon of officials taking advantage of their positions and political power to demand money from others, take bribes, embezzle public property, use public power for private gain, and otherwise illegally seek economic profit. In ancient China, corruption among officials can be seen as a special form of redistribution, which should be added to the other three major forms of distribution, namely taxation, labor levies, and land rents for landlords. It was an important link in the social economic process at that time, and was also a major method for accumulating wealth.

Therefore, we should not view corruption as a topic for moral consideration, but should consider it an actual economic phenomenon. We used to see corruption as abnormal in a society. However, from a different perspective, it is a special normality. Power can be viewed as a universal ground for exchange—everything comes after power. Power can become obsolete if one does not use it, therefore under the right conditions the bureaucratic landlords would surely take hold on to their power and accumulate as much they could. As pointed out in *Bureaucratic Politics in China*, “*The Twenty-Four Histories* is in fact a history of corruption.”¹⁹ The popular saying, “there is no official that is not corrupted,” basically tells the truth.

i The Omnipresent Corruption

Although corruption was never legal, it remained a prevalent phenomenon. According to historical records, corruption was in existence as early as the Western Zhou Dynasty.²⁰ In the Warring States Period, corruption became more common. Han Fei said of that time: “Those who played tricks and seek private gain and who lied to the king, and those who bribed widely allied themselves with important ministers, these people get fame and wealth, even their fathers and sons get to share that.”²¹ In the Qin and Han Dynasties, with the emergence of a political system that centralized power, corruption became even worse. Zuo Xiong of the later Han Dynasty said: “Those officials who only

19 Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo guanliao zhengzhi yanjiu*, p. 116, China Social Sciences Press, 1981.

20 In *Shangshu Lixing*, “loving goods,” one of the five wrongdoings, meant officials taking bribery.

21 *Hanfeizi. Jianjieshicheng*.

take bribes enough for their daily living are deemed as clean; those who take more than their family can use are deemed as corrupt.”²² In the Wei and Jin Dynasties, officials also “seek wealth and ask for bribes, knowing no limits; they give the living official positions and deal people titles; they won’t do anything unless bribed.”²³ In the Song Dynasty, according to Bao Zheng’s estimate, “six or seven out of ten officials take bribes and abuse power.”²⁴ In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it became even worse. In 1421, Zou Ji of the Ming Dynasty once submitted a report to the emperor, and said at that time “corrupt officials are everywhere; exploitation is reaching people’s bones.”²⁵ The Qing Dynasty witnessed more prevalent corruption: He Shen, the Minister of Defense at the time of Emperor Qianlong, was said to have accumulated a billion pieces of silver through taking bribes.

ii Forms of Corruption in Feudal China

In ancient China, corruption was practiced in many ways, and most of them fall into the following three categories.

First, corrupt officials took advantage of their power to take what they wanted or blackmail people. This was most common among local officials. For example, in the Northern Wei Dynasty, an official named Yuan Dan, who was the Inspector of Qizhou, “was corrupt and abusive, he would take everything he wanted, like a horse or a cow, and he became people’s common concern.” When people told him he was too greedy, he was shameless enough to say: “there are 70,000 households in Qizhou, on average I don’t ask for more than 30 dollars from each household, how can you say that I’m greedy?”²⁶

Second, corrupt officials took advantage of state income. Sun Zhenglun of the Ming Dynasty described such corruption this way: “Some officials sit high in their power seats, looking respectable like a god and authoritative like a tiger. Sometimes they make a small task a bigger one, or make a private matter a public one, or make a temporary job a long-term one.”²⁷ This kind of corruption was also popular in the Qing Dynasty. For example, in Hunan people were asked to pay one tenth of their income for tax, but actually “they paid more than two or three tenths.”²⁸

22 *Houhanshu. Zuoxiongzhuan.*

23 *Cefuyuangui. Qingjianbu. tanmao.*

24 *Songshi. Li Xinzhuan Zhuan.*

25 *Mingshi. Zoujizhuan.*

26 *Taipingyulan. Renshibutan.*

27 Chapter 36, *Mingshilu fulu. Chongzhenchangbian.*

28 *Zhao Shenqiao, Zhaogongyigong shenggao*, chapter 6.

Third, corrupt officials took advantage of state spending. Officials in charge of various infrastructure and other state projects were given opportunities for such corruption. For example, Tian Yannian, who was the Grand Minister of Agriculture in the Han Dynasty, took advantage of the state policy of paying to hire ox carts for peasants, and lied about the number of ox carts to gain private profits.²⁹ In the Qing Dynasty, officials in charge of river regulation “took river problems like floods as an opportunity to seek profits. All high level ministers viewed river regulation as an outer treasury. Even if all the money was used, it still was not enough for river regulation.”³⁰

Fourth, corrupt officials in charge of the state treasury took the opportunity to steal from the treasury. For example, *Zhoufuyuangui* recorded the story of Tang Qing, who was the inspector of Shouzhou and “embezzled money and goods from the official warehouse.”³¹ *Suishu* recorded the story of Zhengyi, who was also an inspector and ‘arbitrarily embezzled public money for his own use.’ *Sanguozhi* also recorded a story of an official of Quzhou County who “stole cloth from the official warehouse.”

Fifth, corrupt officials took bribes. In ancient China, high ranking officials usually did not have opportunities to directly exploit common people or have access to the state treasury. However, they would widely engage in bribery. Qin Yiben of the Ming Dynasty once said: “The officials in remote places were sources of income for officials in more important places; and all officials were sources of income for officials who were part of the court’s central cabinet.”³² According to Liang Tingdong, the Minister of Defense in the Ming Dynasty, every time local officials came to the capital city to see the emperor or take exams or reviews, each of them had to spend five or six thousand gold pieces in bribes.³³

D *Ancient Chinese Society as a Power-Dependent Structure*

Ancient Chinese society had a power-dependent structure, which extended to various aspects of social life. In the production relation, the possessor of productive materials and the producers (workers) constitute an absolute or strongly dependent relationship. The economic relationship between people was close to the relationship between masters and slaves. As for political relations, the emperor or the king, the bureaucrats, and the commoners were

29 *Hanshu. Kulizhuan.*

30 *Xiaotingzalu*, chapter 7.

31 *Cefuyuangui. Mushoubu tandu.*

32 *Mingshi. Qianyibenzhuan.*

33 *Mingshi. Liang Tingdong zhuan.*

clearly differentiated within the hierarchical system, which stipulated that the emperor or the king dominated the officials, and the officials dominated the common people. Within the bureaucratic group there also existed a clear hierarchy, with higher ranking officials dominating the lower ranking ones, and the lower ranking ones dependent on the higher ranking ones. In terms of kinship, the clan law stipulated dominant-subordinate relations between the primary and derivative households, the male parent and other family members, the elder and younger generations, elder and younger brothers, husband and wife, and children of the first wife and children of concubines. Among the kinship relationships, fathers' dominance over their sons was an absolute. As for other various social relationships, almost all of them have a hierarchical map that defined one party as the dominant and the other as dependent. Following that, all social actors except the emperor were to some extent endowed with the characteristics of a slave. That "every person is a slave" was a social reality created by the production relations, social relations, political relations, and the corresponding cultural values.

Alongside the power-dependent structure was the universal and absolute worship of authority. In order to maintain this kind of authority, the dominant class always tried to deprive the dependent classes of their independence and freedoms. The relationship between the authoritative and the dependent was essentially a relationship between a master and a slave. The dominant class added a divine element to their authority so that they would be worshipped by the whole society.

Among all those with authority, the emperor or the king was at the top of the pyramid. The power dynamics of ancient China shared a common tendency that all power eventually converged on the king. The centralization of the king's power originated from the value of "five singularities of the ruler" and the strengthening of military and punitive power. "Five singularities of the ruler" refers to the following: "the ruler is the single possessor of the country; the ruler enjoys a singularly ultimate status; the ruler has a singular position in the hierarchy; the ruler enjoys his singular power; and the ruler is the single final decision-maker." Such values, popular and universalized at that time, helped to support the centralization of the king's power.

The notion of the "five singularities of the ruler" was the basis for traditional Chinese politics. The kings and emperors surely espoused this idea, and so did almost everybody else, except the very few people who did not support a kingly regime. Even Buddhist and Daoist monks were supporters of such ideas.

Realizing the "five singularities of the ruler" depended on military and punitive power. The king's power came from military victories, and military power

was behind most political power. A new dynasty came into being only after violent revolution and military dominance. *Hanshu* chapter *Xingfazhi* reads: "The son of heaven stabilizes the world with soldiers." There is also a popular saying that "a scholar can't reason with a soldier." This was the overall characteristic of political systems. How come so many learned and reasonable people were cruelly killed in history? The answer is that violence determines politics. The principle of violence was the ultimate principle of the ancient Chinese political system. This is not to say that every matter had to resort to violence, but that violence always loomed behind politics.

The king's power was a more decisive factor in ancient social structure and social relations than the economy. There was room for the development of society and the economy only if such development did not conflict with the king's power.

There have been various abnormalities and alternations of the imperial power, but all returned to the imperial power. The Xinhai revolution ended imperial power in China, but certain characteristics of imperial power have remained. The basic source of such power is still some kind of value and a privilege guaranteed by violence, which surpasses the society and economy.

E *The Conflict between the King's Power and the Whole Society was the Major Social Conflict*

A Study of Chinese Bureaucratic Politics proposed an illuminating argument that the major social conflict was that between the bureaucrats and the people. But we would argue that the major conflict in ancient Chinese society was between the dictatorial king's power and the whole society.

First, the huge amount of taxation and labor levy demanded by a dictatorial state was a major cause of social instability. Chinese history may have witnessed the largest number of peasant uprisings among all countries. Of course, exploitation and oppression by the landlord class was one of the causes of peasant uprisings. However, no matter how severely the landlords exploited the peasants, the peasants could still rent out their land, and thus that kind of exploitation still followed the simple law of reproduction. Under the social conditions of feudal China, so long as the peasants could maintain simple reproduction of what they had previously produced, large-scale social unrest would not break out. Therefore, national scale peasant uprisings were not caused by landlords' exploitation but by the taxation and labor levies demanded by the state. Large amounts of taxation and labor levies imposed by the dictatorial power deprived the peasants of the means for simple reproduction. Left with no choice, the peasants then would take the risk and fight with their lives. We do not agree with the opinion that landlords in ancient China

were more evil than landlords of Western Europe, for it does not accord with historical facts. In feudal China, it often happened that a registered commoner would flee to a landlord's household to avoid paying taxation and giving free labor to the state.

Further, the dominant and centralized dictatorial power was in sharp contrast with separate and weak individual peasants. The feudal state with a military and bureaucrats could arbitrarily attack the peasants, while the peasants had no means to fight back. Such a discrepancy of power surely helped nurture the tyrannical characteristics of the dictators, who became even more fearless in destroying the capacity for simple production. This is also why a lot of thinkers and politicians in history deem the emperor as the person who was empowered to decide common people's fate.

In summary, the king's power dominated all aspects of the society, including the social resources, materials, and wealth. It also dominated agriculture, industry, commerce, culture, education, science, and technology, and the fate of every member of society. In a society ruled by the king's power, all people and materials were to some extent at the disposal of political power. All theoretical or actual care for the people was only a means to political ends. Within the gigantic power structure, the local had to obey the central, the inferior had to obey the superior, and ultimately all had to obey the ruler.

F *About the Question of Social Form*

Two complementary aspects should be studied regarding the question of social form: first, an overall study of social form; second, an in-depth discussion of "the king's power dominating the society."

As for the first aspect, there are three specific questions: first, the basic question of social relation forms; second, the question of social control and operational systems; third, the question of social ideology. These three questions are interrelated but also differentiated.

i About the Basic Question of Social Relation Forms and the Analytic Methodology of "Class-Community"

Basic social relations means the general social organization of classes and other particular relations. We can classify all social relations into two categories: one is the basic class relations and the other is "social communities," which is more complicated than social relations. Within social communities there are class relations and also relations that transcend class. A social community can be as small as a family, or as big as a nation. Basic class relations are the foundation for other social relations, and therefore restrict other social relations. However, other social relations do exist by themselves and cannot be

totally subsumed into class relations. Therefore, perhaps we can propose an analytic methodology of "class-social community."

ii The Most Important Characteristic of Traditional Chinese Society
 was "The King's Power Dominating the Society"

In a society ruled by the king's power, which was formed on the basis of military power, the economic forces did not determine the power distribution, but rather the power distribution determined social-economic distribution. Socio-economic relations were a result of power distribution and possession. During the process of forming the king's power system, a corresponding social structure also took shape. With its military might, the king's power needed no intermediary to own and dominate the whole nation. In the feudal society, political power was the power to possess land and dominate people's lives. The allocation and distribution of power was also a process of allocating and distributing social wealth and status. The relations within the group of the king's power, the nobles, and the bureaucrats were the foundation of the political system, the social structure, and also the system of social interest distribution. Through power or force, this group and its members controlled, occupied, and dominated most land, people, and social wealth. The land ownership became centralized not because of market behavior, but because of power intervention. This group was the dominant class of the social structure and dominated all other social factors.

iii Ideologically Speaking, Kingly-Powerism was the Foundation
 of the Culture

The most important content of kingly-powerism is the theory and shared idea that the king was superior and the officials were inferior. The idea that the heavens, the Way, the sage, and the king are unified, put the king in an ultimate position of authority. Such an ideology reifies, absolutizes, and ontologizes the king, making the king the same as rationality, law, and morality. It sets all hope on the king or the emperor. Although many people criticized various rulers in history for failing to live up to such an ideal, they could never move beyond the paradigm of imperial power or a kingly regime. Such ideology and culture led to the reality that the more people set hope on a sagely king, the more difficult it became to get rid of the real kings.

Corresponding to the king's superiority was the inferior position of the officials. It was a divine or cosmological order that the officials and the commoners were inferior to the kings. All derivatives of the theory of *yin* and *yang* put the king in the position of *yang*, and the officials and the people at the position of *yin*. This was defined as a cosmological order, a destiny, and an inevitable

necessity. Officials and common people could only serve as the ruler's subjects, subordinates, servants, slaves, and tools. "The ruler was born with the world worshipping him." "As subjects, the people need to look up to the ruler to live." The king or emperor was the symbolic parent who raised everybody. Since subjects were inferior beings that could only live upon the ruler's mercy, they naturally belonged to the ruler. Social conditions like power and hierarchy undoubtedly served to impose such a dominant-subordinate relationship in the society, and the universalized ideology further made people voluntary subjects. Therefore, a universalized and normalized ideology played an even more prominent role in regulating people's behavior. Faced with the sagely king, the subjects culturally and psychologically were filled with a feeling of guilt and wrongness. Even when officials remonstrated with the emperor, they did it with a sense of guilt. Therefore it was common to see such sentences in the officials' remonstrating letters to the emperors as: "I am putting life at risk to say this;" "I am feeling very humbled and full of awe;" "I'm so filled with awe and consternation," etc. These sentences were not just polite, empty words, but were evidence of how the officials defined and positioned themselves in front of the king.