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# Society of Imperial Power: Reinterpreting China's "Feudal Society"

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## Abstract

To call the period from Qin Dynasty to Qing Dynasty a "feudal society" is a misrepresentation of China's historical reality. The *fengjian* system only occupied a secondary position in Chinese society from the time of Qin. It was the system of prefectures and counties (*junxianzhi*) that served as the cornerstone of the centralized power structure. This system, together with the institution of selecting officials through the imperial examination, constituted the centralized bureaucracy that intentionally crippled the hereditary tradition and the localized aristocratic powers, and hence bolstered the unity of the empire. Feudalism in medieval Western Europe shares many similarities with that of China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but is quite different from the monarchical centralism since the time of Qin and Han. Categorizing the social form of the period from Qin to Qing as "feudal" makes the mistake of over-generalizing and distorting this concept. It runs counter to the original Chinese meaning of *fengjian*, and severely deviates from the western connotation of feudalism. Moreover, the decentralized feudalism in pre-Qin dynasties and the later centralized imperial system from Qin onwards influenced the generation and evolution of Chinese culture in vastly different ways.

## Keywords

feudal – *fengjian* – imperial system

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For more than half a century on the Chinese mainland, the prevailing view on the social form of China from Qin (221-206 B.C.) to Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) is that it was a feudal society, similar to that of medieval Western Europe. This view describes the development of the social forms of all nations and countries as a single linear process and ignores the significant differences in social forms between most oriental countries including China and the pre-modern Western Europe. It misrepresents the reticular structure of the diversified history of different parts of the world.

## I The Original Meaning of *Fengjian* (封建) and “Feudalism” and their English and Chinese Translations

Originally, *fengjian* was a clearly defined concept, meaning emperors offering official rank and land to vassals and allowing them to establish a state on the land, known as “offering (*feng* 封) land, and establishing (*jian* 建) vassal states.” This system started as early as the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.) and was conducted on a large scale in the early Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), first by King Wu of Zhou, and then by the Duke of Zhou.

In ancient documents such as *Zuo Zhuan* (*Zuo’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), *fengjian* has had a consistent denotation, i.e. “offering land for establishing states”. *An Analytical Dictionary of Characters* (*Shuowen Jiezi*) defines *feng* as “the land of appointed vassals” and *jian* as “the establishment of state rules.” The system of the emperor offering land for the vassals to establish states, the patriarchal clan system, and the hierarchy formed in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, all constitute an organic whole as is recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*:

Therefore, the son of Heaven establishes States; princes of States establish clans. Heads of clans establish institutions at a lower level and the same applies to officials under the heads of clans; great officers have their sons and younger brothers as their subordinates; as for the common people, artisans, merchants and traders, their rankings are decided according to their closeness to the officials.<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Zhou, grieved by the rebellion by his two brothers Guanshu and Caishu, raised the members of the

1 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990), “The Second Year of the Duke of Huan,” p. 94.

royal family to be ruler of States, intending them to safeguard the court of Zhou by acting as its fences and screens.<sup>2</sup>

The Duke of Zhou lamented that the demise of both the Xia and the Shang Dynasties resulted from the supreme rulers' estrangement from their relatives. Consequently, he offered ranks and land to many of the royal relatives so as to consolidate the reign of Zhou. The principle behind offering ranks and land to the rulers' relatives is the basis of the patriarchal clan system, which is based on the affinity of the relatives to the rulers. No consensus has been reached on the number of vassal states established during the early Zhou Dynasty, but the number is believed to be between several dozen to several hundred. What is certain is that most were ruled by the royal family of Ji. *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* records that five ranks of peerage were offered in the Zhou Dynasty. Boqin, eldest son of the Duke of Zhou, and Kangshu, younger brother of King Wu of Zhou, as members of the Ji family, were promoted to lords of the states of Lu and of Wei, respectively. This act highlighted the "tenet of loving relatives," a common theme in Confucian political thought. Jiang Taigong, as a member outside the royal family, was promoted to ruler of the state of Qi as a reward for his wholehearted service to King Wu of Zhou. The chosen vassals enjoyed hereditary right to rule which was in accordance with the patriarchal clan system. As rulers of the "lesser clans" (*xiaozong* 小宗), the vassals were required to obey King of Zhou, who was the ruler of the "greater clan" (*da zong* 大宗), and pay tribute and provide military service to him.

During the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), various feudal lords conferred fiefs upon family members and people who had rendered outstanding service to the rulers. However, while being allowed to collect land tax as well as industrial and commercial taxes, these people did not have the right of hereditary rule. Meanwhile, more distant vassal states such as Chu and Qin began to implement the system of prefectures and counties so as to strengthen their states' respective central power. From then on, the system of enfeoffment and the system of prefectures and counties coexisted and sometimes contended with each other. After having unified the whole country, Qin completely replaced the system of enfeoffment with the system of prefectures and counties. This is reflected in "Treatise on Geography" of *The Book of Han*: "Qin united all within the four seas. It regarded the institutions of Zhou as weak and attributed the collapse of Zhou to the great power of vassal states. Hence, it did not

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2 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, "The Twenty-Fourth Year of the Duke of Xi," p. 420.

adopt any enfeoffment at all. Rather, it divided the kingdom into prefectures and counties. It destroyed the heritage of previous sages and left little to be found.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is a bit exaggerated to claim that “it did not adopt any enfeoffment at all”. Inscriptions on the unearthed relics of Qin show that there was still vassalage such as *liehou* (列侯) and *lunhou* (倫侯), these official ranks were granted without any land offerings or land was offered but without governing power. In the early part of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the court carried on the system of prefectures and counties and at the same time enfeoffed many vassals from the royal family as well as other clans,<sup>4</sup> empowering them to “rule their states”. Nevertheless, these vassals soon became confrontational forces against the central court. Having tasted the bitterness of vassal rebellions, the Han rulers started to limit the governing power of the heads of states to “make the vassal states diminish on their own.” At the time of Emperor Wu of Han, “vassals could accrue salaries from the collected tax, but could not participate in the governing of the states.”<sup>5</sup> They were the so-called *shifengguizu* (食封貴族, literally, nobles endowed with food) who could do nothing but be loyal to the emperor. Later dynasties conferred official ranks and land on royal members and meritorious officials but stipulated that the vassals had only economic power, not political power. In other words, “the vassals were given the ranks but not the authority to govern the people; they were granted the land but had no say in state affairs.”<sup>6</sup>

This was the common situation for nobles since the time of Qin, which was a sharp contrast with the Zhou Dynasty when the enfeoffed nobles, such as feudal lords, were in control of military, political, financial, and cultural affairs. Although there were attempts throughout the dynasties to reduce the vassals’ power, they still managed to rise in rebellion in almost all dynasties. Even in the extremely centralized Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), Zhu Di, Prince of Yan, launched the *Jingnan* Campaign (靖難之役, *jingnan* means rectifying disastrous disorder) during the reign of Emperor Jianwen; and Zhu Chenhao, the Prince of Ning, staged an uprising during the reign of Emperor Zhengde.

3 Ban Gu, “Treatise on Geography,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 28, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 1542.

4 According to “Table of Sons of Nobles,” “Table of Meritorious Officials” and “Table of Nobles from Families of the Imperial Consorts” of *The Book of Han*, altogether 408 sons of nobles, 283 meritorious officials and 112 nobles from families of the imperial consorts were enfeoffed in the Han Dynasty.

5 Ban Gu, “Table of Nobles Related to the Imperial Clan,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 14, p. 395.

6 Wang Qi, “A Textual Research of *Fengjian*,” *Continuation of General Study of Literary Records (Xu Wenxian Tongkao)*, Vol. 194, a Ming-dynasty block-printed edition of Songjiang County in 1602, p. 3494.

For this reason, each dynasty took measures to “weaken the power of the vassals” (*xuefan* 削藩) and strengthen the system of prefectures and counties and that of non-hereditary officials, regarding these systems as the backbone of sustained centralized power.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819) of the Tang Dynasty claimed in his essay “On Feudalism” that the replacement of feudalism by the system of prefectures and counties was an inevitable historical trend. He made insightful remarks on how the two systems came into being and what their respective strengths and weaknesses were, and in doing so, further clarified the meaning of *fengjian*.

From the perspective of *feng* as offering land and *jian* as establishing states, the *fengjian* system only occupied a secondary position from Qin onwards. It was the system of prefectures and counties that served as the cornerstone of the centralized power structure. This system, together with the institution of selecting officials through the imperial examination, constituted the centralized bureaucracy that crippled the hereditary tradition and decentralized aristocratic power, and hence bolstered the unity of the empire. Consequently, Chinese culture became a unified culture in real terms over the long course of two thousand years. This outshines medieval Europe and Japan, which had numerous separatist vassals, as well as India, which had its countless rajahs.

Starting from late Qing and early Republic of China, with western learning spreading to the East, the meaning of *fengjianzhi* (封建制) was enriched and complicated.

It is reasonable to say that at the turn of the 20th century when the eastern historical terminology met its western counterpart, the connotation and denotation of *fengjianzhi* did not deviate from its original meaning. And it is correct to translate *fengjianzhi* into “feudalism” of the medieval European system, as has been done by Japanese scholars between the late Shogunate times and the Meiji period such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nishi Amane, as well as by Yan Fu, Liang Qichao and other Chinese intellectuals from late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. At that time the concept of *fengjian* was not generalized or misused. “Feudalism” of medieval Europe is highly equivalent to the ancient Chinese *fengjian*. Hence, such a translation is accurate and practical.

*The Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* defines “feudalism” (or “feudal system”) as:

A social system of rights and duties based on land tenure and personal relationship in which land was held in fief by vassals from lords to whom they must render certain services and were bound by personal loyalty. In a broader sense, the term refers to the “feudal society,” a form of civilization that flourished especially in a closed agricultural economy. In such a

society, those who fulfill official duties received remuneration in the form of fiefs either because of their personal or voluntary links with their ruler. The fiefs they held were hereditary. Another aspect of feudalism was the fief or manorial system, under which the overlords exercised over their serfs a wide variety of privileges, including the punitive, judicial, and fiscal rights.<sup>7</sup>

In the Middle Ages, most Western European countries and Japan featured such a feudal system. Some characteristics of the medieval culture in Western Europe and Japan, such as the weakening of kingship, the split of political power, hierarchy, the samurai tradition, serfdom, personal bondage, and the idea of vengeance, all derived from feudalism in this sense.

Feudalism in medieval Western Europe shares many similarities with that of China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but is quite different from the monarchical centralism since Qin and Han. Yan Fu had a clear understanding of this. In translating *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* written by Adam Smith, Yan Fu transliterated “feudalism” into “拂特之制” while in translating *A History of Politics* by Edward Jenks, he translated feudalism as “封建制度”. He believed that during the two thousand years from the reigns of Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun till the Zhou Dynasty, the feudal system in China was so similar to Western feudalism that an analogy could be made. That is why he translated “feudalism” into *fengjian*. However, from Qin and Han to the Ming and Qing dynasties, the bureaucratic system of prefectures and counties was marked by imperial autocracy, centralism, non-hereditary official institution, the imperial examination system and so on. This was entirely different from the traditional hereditary feudal society and was in fact “non-feudal” in nature. A master of both Chinese and Western learning, Yan Fu was keenly aware of the historical similarities and differences between China and the West. He stated that Chinese feudalism spanned the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou and disintegrated around late Zhou and early Qin. Since Qin, China displayed an “autocratic dynasty” (or autocratic monarchy). In Western Europe, feudalism started and ended two thousand years later than in China: “The beginning of feudalism can be traced back to the time roughly equivalent to China’s Tang and Song dynasties. As for the end of feudalism, represented by the republicanism in France and the founding of

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7 *The Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1985).

America, it just happened one or two hundred years ago.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Yan opposed drawing a parallel between China’s mid-ancient times (Qin and Han onwards) and the Middle Ages in Western Europe, and objected to the practice of putting these two different systems under the same framework of *fengjian*. On this issue, Liang Qichao and Qian Mu shared similar views with Yan Fu.

## II Misuse and Overgeneralization of the Term “Feudalism” in 1930s-1940s

Between the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the debate on social history, some Chinese historians followed the example of European historical period division and referred to China’s mid-ancient times (from the Qin to Qing dynasties) as “feudal society”. Since the 1940s, they modeled the division of Chinese historical periods upon the “five social forms” (primitive society—slave society—feudal society—capitalist society—socialist society) adopted in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* and named the period from Zhou to Qing “feudal society.” Despite divergence regarding the historical starting point of feudalism (whether being Western Zhou, Warring States period, or Wei and Jin Dynasties), there was a near consensus that the medieval and early modern China was “feudal.”

Categorizing the social form of the period from Qin to Qing as “feudal” makes the mistake of over-generalizing and distorting this concept. First, it runs counter to the original Chinese meaning of *fengjian* (enfeoffed land which was not subject to transferable trading; decentralized political power and a great many vassals). Second, it severely deviates from the western connotation of “feudalism” (conferring land and ranks upon vassals, the fief system, personal bondage, ultra-economic deprivation and serfdom). Thus, the over-generalized term “feudalism,” as including a bureaucratic regime of monarchical centralism and landlord economy with transferable land, is indeed a misnomer that is historically inaccurate.

Clearly, there is a mismatch between the concept and the meaning for this newly coined term “feudal.” Taking it as the stem to form phrases about social forms—“feudal system,” “feudal society,” “feudal age,” etc.—misrepresents historical fact. As a result, due to the misuse of a key term, a grand narrative of China’s history lost its reticular development feature. There has been a lack of a system of clearly-defined concepts essential for a study on issues

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8 Yan Fu, “Preface to the Translated Version of *A History of Politics*,” *Collection of Yan Fu’s Essays*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986), p. 135.

that have long been examined in historical circles, such as “the periodization of Chinese history,” “the internal division of China’s feudal society,” “forms of feudal land ownership,” “the sprouts of capitalism in China,” and “the reason why Chinese feudal society remained such a long time.”

Over the past several decades, under the influence of the theory of linear historical development, and also because of the misuse of concepts in translating foreign words and creating new words, many people have grouped China’s dynastic history from Qin to Qing under misplaced moniker of feudalism, and then incorrectly likened China’s dynastic history to the feudal society in Western Europe, when in fact they are two distinct social forms. This is really an act of “cutting the feet to fit the shoes”<sup>9</sup> and the result is “chaos under Heaven caused by wrong discourses.”<sup>10</sup>

The popularity of this over-generalized concept of feudalism in China can primarily be attributed to its formation in the context of historical materialism. This concept is even revered as a historical achievement under the guidance of historical materialism. In order to clarify the mistake of over-generalizing the concept of feudalism, we must first restore the original feudal theory as set forth by Marx and Engels, the founders of historical materialism.

Engaged in this intriguing job, we first discover that Marx and Engels were far from endorsing “Western European Centristism” and the view of a single linear historical progress. In reality, they differentiated the pre-modern social forms of Western Europe from the non-Western European regions. They never called most of the pre-modern oriental countries, including China and India, “feudal society”; instead, they termed them as “the Celestial Empire,”<sup>11</sup> “the Asian-style autocracy,” “the oriental autocracy,”<sup>12</sup> “the Chinese empire,”<sup>13</sup> “the semi-civilized system,” “the world’s most ancient empire,”<sup>14</sup> “the bureaucracy,” “the patriarchal clan system,”<sup>15</sup> “the unstable Asian empire,”<sup>16</sup> or “the Chinese socioeconomic structure” that features the “combination of small-scale agriculture and cottage industries.”<sup>17</sup> Their description of the pre-modern social

9 Qian Mu, *An Outline of the History of China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1948), p. 18.

10 Hou Wailu, *A General History of Chinese Thought*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 1950), Book 1, p. 374.

11 Marx, “Revolution in China and Europe” (1853), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1972), p. 2.

12 Marx, “The British Rule in India” (1853), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 63.

13 Marx, “Russian Trade with China” (1857), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 9.

14 Engels, “Persia and China” (1857), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, pp. 16, 21.

15 Marx, “History of the Opium Trade” (1858), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 26.

16 Engels, “Russia’s Success in the Far East” (1858), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 37.

17 Marx, “Trade with China” (1859), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 57.



forms in China and India with “non-feudal” names is by no means accidental. Rather, it is a result of their adherence to academic norms and a paradigm of the application of historical materialism and the social form theory.

One interesting phenomenon is that some modern Chinese scholars identified feudalism in the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou (especially Western Zhou), and depicted the history from Qin to Qing in other terms: “the prime of autocratic monarchy”<sup>18</sup> according to Liang Qichao; “autocratic dynasty”<sup>19</sup> according to Yan Fu; “an authoritarian one” and “a system of prefectures and counties with one supreme ruler”<sup>20</sup> according to Zhou Gucheng; “a centralized state”<sup>21</sup> according to Qu Tongzu; and “free private land system”<sup>22</sup> according to Li Jiannong. These scholars are not Marxists and most have never read Marx’s and Engels’ articles on China, India, or other eastern countries. However, by starting from the reality of Chinese history, they made a judgment about the pre-modern social form of China very similar to Marx and Engel’s view and totally different from the modern, over-generalized view of feudalism.

### III Contradictions between “Feudalism” and the Chinese Social Forms from Qin to Qing

Although Marx never made specific observations on the Chinese social forms from Qin to Qing, based on his logic in commenting on the works of M. Kovalevskii and John Budd Phear (both an economic characteristic of tradable land and a bureaucratic regime with monarchical centralism are incompatible with feudalism), we can deduce that Marx observed the overall historical trend in China to be a weakening of the feudal system, despite intermittent fluctuations. In fact, from Qin to Qing, farmers’ personal bondage waxed and waned but the main trend was waning, so there was not a long-term dominating serfdom. Since the Warring States Period, land could be transferred and traded, with the landlord system gradually gaining prominence and

18 Liang Qichao, “Introduction to Chinese History” in *Complete Works of Liang Qichao*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1999), p. 453.

19 Yan Fu, “Preface to the Translated Version of *A History of Politics*,” *Collection of Yan Fu’s Essays*, Vol. 1, p. 136.

20 Zhou Gucheng, *The Structure of Chinese Society* (Shanghai: New Life Publishing House, 1930), p. 31.

21 Qu Tongzu, *The Feudal Society of China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), p. 357.

22 Li Jiannong, *Lecture Notes on Chinese Economic History* (Shanghai: Zhongguo Publishing House), 1943, p. 17.

the feudal noble hereditary land system (or the lord-vassal system) losing its leading position. Furthermore, in comparison with India, China had a more sophisticated and powerful central monarchy with a complete bureaucracy replacing the aristocratic government, which prevented its development into a social form similar to the decentralized feudal vassal-lord system in Western Europe. All in all, naming the period from Qin to Qing “feudal society” is not only contradictory to China’s historical reality, but also to that of Western Europe, thus inconsistent with Marx and Engels’ theory on feudal society.

### 1 *The Incompatibility of Feudalism with the Landlord Economy of Tradable Land*

To enfeoff vassals was the prerequisite for feudal relations of production and for the vassals’ control over their subjects. Land and the relations thereof serve as the defining mark of feudalism. In his later years, Karl Marx made a large number of notes about the works of historians and ethnologists, such as Lewis Henry Morgan and M. Kovalevskii. These notes demonstrate that Marx paid great attention to the particularities of historical advancement in various regions and nations.

M. Kovalevskii, a Russian scholar and a young friend of Karl Marx, wrote in his book *Communal Land Ownership: The Causes, Process, and Consequences of Its Disintegration* about India’s feudalization after it was conquered by Muslims during the 13th-17th centuries. He believed that India had developed an “Indian feudalism” even before the colonialist invasion of Britain, thanks to its expanded fief system and class-based hierarchy. Marx attached great importance to Kovalevskii’s intellectual contributions and made detailed extracts of his works, but did not approve of his confusing Indian and Islamic social-economic institution with the feudal society of Europe. In his comments on *Communal Land Ownership*, he pointed out India was not characterized by serfdom and non-transferable land, so after being subjugated by Muslims and land became transferable, India was no longer a feudal society.

Since the Zhou Dynasty, China experienced the development of private land and witnessed the popularity of land trading, thus departing from the feudal lord-vassal system of nontransferable fiefdoms. If India, with tradable land after the subjugation of Muslims, was not a feudal society, China from Zhou onwards was even further from being such a society.

There is plenty of evidence to show that private land ownership was in practice in the Spring and Autumn Period. One famous record is a line from “Big Field” of “Minor Odes of the Kingdom” of *The Book of Songs*: “It rains on our public fields, and comes to our private land at the same time.” (Some scholars note the “public fields” here refer to land of the higher ranking landlords

while “private land” to that of the lower-ranking landlords. What is obvious is that there was indeed a separation of public and private land and a tendency towards the privatization of land). In fact, a private farmer could work on and gain from his “private” land as long as he paid the tax to the state. In the late Spring and Autumn Period, the State of Lu practiced “initial tax on land per-*mu*” (初稅畝),<sup>23</sup> and the State of Qi first enacted the “system of mutual aid” featuring “collectively cultivating the public field” and then shifted to “the sharing system” with “tax for each *mu*.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the State of Zheng, “Zichan of Zheng made new and stricter regulations for the taxation from the land.”<sup>25</sup> All these are examples of tax collection from private land, which proves that apart from the “public fields” of feudal lord-vassal system, the “private” land system was booming. What’s more, in the State of Jin, *yuantian* (爰田, land exchanging) was in practice. This, too, was a reflection of the privatization and transferability of land. At the time of the Warring States Period, an integral part of the reforms in many states was the encouragement of the cultivation of private land. For instance, in the Duke Wen of Wei (?-396 B.C.) era, Li Kui (455-395 B.C.) advocated “tapping the full potential of the land” in his reform. The reforms of Wu Qi (?-381 B.C.) in the Duke Dao of Chu (?-381 B.C.) era, Zou Ji in the Duke Wei of Qi (?-343 B.C.) era, and Shen Buhai (385-337 B.C.) in the Duke Zhao of Han (?-333 B.C.) era all had similar proposals. When it came to the reforms of Shang Yang (390-338 B.C.) during the reign of Duke Xiao of Qin (381-338 B.C.), private land ownership became even more common. “Encouragement of Immigration” in *The Book of Lord Shang* written by Shang Yang and his followers, records that the State of Qin attracted people from the three (former) Jin states to reclaim Qin’s land and “allowed them to cultivate as much as possible.” Consequently, Qin’s private land increased dramatically; its landlord-yeoman economy developed greatly; and it became the “unrivaled rich state under Heaven with a powerful army.”<sup>26</sup> The Qin Dynasty “asked the commoners to report their actual land” (quoting Xu Guang’s words in the *Collected Annotations to Basic Annals of Emperor Qin Shi Huang of Records of the Grand Historian*), i.e. ordering the people to report the amount of land

23 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, “The Fifteenth Year of Duke Xuan,” p. 766.

24 *Gongyang Zhuan*, “The Fifteenth Year of Duke Xuan.”

25 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, “The Fourth Year of Duke Zhao,” p. 1254.

26 Du You, “Food and Money Part I”, *Tong Dian*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988), p. 6.

they had so that the court could tax it. This means private land was allowed countrywide and officially supported by law.

Starting from “requiring the commoners to report their actual land” in Qin, later dynasties witnessed a decrease in land conferring. From early to middle Western Han, although state land conferring survived in the form of “*mingtian* system” (名田制 registering the land in one’s name), land trading also became prevalent. One prominent example is Xiao He’s (?-193 B.C.) “coercive buying of thousands of people’s land and houses.”<sup>27</sup> Land trading since then can often be found in historical records. Private land had developed to the extent that, from the time of Han Emperor Ai onwards, the *mingtian* system was abolished and the landlord system marked by private land ownership gradually became dominant.

However, it must be noted that in spite of the popularization of land privatization, it always coexisted with imperial-owned land, as was shown in *The History of Ming*: “The land of the Ming Dynasty falls into two categories: official land and people’s private land.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, private land ownership from Qin to Qing was an incomplete and not entirely free system. An accurate description should be that China had private land ownership that was restricted by the land ownership of the ruler.

Regarding the changes in land ownership, Song Dynasty scholar Ma Duanlin concluded that during the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, “all the land under Heaven belonged to the government. People relied on the government for food supplies. They received land from the government to support themselves and in return had to pay taxation.” From the time of Qin, “private land was permitted in the kingdom” and this led to important social changes: “From Qin and Han onwards, the government no longer conferred land; private land possessed by commoners became the trend. Although in some periods, such as Taihe of the Wei Dynasty and Zhenguan of the Tang Dynasty, the state attempted to restore the system of the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou, it soon collapsed because without feudalism, the nine-squares system could not be re-implemented.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Ma stressed the non-feudal nature of the private land system ever since Qin and Han and pointed out the tendency towards land privatization after Qin.

27 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Xiao”, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 52 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), p. 2018.

28 Zhang Tingyu, “Treatise on Official System Part I”, *The History of Ming*, Vol. 72 (明史 • 職官一), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), p. 1733.

29 Ma Duanlin, *Preface to General Study of Literary Records*, the Shenduzhai 慎獨齋 edition, 1521.

## 2 *The Incompatibility of Feudalism with A Centralized Monarchy*

Decentralized feudalism and centralized monarchy differ greatly not only in terms of the kind of economic system that they foster, but also the political system. Hence, they are not compatible and should not be considered as such.

Karl Marx's objection to the abuse of the word feudalism was clearly shown in his division of political power as an essential characteristic of feudalism. He explicitly argued that centralized monarchy was contrary to feudalism. This view of the incompatibility between autocracy and feudalism was revealed in his ethnological notes written in his twilight years. For instance, in his commentaries on M. Kovalevskii's *Communal Land Ownership*, Marx stated centralized monarchy existed in India, which blocked the country's evolution into the Western European-style feudalism. He cited the words in Kovalevskii's book, "In the late years of the Mongolians' empire, the so-called feudalization only appeared in some regions; while in many others, the communal and private property was still in the hands of the aboriginal people and the state affairs were handled by officials appointed by the central government." Moreover, Marx also noted that India had "no serfdom."<sup>30</sup> He quoted Kovalevskii as saying that India "did not have hereditary jurisdiction in term of civil law." Yet "serfdom" and "hereditary jurisdiction" are the hallmarks of feudalism. Without these essential elements, India was definitely not a feudal society. Marx claimed with no ambiguity that autocratic monarchy and feudalism were two distinct systems and as far as Western Europe was concerned, the former was the transitional period between feudal hierarchy and modern capitalism. Therefore, to include autocratic monarchy into feudalism is a deviation from Marx's theory. And as regards China, its centralist monarchy since the time of Qin was far more advanced than that of India, making it even less of a feudal society.

From Qin onwards, all the imperial power was marked by centralism, and this feature became increasingly evident in later dynasties. The emperor assumed the total power of legislation, jurisdiction, administration, and military command. This defined Chinese imperial politics. Starting from Emperor Qin Shi Huang, "all the affairs under Heaven, big or small, are up to the emperor to decide."<sup>31</sup> This tradition persisted till the Qing dynasty, the late period of society featuring patriarchal clan system and imperial power. Emperor Kangxi

30 Marx, Karl "Excerpts from M. Kovalevskii's *Communal Land Ownership: The Causes, Process, and Consequences of Its Disintegration*," *Marx's Notes on the History of Ancient Society*, (Beijing: People's Press, 1996), pp. 70, 78-79.

31 Sima Qian, "Basic Annals of Emperor Qin Shihuang," *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 6, p. 258.

remarked, “all the matters, regardless of their importance, are handled by myself. It is unacceptable to assign the task to others. So no matter how big or how small the thing is, I always see to it in person and make the decision on my own.”<sup>32</sup> In reviewing this type of monarchical politics, Emperor Jiaqing of the Qing Dynasty said, “In our dynasty, one sagacious ruler is followed by another. They all wield absolute imperial power. During the 60-year reign of Emperor Qianlong, each imperial edict was issued in accordance with his own judgment and none of his subjects could ever intervene in state affairs. “Since I assumed the throne . . . all orders have been fulfilled and the power has never fallen into others’ hands.”<sup>33</sup> The form of law under monarchical centralism can be summed up as follows: “Words from the emperor’s mouth reveal the heavenly constitution,” where whatever the emperor dictates becomes law. In such cases, a single utterance from him could lead to the boom or the doom of the state, all determined by the emperor’s momentary whims and passing judgments.

Related to the absolute monarchical power were the prime minister system and the system of Three Councils and Six Boards. It was impossible for the emperor (irrespective of how intelligent and capable he was) to single-handedly govern a country of millions of square kilometers with tens or even hundreds of millions of people. “At all times, the prosperity of a ruler depends on selecting ministers to assist him in concertedly achieving the success endowed by Heaven.”<sup>34</sup> Emperors of all dynasties paid great attention to choosing virtuous and talented men to “help the Son of Heaven deal with myriad affairs,”<sup>35</sup> run the central administration, and ensure the coordinated efforts of all institutions. For the sake of ensuring an efficient government, the first and foremost consideration in “selecting ministers to assist the emperor” was to appoint a prime minister.

The post of prime minister had different names in different dynasties. In Qin, it was called *xiangguo* (相國) or *chengxiang* (丞相); in Han, *chengxiang*; in Sui, Tang and Song, *zaixiang* (宰相); and in Yuan and early Ming, again *chengxiang*. Responsible for the central administration, the prime minister occupied a key position in the monarchical regime, he was “under only one

32 *Donghua Records in the Kangxi Era (Kangxi Chao Donghua Lu)*, Vol. 91.

33 Liang Zhangju, *A Record of the Grand Council (Shuyuan Jilüe 樞垣記略)*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997), p. 8.

34 Ban Gu, “Meritorious Ministers during the reign of Gao, Hui, Gaohou and Xiaowen,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 16, p. 527.

35 Ban Gu, “Table of Nobility Ranks and Government Offices,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 19 I, p. 724.

person, and ruled over tens of thousands of others.” Originally, the position of prime minister was set as an instrument to carry out the wishes and commands of an absolute monarch, but in practice, these two positions were often found to restrict each other. The root cause for this was the selfishness and corruption inherent in monarchical power. On the one hand, the supreme ruler had to depend on the prime minister to carry out his will; and on the other, he always guarded against the prime minister’s usurping his power. A review of China’s imperial society shows that the two powers invariably maintained a delicate relationship, yet the fundamental trend was the increase of imperial power and the decrease of that of the prime minister.

In the early Western Han Dynasty, the prime minister enjoyed a wide range of power. “Looking above himself, he assists the Son of Heaven in regulating Yin and Yang and observing the rules of the four seasons. Looking below, he ensures the timely growth of all creatures, manages the four barbarian groups and various vassals, cares for and unites the ordinary people, and sees to it that all the nobles and officials perform their duties.”<sup>36</sup> Virtually everything was in the control of the prime minister, including domestic and foreign affairs, civil affairs, legislation, choosing officials, and rewards and punishments. The prime minister’s power was so great that “During the Han, nothing the prime minister proposed was not followed.”<sup>37</sup> Still, the emperor took precautions against the prime minister. When Liu Bang (247-195 B.C.) proclaimed himself ruler of the kingdom of Han, he was out of the court, fighting with Xiang Yu for quite a long time. But he never forgot to frequently send a messenger to express his appreciation to the Prime Minister Xiao He, who had stayed at court. Xiao could not figure out the intention of Liu Bang and “Bao Sheng explained to him: ‘Now the King of Han is in a tough situation. The reason why he more than once dispatched messengers to convey to you his gratitude is that he is still suspicious of you. For your sake, why not send your relatives that are good at warfare to the military camp? In this way, the emperor will surely trust you more.’”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Bao Sheng advised Xiao He to offer his relatives as hostages so as to gain the trust of Liu Bang. Even Xiao He, a person known for his prudence, could not stay clear of his lord’s suspicion, as reflected in the line “Autocracy could not tolerate Prime Minister Xiao” of the poem

36 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Chen,” *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 56, pp. 2061-2.

37 Fan Ye, “Biography of Chen Chong,” *Book of the Later Han* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965), Vol. 46, p. 1565.

38 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Xiao,” *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 53, p. 2015.

“The Chang’an City: an Ancient Theme” (*Chang’an Guyi* 長安古意) by the Tang poet Lu Zhaolin (635-689 A.D.). From this we can see the situation in which the prime ministers found themselves.

By the middle of the Western Han, the power of the prime minister was reduced in several ways. First, his own administrative power was divided into three parts, with the Grand Commandant (*Taiwei* 太尉) and the Imperial Counselor, who originally held positions lower than that of the prime minister, promoted to be on an equal footing with him. Together, the three were renamed as *Da Situ* (大司徒), *Da Sima* (大司馬) and *Da Sikong* (大司空), in charge of civil affairs, military affairs and infrastructure, respectively. Instead of being subordinate to one another, they all reported to the emperor. Second, a special oversight institution called *Yushi Tai* (御史台 the Imperial Council) was established to represent the monarch in overseeing and restricting the power of the prime minister. Third, there appeared a confrontation between the “inner court” and the “outer court”. At the time of Emperor Wu of Han, some inner court officials (including eunuchs), much lower in position than the prime minister, were selected to participate in running the government. They formed a decision-making group inside the court and were titled the “inner court” as opposed to the “outer court” administration headed by the prime minister. This was an obvious restraint of the prime minister’s power.

After the founding of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the three Dukes (*Da Situ*, *Da Sima* and *Da Sikong*) remained in the position of a prime minister, but with much less power: “The three Dukes today are more just a name than they are a reality.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the “inner court” rose in status and the *Shangshu* institution responsible for inner court paperwork was expanded and was officially named “*Shangshu Tai*” (尚書台) or Chancery, which “takes orders from the emperor, collects taxes within the four seas, enjoys huge power and shoulders great responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> Zhongchang Tong (180-220) said the prime minister “held a higher position with fewer obligations in the past; but nowadays a lower position with more obligations.”<sup>41</sup> The underlying reason for such changes was none other than the emperor’s suspicion of and constraint on the power of the prime ministers.

The central government of the Sui Dynasty set up a system of Three Councils and Six Boards. The heads of the Three Councils, namely *Shangshu* (尚書), *Menxia* (門下) and *Neishi* (內史), all acted as prime ministers and jointly ran the state affairs. The *Shangshu* Council had six branches, namely the boards of

39 Fan Ye, “Biography of Chenchong,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 46, p. 1565.

40 Fan Ye, “Biography of Li Gu,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 63, p. 2076.

41 Fan Ye, “Biography of Zhongchang Tong,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 49, p. 1658.



*Li* (吏 personnel), *Min* (民 people), *Li* (禮 rites), *Bing* (兵 soldiers), *Xing* (刑 punishment), and *Gong* (工 Construction), each of which administered four sub-branches to further divide the prime minister's power.

The Tang Dynasty followed the system of Sui, but changed the *Neishi* Council into the *Zhongshu* Council (中書省). Concerned about the high ranks of the three council heads, the emperor often deliberately deprived them of their power and transferred it to deputy heads or other officials with a total of more than ten people. The intention was clear: to strengthen his own power by weakening that of the prime ministers.

The Song Dynasty used the means of “separation of power” and “inconsistency of a post with its duty” to decrease the prime minister's power and increase the emperor's strength. For example, military affairs were run by the *Shumi Yuan* (樞密院 the Privy Council), the administration by the *Zhongshu Menxia* Council (中書門下省), and finance by *San Situ* (三司徒). The head of the *Zhongshu Menxia* Council was titled *Zhongshu Menxia Pingzhangshi* (中書門下平章事), who though served as a prime minister, had no jurisdiction in military affairs or finance and had to report to the emperor for every decision, be it governing guidelines or specific measures. Clearly, the Song court continued the trend of greatly diminishing the powers of the office of prime minister.

The Yuan Dynasty abolished the *Shangshu* and *Menxia* Councils, leaving the *Zhongshu* Council as the highest administrative organization, whose head, *Zhongshu Ling* (中書令), was the crown prince. “Once a crown prince is chosen, he holds the post of *Zhongshu Ling* without exception.”<sup>42</sup> Then, directly under the *Zhongshu Ling* was the prime minister—a reflection of the emperor's strong control over the prime minister's power.

During the Ming Dynasty, monarchical centralism reached its zenith. The post of the prime minister was simply abandoned by Zhu Yuanzhang after the Hu Weiyong incident. The emperor took over the duties of the prime minister and mandated that the directors of the Six Boards should report directly to himself. He also issued a decree that “later emperors should not consider appointing a prime minister. An official who presents a memorial for this purpose should be sentenced to death.”<sup>43</sup>

The Ming and Qing dynasties established the post of “Senior Grand Secretary of Cabinet” (*Neige Daxueshi* 內閣大學士) who “though not titled as prime

42 Tao Zongyi, *Nancun Chuogeng Lu* (南村輟耕錄), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), Vol. 22, p. 269.

43 Zhang Tingyu, “Annals of Bureaucratic Establishment” I (*Zhiguan Zhi*), *The History of Ming* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), Vol. 72, p. 1733.

minister, still enjoyed the power of a prime minister". But in reality, the senior grand secretaries during this period, with only a few exceptions (for instance, Yan Song in the Jiajing era and Zhang Juzheng in the Wanli era of Ming), did not have the authority of a prime minister and were merely secretaries of the emperor. Emperor Qianlong of Qing was so suspicious of the power of a prime minister that he wrote an article to argue against it, revealing fully the extreme centralist mentality of an autocratic monarch. He argued:

Who would it be other than the emperor that appoints a prime minister? If the emperor stays reclusive to cultivate himself and hands over the governance of the empire to the prime minister and does not intervene himself, he would be lucky if he had such prime ministers as Han Qi and Fan Zhongyan. But even Han and Fan did not hesitate to debate with the emperor. Though if the emperor had the misfortune to have such prime ministers as Wang Anshi, Lü Huiqing and the like, then it would be inevitable for the empire to fall into chaos. Therefore, this should be avoided. It is totally unacceptable for a prime minister to go so far as to regard the governance of the empire as his own job with no regards for the emperor. (A Note on Cheng Yi's "On the Memorials of Preceptors," 書程頤論經筵筓子後)

In this passage, Emperor Qianlong expressed not only his discontent over such prime ministers as Han Qi who dared to "argue with the emperor," but also his resentment towards those like Wan Anshi and Lü Huiqing. He condemned the view upheld by Cheng Yi and other Confucians of the Song Dynasty that a prime minister should always work towards the realization of a better state, and if he does not have the position to do so, at least counsel the emperor to such ends. What Emperor Qianlong hoped was that the intellectuals would serve as the emperor's literary servants or bookworms with no interest in politics. The Qianjia School's preference for exegesis and textual criticism and the demise of the prime minister system (which had lasted more than one thousand years since the Qin) in Ming and Qing both were closely related to the development of extreme monarchical centralism.

Mighty as it was, China's imperial power was under the restraint of rites, conventions, laws, a bureaucratic system, noble privilege, and the authority of local gentry. Thus we cannot say that Chinese autocratic emperors had unlimited power. Nevertheless, restraints on imperial power were not codified into laws and regulations. From Qin onwards, privileges of the nobility were often restricted or even denied; meanwhile, the ritual system, the bureaucratic

system, and the local gentry's authority were all subject to the office and power of the emperor. With "His command being the institution, and his instruction being the verdict," the emperor could change a system or dismiss an official whenever he wanted. Wielding "six scepters" (life and death, riches and poverty, and respect and baseness), the Chinese imperial power was undoubtedly autocratic. It is a basic fact that starting from Qin, imperial power was enormous and highly esteemed; but it was not absolute power without limits.

Although Chinese autocratic hierarchy and the patriarchal clan system are symbiotic, the former is usually stronger. To take an example from *A Dream of the Red Mansion*, in Chapter 18, when the imperial consort Yuanchun paid a visit to her parents, "Jia She, as head of all the men of the clan, remained at the western street door, and dowager lady Jia, as head of the female relatives of the family, waited outside the principal entrance to do the honors". Upon seeing the imperial consort, the grandmother (dowager lady Jia), the uncle (Jia She), the father (Jia Cheng), and the mother (Madame Wang) either "knelt down at the side of the street" or "advanced as far as the other side of the portiere, and inquired after her health". This is the so-called "the monarch-subject propriety comes before the affection among family members," an embodiment of the highly esteemed great imperial power. It was not until the monarch-subject propriety was observed that the granddaughter (or daughter) Yuan Chun "supported the old lady Jia with one hand and Madame Wang with the other" to fulfill her filial piety, that the three generations talked about the bygone days in tears.

While the autocratic monarchy of Han, Tang and Song merely extended its power to prefectures and counties, regional administrative authority was still respected by the monarchy. However, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, this regional "second line of defense" was breached by the central government when the newly implemented "neighborhood administrative system" brought the central court's power all the way to the citizens' doorsteps. As Fei Xiaotong, a renowned contemporary sociologist, remarked, "the neighborhood administrative system laid the top-down political track right before the door of each family, and the imminent police patrolling system would even extend the track inside the family door."<sup>44</sup> Hence, in the age of recent antiquity and modern times, autocratic centralism was strengthened rather than weakened.

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44 Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), p. 150.

#### IV The Cultural Functions of Feudalism and the Imperial System

The decentralized “feudalism” in pre-Qin dynasties and the later centralized imperial system from Qin onwards had influenced the generation and evolution of Chinese culture in different ways.

##### 1 *Feudalism Being Conducive to the Creation of Ideological and Academic Diversification*

In evaluating feudalism, both ancient and modern thinkers tend to judge it from the perspective of political structure, especially the strengths and weaknesses of the divided/united regime in governing a state. This can be called a politics-oriented study of feudalism best represented by the famous “On Feudalism” by Liu Zongyuan mentioned earlier.

Some philosophers examined “feudalism” in light of ideology and culture, whose diversity, in their view, was attributed to the decentralization of feudalism. For instance, Yuan Mei (1716-1798) of Qing pointed out that the various forms of feudal politics left enough room for different talents to live and for all schools of thought to take shape and thrive. Taking Confucius as an example, Yuan argued that the sage could not prosper under the system of prefectures and counties, nor under the system of imperial examination, both of which featured unified thinking. The spread of his teachings had a lot to do with the feudal pattern of the independent vassal states in late Zhou. He states,

Thanks to feudalism, he could be busy traveling around various states, such as Wei, Qi, Chen, Cai, Liang, Song and Teng. Wherever he travelled, vassals showed their respect and students followed, which enabled him to gain even more repute. Thousands of years later, he would still be revered as a great master. If the sage had been born in the times of the prefecture and county system and had failed the imperial examination three times, he would have been stranded in one state and would have lived as a hermit and remained a nobody. If so, how could he have possibly established himself under Heaven?<sup>45</sup>

This is indeed an incisive culture-oriented view on feudalism.

There were people in late Qing and modern times who shared this view of Yuan Mei. For example, the contemporary figure Dai Jitao stated:

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45 Yuan Mei, “More Notes on Feudalism,” *Xiao Cang Shan Fang Wen Ji* (小倉山房文集), (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1998), Vol. 21, p. 1638.

The system of Zhou was feudal. The advancement of Chinese civilization had persisted for over one millennium before Zhou but it was in the Zhou Dynasty that it reached its peak. Since then, it was on the decline. The scholarship of Han featured far-fetched argumentation and analogies; that of Tang, extravagance; and Song, shallowness. The highly civilized culture in Zhou was made possible due to the absence of autocratic central governance and the presence of freedom in local areas. The thriving competition would naturally lead to improvement. Therefore, the reason why Confucius, Mencius and many other eminent figures of the “one hundred schools of thought” were all from this feudal period was not that they were born with exceptional intelligence . . . but that the times enabled them to shine.<sup>46</sup>

Dai was not a champion of feudalism, but he was aware that while “feudalism” was not conducive to national unity, it offered a relaxed environment for free ideological and academic development: “Feudalism is not an admirable system,” but due to its decentralized nature, “it is conducive to the advancement of society, of culture and of the individual’s mind.”<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, centralism “greatly hinders their advancement.” Dai concluded: “So the progress of Chinese culture is attributable to decentralization; while its retrogress to centralism.”<sup>48</sup>

Feng Youlan (1895-1990), a Chinese historian of philosophy, held views similar to Yuan Mei and Dai Jitao. Regarding the reason for the academic prosperity in the pre-Qin feudal period, he gave his explanation by quoting from ancient classics: “At that time, vassals of all states had different likes and dislikes” (“Treatise on Literature,” *The Book of Han*) and “Every one in the world did whatever he wished, and was the ruler to himself” (“On the Schools of Thought all over China,” *Zhuangzi* 莊子 • 天下). Feng went on to conclude: “Philosophy in remote ages owed its boom to the freedom of thinking and speech which itself was engendered by the emancipating transitional era.”<sup>49</sup> He noted that under the autocracy since the time of Qin, “the atmosphere of complete freedom in speech and thinking disappeared.”<sup>50</sup>

46 Dai Jitao, *Collection of Dai Jitao's Essays* (Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 1990), pp. 765-766.

47 Ibid., p. 766.

48 Ibid., p. 766.

49 Feng Youlan, “Political and Social Background of Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” *The Sansongtang Collection of Academic Essays (Sansongtang Xueshu Wenji)*, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1984), p. 164.

50 Ibid., p. 165.

Thanks to the liberal and diversified social conditions provided by feudalism, the pre-Qin philosophers traveled all around freely to preach their teachings. For instance, Mencius “went from one prince to another, who provided for him in return for his advice.” And on his trips, he was “accompanied by dozens of carriages and followed by several hundred men” (“Duke Wen of Teng” II of *Mencius*). As for Mozi, he “set foot upon Qi in the north, Wei in the west and Chu for several times.”<sup>51</sup> And Su Qin and Zhang Yi went to different states as lobbyists and served the lords as prime ministers.

The Warring States Period witnessed the emergence of the “Nine Schools” (Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, the School of Names, Legalism, the Yin-Yang School, the School of Agrarianism, the School of Political Strategists, and the School of Eclectics) and the “Ten Schools” (the “Nine Schools” plus the School of Story Tellers), and each school had sub-sects. Han Feizi claimed that after Confucius and Mozi, “Confucianism was divided into eight groups and Mohism into three” (“Eminent Study,” *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 • 顯學). Starting from different academic vantage points, all schools proposed colorful schemes to govern a state and bring tranquility to the whole world. They even put forward manifold cosmologies and life philosophies, presenting a picture of “Scholars indulging in ardent discussions” (“Duke Wen of Teng” II, *Mencius* 孟子 • 滕文公下).

In contrast to this, Qin and Han, with public opinion dictated by the state, and Ming and Qing with the “literary inquisition,” could by no means breed anything similar to the splendid one hundred schools of thought. Take the Han Dynasty for example, when executing Liu An, the King of Huainan, and Liu Ci, the King of Hengshan, Emperor Wu also arrested their relatives and subordinates, and consequently tens of thousands of people were implicated and died. At the same time, the court established an imperial university and “asked the whole world to recommend upright, virtuous and talented scholars and endow them with important posts.”<sup>52</sup> But the scholars could only sing paeans for the court and “salute the grand cause.” The all-inclusive pattern with “Vassals practicing different governance and one hundred schools advocating distinct theories” (“Dispelling Blindness,” *Xunzi* 荀子 • 解蔽), which existed in the feudal times, had completely disappeared.

Yuan Mei and Dai Jitao had good reasons to affirm, from the perspective of cultural history, the contribution of feudal decentralization to academic diversity. Feudalism did provide a liberal environment for all thought and learning

51 Sun Yirang, “Biography of Mozi in Postface of Mozi I,” *Collected Textual Criticism of Mozi (Mozi Jiangu)*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 1986), p. 40.

52 Ban Gu, “Biography of Dongfang Shuo,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 65, p. 2841.

to flourish, as evidenced in Mencius. The book records Mencius' criticism of the ruler of Liang: "King Hui of Liang is indeed heartless"; his criticism includes an appeal on behalf of the "people who suffered the tyranny of the ruler"; it also has arguments advocating the view that the people are the most important for a nation; the sovereign is less significant. What is more, it even includes such a statement as the killing of a tyrant does not count as an insubordinate act, but should be seen as getting rid of a "robber" or "hooligan." In the face of such incendiary remarks, the vassals only listened and dared not do anything to suppress and punish the speaker.

Apart from the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, during the several brief periods of political disunity in Chinese history, the control of culture by the autocratic monarchy was weakened and academic thoughts developed in a relatively free manner. For example, in Wei, Jin, the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the late Ming, early Qing, and at the transition from Qing to the Republican Era, diversified schools of thoughts boomed. An ancient scholar once said, "when the country suffers, the poets get lucky." Following this logic, we can also say that political turmoil and disunity present the possibility of diversified thought and culture. During the change of dynasties from Ming to Qing, the whole country was in disorder. Yet such "collapse of Heaven and Land" gave birth to the early enlightening thoughts of Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi and Wang Fuzhi. After the Revolution of 1911, with the warlords engaged in wars, the government was too busy to care about culture, thus leaving enough room for the rise of the New Cultural Movement. Of course, an ideal case would be a unified, flourishing age with a liberal atmosphere under which scholarship can advance without any obstacles. This situation once emerged in the Song Dynasty, though in a very limited form. In compliance with Emperor Taizu's posthumous order, the Song court did not kill a single scholar, and adopted quite liberal cultural policies. It was in this context that after having been demoted and promoted several times, Su Shi still maintained a good state of mind and produced even better works.

## 2 *The Stifling Effect of Centralism on Culture and Creativity*

In contrast to the decentralized feudalism, the highly centralized imperial system had a distinct impact on culture, but it was a double-edged sword. In examining this impact, let us first look at an extreme example.

The contention among the one hundred schools could only have existed in the feudal era of political pluralism. It would have been unimaginable in a centralized monarchical age. The people-oriented ideas in Mencius were disliked and even hated by autocratic monarchs. In the Warring States Period, unhappy as they might be, the vassals still listened respectfully to the teachings of

Mencius. In sharp contrast to this, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Emperor Taizu of Ming, even with all the political and military power in his grasp, could not bear the millennium-old warnings of the “second saint” (Mencius) to the sovereigns. He not only excluded Mencius from the sacrificial ceremonies at the Confucian Temple, but also expressed more than once to his intimate ministers that if the old man (Mencius) had lived in Ming, he would have been sentenced to death. Zhu Yuanzhang issued a decree to delete from Mencius the passages that the people are the most important for a nation, and the sovereign is less significant: “In the tenth month of the twenty-third year of Hongwu, an order was issued to compile *Excerpts from Mencius*, in which all that did not advocate the supremacy of the ruler should be deleted, such as “An emperor who does not listen to remonstrations should be dethroned” and “the sovereign is less significant.”<sup>53</sup>

The historian Rong Zhaozu (1897-1994) analyzed in his *Excerpts from Mencius* by Ming Taizu, the 85 pieces that had been left out in the Hongwu twenty-seventh year version of *Excerpts from Mencius* now collected in Peking Library. He classified them into different categories. They were prohibited from being included in the excerpts “due to the proposal of putting people before the emperor,” or “due to people criticizing the ruling class,” or “due to people criticizing the politics,” or “due to people’s protest against severe taxation,” or “due to protest against civil war,” or “due to the denouncement of bureaucracy,” “due to the assertion that the emperor is to blame for the degenerating customs,” and “attacking hypocrisy.”<sup>54</sup> From this, we can see the marked contrast between the idea of people-oriented governance formed in the politically diversified feudal era, and the autocracy in a centralized monarchy with unitary politics and state-sanctioned thought.

The monarchical centralism from the time of Qin was very powerful, however, in certain aspects of cultural construction. China was one of the first countries to establish a centralized regime, which was more beneficial to social stability and economic prosperity than the separatism of vassals which long existed in medieval Western Europe, thus laying the foundation for cultural development. Only a centralized monarchical system could standardize characters and units of measurement (Qin Dynasty), and launch large-scale academic compilations (Han Dynasty). From Han’s large-scale collation and compilation of the classics, Tang’s *Collection of Literature Arranged by*

53 Peng Sunyi, *Complements to the Historical Records of Ming (Mingshi Jishi Benmo Bu)*, Vol. 1, the private edition of Hanfen Library, p. 2.

54 Rong Zhaozu, “Emperor Taizu of Ming’s Excerpts from Mencius,” *Reading and Publishing*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, (Shanghai: Life Bookstore, 1947), pp. 16-21.



*Categories (Yiwen Leiju)*, Song's *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era (Taiping Guangji)*, *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era (Taiping Yulan and Cefu Yuangui)*, to Ming's unprecedented reference book *Yongle Canon (Yongle Dadian)*, Qing's series of *Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature (Siku Quanshu)*, and *The Kangxi Dictionary (Kangxi Zidian)*, all of them were fruits of the centralized monarchy and government support. In addition to enabling cultural unification, centralized regimes also ensured wide-spread pragmatic rationalism and were therefore able to avoid the religious fanaticism and theological dogmatism in medieval Europe. All this demonstrates the strengths of the imperial system that contributed to the medieval civilization of China.

On the other hand, the strict control of the centralized regime over the household registry system, the restraint by the neighborhood administrative system and the patriarchal clan system, and the shackles of ethical codes and patriarchal beliefs on people's minds all contributed to the slow progress of the pre-capitalist society, the underdevelopment of the commodity economy and the citizenry. As a result, when Western European capitalism grew from the budding state into the Industrial Revolution through the accumulation of capital, China was found greatly lagging behind. The persistence of the imperial system had a great influence on modern China's backwardness and being at the mercy of other countries.

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