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# New Thoughts on the Social Forms of Ancient China (from the Zhou to Qing Dynasties)

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## Abstract

The entire course of ancient Chinese history has centered on state power, which dominated and shaped the basic picture of social history. The key to Chinese state power has been the state ownership of land, and based on this we can divide the social forms of ancient China into four successive periods: the period of *yishe* 邑社時代 or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period); the period of official communal system 官社時代 (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty); the period of half official communal system 半官社時代 (Han to Tang Dynasty); and the period of state vs. individual peasants 國家個體小農時代 (Song to Qing Dynasty).

## Keywords

social formation – state power – land ownership – official communal system – individual peasant

For more than half a century, most theories and methods regarding the study of ancient Chinese society have been imported. Some came directly from Western academic discourses on the basis of Euro-centrism, while some were imitations of Western academics. For example, the neat and systematic theory of “five production modes” was modeled on Stalin’s thought. Other key

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theories, including theories that reference rural communes, medieval times, middle ages, manorial systems, and the more systematic “ancient aristocratic society of the Six Dynasties reformed in the Tang and Song Dynasties,” were proposed with reference to Western academic discourses rooted in Euro-centrism.

In the 1950s, the academic field of history engaged in heated discussions over such issues as the periodization of ancient Chinese history, inchoate capitalism in China, the peasant wars, the formation of the Han ethnicity, and the system of land ownership. These discussions had such a great impact that the issues were labeled “the five golden flowers.” At its roots, the blossoming of “the five golden flowers” was no different than the practice of observing Chinese history through the single theoretical model of “five production modes.” Although during that process many empirical studies were conducted, they were not intended to discover the actual logic within Chinese history or to establish conceptions and fields of theoretical analysis in accordance with actual Chinese history. Instead, those empirical studies were conducted to obtain the expected results that would prove the pre-selected theory. As a result, they were constrained within the framework of “five production modes,” just like, as the saying goes in Chinese, someone cutting his own feet to fit into a new pair of shoes.

Although the founders of Marxism did not propose a theoretical model of periodization as clear-cut as the “five production modes,” Marx himself did raise the theoretical question of the exceptionality of Eastern societies’ histories, including China. Chinese academic circles also carried on enthusiastic discussions over this question. Yet, despite some accomplishments, they never arrived at a new theoretical conclusion in accordance with the realities and characteristics of Chinese history. Scholars were still trying to prove whether ancient China was a society based on slavery or on feudalism. The most typical example of this was the discussion of the periodization of ancient Chinese history: all the arguments between scholars were carried out within the old model of “five production modes,” which was a pre-established theoretical framework. Given this history of misguided scholarship, future research on China should try to escape the constraints of Western-centric historical ideas and the system of Western academic discourse. Instead, future research should focus on an in-depth study of the idiosyncrasies of Chinese history through expanded empirical analyses, and the establishment of a theoretical framework that is based on the realities of Chinese history.

### Section One: Envisioning a New System of Socio-Economic Forms in Chinese History: The Theory of State-Centered Power

The features of this new system are as follows: it modifies the traditional two-dimensional relationship into a three-dimensional relationship; it changes horizontal relationships into vertical relationships; and it changes social relationships into the relationship between the state and the common people. The relationship between the official government and the common people (common people being those without official government positions—lay people) will become the axis line in this system, upon which the rise and fall of the society, the nation, and the state all depend.

The traditional methodology of researching socio-economic forms in Chinese history focuses on looking for a fundamental relationship within the society, and thus takes society as the axis line of the coordinate system. We call this kind of system a two-dimensional system, which looks at the relationship between the exploiters and the exploited within social relationships. The inevitable route taken is a careful search for exploited slaves or peasants, and once this kind of relationship is found, it is used to define the superstructure and the state's nature, with the state representing the dominant class. In this way the nature of the society is defined. In this old system, the state is considered merely as a superstructure that serves as the foundation, and therefore the relationship between the state and the people, that is, between officials and the non-officials, becomes indirect and secondary. Only by looking at relationships in the non-official society can one see the nature of the state. This, however, is not in accordance with the reality of Chinese history.

The reason is that a society is three-dimensional, not two-dimensional. The traditional methodology ignored the dimension of state power, which is a most important and decisive dimension in Chinese social history. State power is paramount because it determined everything and dominated everything in Chinese history. In China, it is not that the non-official society determines the state, but that the state power and imperial will shape the overall picture of the society. Therefore, to observe, perceive, and narrate ancient Chinese history we should look at the oppositional yet integrated relationship between the state and the lay society, or simply put, between the officials and non-officials. Only through this approach can we elaborate the essential characteristics of the history of ancient Chinese society.

We must first establish the following perspective: the opposition between the officials and non-officials was the basic structure of ancient Chinese society. It was not only the basic structure of social classes in ancient China's official economic system, but also the axis line of China's social class

system for thousands of years. To put it simply, the relationship between the officials and the lay society has been as tight as an iron-barrel in Chinese society.

This relationship between the officials and lay society is not only one between the ruling and the ruled, but also an economic relationship of the exploiters and the exploited. It is a relationship of social production that was established on the basis of the state ownership of the land, the state's power, and the political rule. This kind of production relationship is a social production relationship based on the state system, or power. Compared with other kinds of production relationships within the lay society, it featured unparalleled stability, cohesiveness, vileness, and violence, and applies to the temporal as well as spatial context. Therefore, it is the fundamental gene of the history of Chinese society. For approximately three thousand years, it has been shaping Chinese society and history in different forms, and only through it can we see the true essence of ancient Chinese history.

The social production relationship based on the state system has the following characteristics.

First, this relationship and all actions generated by it were ever-present in history.

Second, this relationship exhibits widespread violence. It did not rely on pure economic law for its functioning, but instead relied on state power and administrative orders. All economic demands based on this relationship were obligatory.

Third, this relationship has the maximization of state wealth as its end, and therefore exhibits broad confiscation of wealth from the peasantry. In the system based on this relationship, the supervisors are those with state power. It then became common that people with power sought wealth. And the transformation of power into wealth has been an ever-true iron-law. An open state system thus came into existence, featuring corruption, theft, bribery, and using public power for private profit.

Because of its gigantic scale and lack of corrective mechanisms, this kind of social production relationship based on the state system was always very close to a loss of control, and any infection could lead to overall collapse. Therefore, the history witnessed cyclical overthrows.

The game between the officials and the common people in ancient China usually ended with a revolt by the people who could not bear the oppression from the officials any more. The developments and changes of relationships between the officials and the common people constitute a historic pattern. In the late Qin Dynasty, the riot of the peasants did not stem from conflicts within the lay society, but from the fact that the peasants could not long bear

the pressures from the officials. It was an inevitable end to the accumulation and intensification of conflicts between the officials and the common people. As an archetype, it also signified a fundamental and historic path of development and change for Chinese social and class conflicts across the following two thousand years.

The foundation of social forms within the state system (production relationships) is the state ownership of land. Together with the land-granting system, state ownership of land became the basis for state exploitation, gave birth to the official communal economic system, and enabled the system that allows the government to demand taxes and free labor from the people. From the levy of grain, fabric, and labor in the time of Mencius, to the basic system of land rent, military taxes, and labor levies in Qin Dynasty, a basic structure of the state exploiting the people came into existence and lasted for two thousand years. This structure in the Qin Dynasty, deriving from the official communal economic system, became the fundamental exploiting system in ancient China. Therefore, the state ownership of land can be viewed as the logical starting point to analyze the exploitative systems that existed in ancient China. The Qin Dynasty can also be taken as an example to analyze the relationships between officials and non-officials across the following two thousand years of history of China.

Within the system of land rent, military taxes, and labor levies in the Qin Dynasty, the proportion of labor levy was higher than the military tax, which was higher than the land rent. This shows that the possession and the exploitation of the people's labor bore more weight than the land. The emphasis on labor levy over land rent is a basic characteristic of state exploitation under the state ownership of land. I have to point out here again that the very basis for the exploitation system in the Qin Dynasty was the state ownership of land and the land-granting system. On one hand, we may attribute Qin's success in the beginning to a limited exploitation through a relatively rigorous system. On the other hand, for various reasons, common peasants were granted more and more barren land, and after their hard work, their harvests were exploited by the officials. When these people became more and more desperate, the state lost its source of exploitation, which resulted in the collapse of Qin.

The establishment and development of Qin's tax and levy system epitomized the basic systems of all other Chinese dynasties. In ancient China, both the central and local governments tended to add temporary tax items and then codify them as permanent ones. Exploitation of the peasants was not limited to land rent, military taxes, and labor levies. The governments would always create new taxation items whenever they saw the need, until the peasants could not take it anymore. Then the dynasty would collapse and a new dynasty

would start, only to repeat the old path. Between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Huang Zongxi very insightfully pointed out this pattern: “The people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens.”<sup>1</sup>

Huang pointed out that all the tax reforms in all dynasties shared the same nature. By only changing the names instead of making real changes in taxation, those reforms resulted in the pattern where “The people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens.” His conclusion that non-stop exorbitant taxation led to the collapse of all dynasties is accurate and his finding is of great worth because it touches upon the basic pattern of taxation system development in Chinese history. I argue that the items and names are merely superficial and technical problems. Behind the phenomenon that “people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens,” there was an even more essential problem. Historically speaking, in all dynasties since the Qin, all the reforms in taxation systems, even some famous ones, were not meant to reduce the peasants’ burdens. Instead, they all share an essential purpose, which was to ensure the highest, or actually limitless, profit of the state. To sum it in one sentence, all the power exerted in the name of state was meant to exploit peasants and seek an ultimate and limitless profit for the state. That was the essential cause of “exorbitant taxation” in different dynasties. With this intention as their principle, no matter what kinds of policies or reforms were adopted, they could only solve the deficit of the state temporarily but could never solve fundamental social problems. To make the situation worse, those who held offices never ceased rent-seeking. All these added up to the pattern elaborated by Huang Zongxi.

Looking at historical facts, one basic principle underlies all taxations systems and reforms in all dynasties: the state asks for what it needs, not what the peasants could afford. No matter how large the budget of the government became, the peasants had only one choice: feed it.

According to *Historical Records* of Sima Qian, the government in the Han Dynasty would “measure the amount of salaries for officials, estimate the official expenses, and use these as the criteria for taxation.”<sup>2</sup> Without realizing the harm inherent in this principle, scholars used to applaud this method. Essentially a principle of “dividing the burden according to the budget,” it became a codified law for the exploitation of peasants for thousands of years.

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1 Huang Zongxi, “Land System Three” in *Ming Yi Dai Fang Lu, The Complete Works of Huang Zongxi*, Vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Classics Publishing House, 1985), p. 26.

2 Sima Qian, “Equalizing Agronomical Matters” (平準書), *Historical Records*, Vol. 30 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), p. 1418.

Under this principle, both exorbitant taxation and the pattern described by Huang would not stop. When taxation adjustments were executed in a skillful way, there might be some short-term relief for peasants, but in the long run the peasants would always be faced with too heavy a burden. The ultimate result would be the collapse of dynasties after incessant exorbitant taxation.

The development and transformation of the conflict between the officials and the common people was a historical process. One historical fact is worth mentioning here: in the Warring States Period, there were many wars and people were drafted for labor. However, this did not lead to large-scale resistance among the people. In contrast, it was not until fourteen years after Qin unified China that the nation-wide uprising led by Chensheng and Wuguang broke out. Why? We can be sure of at least one cause: the peasants could no longer bear the exploitation of the officials. None of the three large scale peasant uprisings in the Qin and Han Dynasties was caused by civil conflicts. If we look at almost all of the large-scale peasant uprisings throughout ancient Chinese history, the common cause was that the officials pushed the people to the edge. When the disadvantaged commoners and peasants could not put up with it any more, they took the risk and embarked on the violent path of rebellion against the ruling group of nobles.

The peasant uprising at the end of Qin Dynasty was the inevitable end to the long-fermenting conflict between the officials and the common people. It foreshadowed the basic historical development and transformation of conflicts between social classes in China.

## **Section Two: Philosophical Thoughts on Land Ownership Relationships in China—The Ontology of Chinese Land Ownership**

One must pay special attention to three key concepts to do research about Chinese history: “the king’s land,” “the king’s subjects,” and “the king’s power.” These are the three guiding principles for state power in ancient China, with the king’s land being the paramount principle. These three principles are of the same nature. They collectively define the ultimate and ever-present state power, which owns, monopolizes, dominates, and dictates everything. These principles and the features of state power determined the course of ancient Chinese society.

To understand these principles, we need first to correct the meaning of “king.” The king, as in the king’s land, king’s subjects, and king’s power, is not just an individual king or emperor, but a symbol of the state power. It is a special concept of Chinese civilization, and only by understanding it can we

discuss and interpret the real meanings of different concepts in Chinese discourses that pertain to the regal or imperial rule.

“The king’s subjects” stipulates the status of ancient Chinese people as subordinate. The king’s subjects are those who are attached to the king’s land. As is recorded in the poem “Northern Hill” from “Minor Odes of the Kingdom” (小雅 • 北山) of *The Classic of Poetry*, “Every inch of land under *tian* belongs to the King; every individual within the border is the king’s subject.” The same meaning was also elaborated in the *Zuo Zhuan*: “Which inch of land within the border does not belong to the king? Which individual that eats grains from the land is not the king’s subject?”<sup>3</sup> Anybody who lives on the king’s land, drinks the water from the land, and eats the food that grows on the land naturally becomes the king’s subject, i.e. the state’s subject. And a state’s subject is obligated to work on the land, pay taxes, and sometimes offer free labor to the state.

“The king’s power” is a symbol and an idolized version of the supreme state power. The king’s power is a part of the state’s power; it does not lie outside or above the state power. Therefore the king’s power does not include state power, but the state power included the king’s power. This is also the reason I use the notion of state power instead of the king’s power in my argument.

Next I want to start a discussion about the king’s land, and to do that I suggest a concept of “the ontology of Chinese land ownership.”

Looking into the history of Chinese land ownership, one feels an omnipresent, irresistible being that exists all the time. I will borrow the philosophical concept of “ontological ground” to describe it. An ontological ground does not need another being for its existence—it is absolute. Its existence decides other forms of land ownership. We may also think of two concepts in traditional Chinese thoughts: the *dao* and the vessel. The *dao* is the metaphysical and the vessel is the immanent. The ontological ground of land ownership is like the *dao*, the metaphysical. Specific land ownership systems are like the vessel. Just as the *dao*, coming from *tian*, does not change, something similarly eternal exists in the Chinese history of land ownership. Therefore I am not using the concepts of “property” and “rights by ownership” as criteria to look into this history, but I will employ the ideas of “ontological ground of land ownership” and “the specific systems” to analyze China’s land ownership history. This kind of analysis will separate Chinese history of land ownership into two levels: the level of ontological ground and the level of historical phenomena. It is different from other analyses because upon the fixed ontological ground there can

3 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990), “The Seventh Year of the Duke of Zhao”, p. 1284.



be changes of superficial phenomenon, or form. I believe the paradigm I suggest is more in accordance with Chinese history than previous theories and thus provides a better analytical tool.

The king's land, i.e. the notion that the state owns the land, is the ontological ground of land ownership in China. No matter when and where in history, the existence of king's land and the fact that the state owns the land never changes. Specific systems were volatile, but the concept of the king's land was stable. That is why it is somewhat transcendental and should be considered as the root of all land ownership systems in Chinese history. This is key to understanding all problems concerning China.

The key part in the king's land is the king, for there was always a king (or emperor) in any dynasty. The king represents the state and the symbol of state power, therefore the king regarded himself as equivalent to the state. The king's land is not merely a slogan or concept; it has the backing of the political state and is an instrument of state power. It shows the value and will of the state as an institution of violence. The concept becomes a reality when the state resorts to violence when necessary and dominates the social economy.

That the state owns the land is both a concept and a system. As a specific land system, it was first established in the Zhou dynasty, and it was more symbolic than real. It became solid as all real/physical land should belong to the state in the Warring States Period. By the early years of Western Han Dynasty, private ownership of land emerged as a derivative of this system. Since then Chinese history has witnessed privatization of land ownership that was closely related to the state's political system. The system was created in the Qin Dynasty and was based on state land ownership and the state land-granting system. This has supported the state exploitation system for more than two thousand years. The basic nature of the setup never changed in all those important historical moments: the establishment of state land ownership in Western Han Dynasty; various "land limits" policies in the Han and Jin Dynasties; the policy of granting land equally to peasants in the Northern, Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties; the land usurpation by the state in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties; the land system of the Heavenly Kingdom; the collective ownership of land policy in 1950s; and even the current land system. Throughout history, the concept of the King's land was always there, sometimes obvious and strong, sometimes vague and less powerful. This is why I take it as the ontological ground of land ownership in Chinese history to explain a fundamental persistence throughout historical transformations. That is indisputable.

By using the king's land as the ontological ground of land ownership, we can achieve a better understanding and explanation of China's private land ownership system, as well as Chinese property ownership systems. In certain periods,

private ownership of land was allowed within the ontological ground of the king's land. That is a historical fact we need to acknowledge. Those who do research on the history of Chinese land systems often find themselves trapped between state ownership of land and private ownership of land. This dilemma comes from the paradox of the logic and the facts of Chinese history, and those who do not do their research in a proper way might find it hard to overcome. My discovery and theoretical assumption that the king's land is the ontological ground of historical appearances may help researchers out of this dilemma. The key is that the state's ownership of land and private ownership of land are not at the same level: private ownership of land did not eliminate the state's ownership of land at a deeper level. The ontological ground is eternal, while specific political systems are changeable. Therefore I am adopting the paradigm of "ontological ground vs. specific systems," instead of "ownership vs. possession" to elaborate the land ownership relationship in China.

The ownership of land is the most important element of state power. The highly concentrated state power owes itself to the highly concentrated power of land ownership. The land is the source of people's livelihoods and thus the root of state power, therefore no dynasty ever let go of its power over the land. For nearly three thousand years, the state ownership of land has been the factor that determines and regulates basic systems and notions of Chinese land ownership and property rights, and further decides the fate and path of Chinese history.

Adopting the paradigm of "ontological ground of land ownership vs. specific systems" of land ownership, we can divide Chinese history into four periods: the period that held the King's land as a fictional concept (Western Zhou Dynasty, Spring and Autumn Period); the period when state ownership of land became reality (the Warring States Period, Qin Dynasty); the period of the decline of state land ownership (Han through Tang Dynasties); and the period of development of relatively private ownership of land (Song through Qing Dynasties).

The establishment of the notion and system of the king's land should be taken as the "Great Matter" in Chinese history. On May 13, 2010, renowned Chinese-American historian Ping-ti Ho gave a lecture at Tsinghua University entitled "Unraveling the Mystery of 'Great Matters' in Chinese History by Reestablishing Historical Facts about the Mohist School in the Qin State." In his speech, Ho mentioned that more than sixty years ago, Chen Yinke came to the following conclusion: "According to Buddhist classics, the Buddha appears when there is a 'Great Matter.' Since the Qin Dynasty, Chinese thinking has gone through many complex changes across a long time. If we condense all of that, we can see that the analogous 'Great Matter' here is the emergence and

development of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty.”<sup>4</sup> Ho commented on Chen’s argument: “When I think of what my teacher Mr. Chen has said, both his conclusions seem too absolute. It is true that the birth of Neo-Confucianism was an important matter in the history of Chinese thought; but if we look at the whole history of China, the real ‘Great Matter’ should be the establishment and passing on of the highly concentrated power system of prefectures and counties in the Qin dynasty.”<sup>5</sup>

Looking back, it is true the establishment of despotism in the Qin Dynasty was the Great Matter of all Chinese history. However, I argue that the establishment and development of the concept of the King’s land was also a Great Matter in Chinese history. Since the Zhou Dynasty, all kinds of state powers became more and more concentrated. Although various forms of power related to land ownership were reduced at certain times, this is just the other side of the coin with the new model of power concentration. Old forms of power were reduced, but at the same time the power was concentrated at a higher level. Among all forms of state power, land ownership is the core. Therefore a highly concentrated state power comes from a highly concentrated land ownership. Mencius said: “three things are precious to all lords: the land, people, and politics.”<sup>6</sup> Land, the source of people’s livelihoods and of state power, is the most precious of all. Those in power in all dynasties had to make sure of absolute power over land. *Guoyu* or *The Discourses of the States* states: “The King owns all the vast land within the boundaries, and provides all the food from the land to people; the King takes part of the harvest to feed the officials.” This expressed an idea similar to “all the land under *tian* belongs to the King.”<sup>7</sup> Lu Zhi in the Tang Dynasty also said: “the King owns the land, the peasants work on the land.”<sup>8</sup> Zhu Xi also said: “All the land under *tian* belongs to the

4 Chen Yinke, “Reader’s Report on Volume Two of Feng Youlan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*,” *Essays of Jinmingguan II* (金明館叢稿二編), (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001), p. 282.

5 “Unraveling the Mystery of ‘Great Matters’ in Chinese History,” *Guangming Daily* 2010-06-03, p. 11.

6 “Jinxin” (Part Two), *Mencius* (孟子 • 盡心下), see Zhu Xi, *Collected Annotations of the Four Books*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p. 371.

7 “Chuyu” (Part Two), *Guoyu* (國語 • 楚語下), (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1978), pp. 570-571.

8 Lu Zhi, *Collected Works of Luxuangong*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Classics Publishing House, 1988, p. 260.

King; all the people living along the river are the King's subjects."<sup>9</sup> Even in the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang still expressed such an idea: "All the land belongs to the official system, the people were granted land to work and thus do not get idle."<sup>10</sup> For almost three thousand years, the land ownership by the state has not only decided the basic system of land ownership and property rights in Chinese history, but has also decided the overall path and destiny of Chinese history.

### Section Three: A Theory of Four Periods of Social Forms in Ancient China (from Zhou to Qing Dynasty)

If we adopt a new system based on state power and the ontological ground of land ownership, we can divide ancient Chinese history into four periods.

The first period is the time of *yishe*, or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period). Looking at the history of the pre-Qin, Qin, and Han Dynasties, the historical forms of communal village society went through the following development: from relatively independent neighborhood communal societies to a communal organization under strict control of various types of state political powers. Although the upper-level political powers went through many changes, the village community was very solid, and therefore was fairly independent compared to the later official communal societies. From *The Classic of Poetry*, which is the most important historical document about society in the Western Zhou Dynasty, rather than finding any proof of slavery or feudalism, we find that village societies were in existence.

The ancient poem "July" from "Odes of Bin" (豳風 • 七月) of *The Classic of Poetry* in particular shows a typical picture of a village society. In the later time of the Spring and Autumn Period, the village societies went through drastic changes and went into decline, and were later replaced by the official communal economic society, which combined the political and communal factors. This development was in accordance with the development of the state land ownership system and state land-granting system. Although the official communal system came after the village societies, it did not develop out of village

9 Zhu Xi, "A Complaint against the Migration of Military Government," (申免移軍治狀) *A Collection of Zhu Xi*, collated by Guo Qi and Yin Bo, (Chengdu: Sichuan Education Press, 1996), p. 820.

10 Zhu Yuanzhang, "Preface to *Continuation of the Great Imperial Criminal Code*," (禦制大誥續編 • 序), see Yang Yifan, *A Study of the Great Imperial Criminal Code*, (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press, 1988), "Appendix," p. 257.

societies. Rather, it was a result of the enforcement of state power. It emerged as a brand new phenomenon, a new social-economic system after the development of state ownership of land and the adoption of a state land-granting system. With the combination of the political and the communal as its basic characteristic, the official communal system as a socio-economic system represents a certain historical social form. It combined the processes of administrative organization and land-granting. Later in history, the combination developed into more pure village official political power, while the peasants became relatively freer as they each were given a portion of land. Later the Han through Tang Dynasties witnessed the development of an economy featuring half official communal as well as private ownership by peasants. Generally speaking, the typical official communal economic system, which could be found as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, developed most in the Warring States Period and the Qin Dynasty.

The second period is the time of the official communal system (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty). The foundation of the official communal system was the high development of the actual system of state ownership of land. The key feature of this organizational form is that political power is unified with the official communal system. With basic-level administration as the system and agriculture as the root, the state policies command everything, including agricultural production, military, social, economic, and cultural aspects. The basic framework unifying state political administration was to register people and peasants and even members of the military. During this process of unification, political power was the ultimate and decisive factor. The state political administration dominated the economy and then dominated everything else. The unification of the political power and the communal system is not only the most important feature of the official communal system, it is also what makes it different from the *yishe*, or village societies.

Even in the early Han Dynasty when Empress Lü was in power, the state made laws classifying twenty different ranks to determine of the amount of land granted to peasants according to their traditional status. At the same time, with the state land ownership stratified and diminished at multiple official levels and the officials of different levels trying to usurp public land, the state land-granting system lost its balance and the privatization of land ownership became inevitable. Ever since the 31st year of Emperor Qin Shihuang, when he asked all landlords as well as peasants to report to the government the amount of land they had, all the way to the enactment of the above-mentioned law in the Han Dynasty, in spite of the state's efforts in controlling land, the private ownership of land became more developed within the larger system of

state ownership of land. There was no definite moment when the private ownership of land was announced; its development was a gradual process of separating, fixing, and differentiating state ownership from private ownership. When state then stopped controlling land owned by non-officials, the private ownership of land was established.

Private ownership was a natural derivative of the state ownership of land. When Han Emperor Wen abolished a universal land-granting law, the system of universal land-granting by the state came to an end and the private ownership of land became established.

The third period is the age of half official communal system (Han to Tang Dynasty). Why call it a half official communal system? The first reason is that Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty abolished the system of universal land-granting by the state, and thus eliminated the basis for official communal system, but the legacy of the official communal system did not vanish. The second reason is that although the state in this period still granted people some public land according to the scale of their households (for example the state adopted the policy of evenly granting some land to peasants in the Northern, Sui and Tang Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties), the land-grating by the state in this period was not as strict and adequate as in the official communal system, the regulation by the state was not as complete, and the official guarantee of social production and livelihood was not as strong.

From the pre-Qin period to the Han Dynasty, there existed a kind of village social organization called *dan* (彈). Its existence marks the difference between village societies in the Qin and Han Dynasties and village communities in later history. The villages in the Han Dynasty still shared some characteristics from earlier official communal societies, in that the villagers maintained common and close connections in social-economic and cultural life. These village communities, whether they were officially organized, non-officially organized but officially controlled, or non-official ones, all shared a strong spirit of self-governance and mutual help among members. At the same time the local officials had great power, and the government still had great control over village societies, which shows the legacy of the official communal system from earlier times.

During the Northern, Sui, and Tang dynasties, till the Five Dynasties, the state adopted the policy of equal land grants to some peasants, who would pay taxes and offer free labor to the state. As written in an imperial order in the 9th year of Tianhe period (485 A.D.) in the Northern Wei Dynasty: "When someone reaches the age to pay taxes, he or she will be granted some land;

when someone gets old or dies, he or she will have to return the land to the state.”<sup>11</sup>

In Volume 13 of *Tanglü Shuyi*, one item stipulates: “Each village head should grant villagers land according to the order, and persuade villagers to work hard on agriculture.”<sup>12</sup> Based on the equal land-granting policy, the state made new standards for taxation and labor levies, and also adopted the *fubing* system through which men were drafted into military service. This was the basic system of the state. The village heads did not just “persuade villagers to work hard”; they also supervised their work and collected taxes.

In Volume 110 of *Weishu*, the records say: “At first, each man will be granted twenty *mu* of land. They have to grow fifty mulberry trees, five date trees, and three elm trees. If they have extra land, they should grow trees accordingly. They should finish growing this land in three years. If they can not, the land that was not worked on will be confiscated back to the state. If they have more than twenty *mu*, they can grow other kinds of trees on the extra land. But on the land they have to give back to the state, they are not allowed to grow mulberry, date, and elm trees.”<sup>13</sup> These records showed that there were unified plans about planting trees. This nation-wide order for agriculture reminds one of the state universal land-granting systems in former dynasties.

The system of equal land-granting by the state also decided the establishment of *fubing* system at that time. According to *The New Book of Tang*, “The military had an official in each village to supervise villagers’ registration and persuade them to work hard on the land.”<sup>14</sup> This can be seen as the combination of agricultural and military policies under the land-granting system. The *fubing* system, in which one man was given the job of “both farming and fighting,” should be seen as a derivative of the universal levy system established on the basis of the universal land-granting system from the Warring States Period. The *fubing* system therefore should be included into the combination of “military and agriculture” based on traditional official communal system.

11 Wei Shou, “Treatise on Food and Money,” *Weishu*, Vol. 110 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), p. 2853.

12 Liu Junwen, *Annotation and Analysis of the Commentary of Criminal Law of the Tang Dynasty* (唐律疏議箋解), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1996), p. 993.

13 Wei Shu, “Treatise on Food and Money,” *Weishu*, Vol. 110, p. 2853.

14 Ouyang Xiu, Song Qi, Fan Zhen, Lü Xiaqing etc., “Treatise on Military,” *The New Book of Tang*, Vol. 50 (新唐書 • 兵志), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975), p. 1325.

During this period, there emerged owners of large pieces of land. However, this should not be seen as a sign of a manorial economy as in Europe, for there were not that many of them, and they did not gain a dominant position.

The fourth period is the age of state vs. individual peasants (Song to Qing Dynasty). After the middle of the Tang Dynasty, the equal land-granting system was abolished and the state stopped granting peasants land. At the same time, the limit on land ownership in place since Han Dynasty was also abolished, and merging lands became legal. After the Jianzhong period of the Tang Dynasty, the state also adopted the “double taxation” law. After this, the state stopped making laws concerning land, and also stopped exerting influence on the huge gaps in land ownership among the people. As a result, there was a great change in the land ownership and amount of land owned by different classes of people. The overall tendency was that private ownership became more popular, and some people started to own larger amounts of land. Also, the forms of ownership became more diverse, with some pieces of land owned by more than two owners.

During the Han and Tang dynasties, the state tried to reform the multi-ownership of land, which shows that the state still wanted to exert influence to ensure production and manage the living conditions of peasants. After the Song Dynasty, the state adopted reforms to collect taxes multiple times per year to make profit in any way they could. At the same time the state paid no attention to the land, which was the most important thing to people’s livelihoods. The people became absolutely helpless before the state power, for the state only cared about collecting taxes and making profit. The state totally lost its function of, in the words of Mencius, “steering people’s production,” and became a profit-collecting organization. More than ever the state power showed its parasitical and corrupt nature.

Some might see this as a sign of budding capitalism. I disagree. The economic position of large land owners was not dominant. Therefore, I argue that in this period the major social structure was the state vs. individual peasants.

Generally speaking, the course of Chinese history undoubtedly centered on state power, which dominated everything, determined the path of Chinese history, and also shaped the basic picture of social history. The key to Chinese state power has been the state ownership of land, and based on this we can divide the social forms of ancient China into four contiguous periods: the period of *yishe*, or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period); the period of official communal system (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty); the period of half official communal system (Han to Tang Dynasty); and the period of state vs. individual peasants (Song to Qing Dynasty). This division is based on the internal logic of Chinese history and thus reveals its own pattern.