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The historical trend of Ming China: An imperial agric-mercantile society

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Abstract Majority of contemporary Chinese historians have been employing a conceptual framework focusing on the difficulty of capitalistic development in China to analyze the historical trend and potentials of late imperial China. This approach based upon the presupposition of viewing the pattern of Chinese history as abnormal reflects with the remaining influence of the Western-centric methodology. Further, based upon a “normal” point of view, seven fundamental, irreversible, and systematical changes to the Ming society could be identified. By conclusion, China in the Ming period was transforming into an imperial agric-mercantile society. This process proves that late imperial China was not stagnate society without “history,” meanwhile, its pattern of development was clearly not identical to the Western style modernization progress.

Keywords the Ming Dynasty, historical trend, capitalism, imperial agric-mercantile society

摘要 中国史学界长期运用资本主义发生学障碍思想模式来分析明清中国历史演变的基本趋势，这其实是一种把明清史当作“变态”来看待的方法，带有强烈的西方中心论色彩。在讨论这种思想模式多方面的问题之后，从“正常”的视点出发，可得出明代中国正在发生七种历史性的转变、其趋势是演变成为一种帝制农商社会的结论。这一历程以独特而又合乎逻辑的方式展现了人类社会转变的一种非西方模式。

关键词 明代，历史趋势，资本主义，帝制农商社会

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Any social system has its own organizational way, operational mechanism and systematic function. Logically speaking, if a social system has its unique cultural foundation, it would contain a potential possibility of particularity. And if some conditions are fulfilled, some potentialities will be fully developed to form its trend of change. China in the Ming Dynasty was not only a country but also a system of culture and civilization. Therefore, its evolvement had its own logic. In other words, because China has its own system of culture and civilization tradition, its trend of historical evolvement contains possibilities different from other social systems. Such historical development based on Chinese culture and civilization should not be misunderstood in haste as “abnormality” due to the extrinsic criteria. Or else, the diverse ways of exploring the history of human society will be blocked. Firstly, this article will reflect on the problems caused by some influential “standard” thinking models about the historical trend of the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. And then seven important historic movements in the Ming Dynasty will be concluded. Finally it pointed out that the overall trend of these movements is to develop into an “imperial agric-mercantile society.” The aim of putting forward this concept is to offer a meaningful method to understand the basic evolvement trend in the Ming Dynasty as well as in the whole period of late imperial China. The comprehensive characteristics of the imperial agric-mercantile society in the Ming and Qing dynasties as well as their historical and cultural meanings will be discussed soon in a separate article.

1 Rethinking the methodology

1.1 “Feudal Society” self-mutation approach

The study in China since 1950s on the historical trend of the Ming and Qing dynasties has been based on an essential hypothesis which regards the Ming and Qing dynasties as the later period or last period of Chinese “feudal society.”¹ The “feudalism” in China mainly refers to the hierarchical system with a division of power of the “union and country” in politics, which has neither been the dominant trend of Chinese history since the unification of the Qin Dynasty, nor

¹ The hypothesis which regards the Ming and Qing dynasties as the later period or last period of Chinese “feudal society” is reflected in abundant articles and books on Chinese ancient history, capitalist seeds, social nature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, land tenure in China, economy of landowner, and so on. A general introduction can be found in *Lishi yanjiu wushinian lunwenxuan*, 2005. A detailed understanding can be found in books such as Bai Gang, 1984; Tian Jujian and Song Yuanqiang, 1987; and so on. The doubts about the hypothesis did not appear until the middle of 1980s and has not made huge influence until recent years.

the basic frame of politics, economy and social organization. Feudalism in the middle ages of Europe refers to a hierarchical system with a division of power, which has a huge difference from the post-Qin Chinese society. The differences involve aspects such as state power organization, economic structure, social fabric, cultural spirit, relation between religious order and secular society, as well as the characteristics of social stratification. Meanwhile, the origin and outcome of the European feudalism is no match to the experiences of imperial China from the Qin to the Qing dynasties. Therefore, employing Feudalism as a key word to explain the history of imperial China is logically not relevant. The main reason why Chinese historians in the twentieth century regarded the Ming and Qing dynasties as the later period of “feudal society” lies in Stalin’s five step devolution theory, namely, all societies would experience the same progress from primitive society, slave society, feudal society, and capitalist society to communist society, was wrongfully taken as the basic principle of Marxism. However, neither Marx nor Engels ever expressed such rigid model. There have been no other civilizations, nations, countries and regions in accordance with such kind of progress except some regions in Europe. Stalin’s five stage model has neither theoretical reference from Marxism nor factual grounds.² Therefore, studies employing the concept of Ming and Qing Feudalism are hypothetic without historical facts and theoretical foundation.³ If the Ming and Qing dynasties are regarded as the later period or last period of feudal society according to such model, one question that must be put forward next is how the dynasties developed into capitalism. Because according to the five stages model, when the feudal society has developed fully, it will inevitably become capitalism. And the Chinese historians commonly believe that Chinese feudal society after the Tang Dynasty or the Song Dynasty had developed into a high level. But capitalism did not appear in the whole period of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Therefore, there comes the question of capitalism transformation impediment in China. This is what has been called “the issue of capitalist sprouts.”

1.2 “Capitalist sprouts” impediment approach

When the five stages model mentioned above is regarded as a common rule, Chinese history is going to be explained in such model. Under such situation, the view of “capitalist sprouts” in the Ming and Qing dynasties can make Chinese history in accordance with the “common rule” at least in “trend.” However,

² Zhao Yifeng, 1989; 2005.

³ Different schools on the division of Chinese ancient history have different opinions about the origination of feudal society. But from the perspective of this article, such differences will not lead to different conclusion. Therefore, for better argumentation, in this article, the feudal society in China means from the Qin Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty.

although the nature of human beings makes the organizational pattern, operation and spiritual phenomenon of different social systems embody some basic features, human society is also limited. Therefore, the generality should be summarized by conclusion rather than deduction. If any historical “rule” is contradicted with the concluded facts, what we can do is to amend the theory rather than overturn the facts. Because China has broad boundary, great population and profound history and culture, if any common rule on world history is not in accordance with the basic facts of Chinese history, the rule has no ability to make through the test of historical practice and it should be summarized and expressed once again. In other words, the question similar to that “whether Chinese history is in accordance with the common rule of human history” should never be put forward. Whether “capitalist sprouts” appeared spontaneously in China has nothing to do with the question that whether Chinese history is in accordance with common rules of world history. The summarized conclusion without Chinese history is impossible to be the common rule.⁴

It is likely to get a logic paradox on the problem of China’s “capitalist sprouts” in the sense of “historical common rule,” that is, “capitalism is doomed to appear in China, but it did not.” The result overturns the premise and therefore a pseudo-question or a nonsense question comes into being. If we admit that the spontaneous capitalism is the combination of many complex factors, such as humanism, economy, culture, geography, ecology, and even the international circumstance, it is clear that there is no generality of spontaneous capitalism.⁵ Since the spontaneous capitalism is not general or necessary, it is not strange that it did not happen in China. Therefore, most of the explanation about why there is no spontaneous capitalism in China is in fact trying to explain that China during the Ming and Qing dynasties had gone through a totally different way from Europe that followed the way of capitalism.

There is also a close relationship between the opinion on capitalist seeds of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the hypothesis of synchronization of historical progress. Such point of view regards that when capitalism appears in the West, it “should” also happen in China. However, between two social systems which have no direct relations, there is no basis of logic and fact for the necessity of the same change of social system at the same time. It is possible to have the same social change for different societies at very different time. The appearance of capitalism is one of the phenomena that have the weakest synchronization of the

⁴ The concept of “world history” popular in Chinese academic circle refers to the history beyond China. This is a typical symbol of the separated view between “China” and “world,” which has caused many problems on subject division and research sense. See Zhao Yifeng, 2006, No.5.

⁵ Andre Gunder Frank, 1998; Kenneth Pomeranz, 2000.

occurrence of the same social change while the end of primitive society is one of the phenomena that have the weakest synchronization of the finish of the same social change.

1.3 Western-centrism

There are close connections between the conception of Western-centrism and the “feudal society” self-mutation approach, as well as the “capitalist sprouts” impediment approach. The fundamental conceptions of China’s new historiography are based on the fact that China has been behind the West since the modern times under the influence of Western historiography. Therefore, the Western history becomes the “model” and then other theories of historical movement will be formed according to this “model.”⁶ In this way, when Chinese scholars find something different between Chinese history and Western history, what they do to try to break the Western-centrism is to demonstrate that China has whatever Western countries have, or, Chinese history is the same as Western history in “nature.” Unfortunately, such view still regards the Western history as the typical one and cannot prove with justice the special phenomena in Chinese history. It is another kind of “abnormal” Western-centrism. The “model” should be the individual with most perfect characteristics commonly shared by things of the same “type.” Logically speaking, unique things cannot be a model because there is no comparison with other things of the same type. Although not all stages and contents of Western historical progress are unique, there is no one the same as it on a whole, even no one similar. Therefore, from the perspective of world history movement on a whole, it can not be called a standard or a model. However, the world history shows more diversities before the time of capitalism and produces more generalities after capitalism happened in western Europe because the capitalism has the nature of expansion to make influence on other countries in the world. Because capitalism gradually covered the whole world after the 16th century, it was no longer a unique thing when it appeared on different parts to different extent and then there comes a comparison among various models of capitalism. In nother words, in the sense of origination of capitalism, since there is no comparison for western Europe, it is not a model. But in the sense of improvement model of capitalism, since it has comparative objects, it can be regarded as typical. However, such typical status has changed a lot with the development of history.

The economic pattern and even the social organizational pattern of European

⁶ Paul A. Cohen’s *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* has made great contribution to breaking the Western-centrism in China’s history study. But the book has not made enough criticism for the origination of such thought. See Cohen, 1984.

capitalism had gradually influenced all countries in the world during the 16th to 20th centuries. Many countries have replanted or reproduced capitalist system and other countries as well as regions are involved in the world market-oriented economic system dominated by capitalism, which leads to a conception of necessity of capitalism. Meanwhile, since Europe has been in the dominant status in capitalist system in the world, the Western-centrism conception is intensified. But what has been ignored is that the fact that capitalism has spread from western Europe to the whole world can not prove the hypothesis of the generality of capitalism. In fact, they are contradictory. For the other parts beyond the western Europe, since capitalism is introduced from outside, it can not be the original. The “central” status that Western Europe has got since the 16th century is the superiority of strength rather than typical status of pattern. Other countries and regions beyond Europe had lost the same external circumstances as European capitalism just because of Europe’s expansion. Since capitalism firstly happened in Europe, other countries and regions in the same period had much less possibility to follow the same way. Even if they positively imitated European pattern, the circumstances were not the same and hence the way became different from that of Europe. The most important reason is that the non-Western countries have to face a developed and powerful Europe while Europe had no such powerful opponent during the early period of its modern development.

The more profound origin of Western-centrism is the conception of Western “modernity.” The development of Western countries since the 16th century has caused a new pattern of economy, politics, culture as well as spirit totally different from any civilization, culture and society at any time before in the whole world and therefore has presented a nature of self-adjustment and self-renewal as well as immeasurable achievements of materials and culture. Such new nature that human society has got is called modernity. Because modernity was produced firstly with the development of Western countries, in the sense of origination, it has a close relationship with Western civilization. Therefore, when “modernity” is talked about, the specific examples are usually the Western situation. “Modern” and “Western” has become a couple of concepts related with each other, which strengthens the thought that Western history is the “normal” pattern. However, modernity is not a property finalized during the early time when Western countries began capitalist expansion. Instead, it has a nature of gradual improvement. Its improvement and present state include the contribution and creation of non-Western world and its existence is based on non-Western world. Modernity is no longer a special thing for western countries. It relates with modernization but does not equal to that. The former is a result and a property while the latter is a process. As a property, modernity is general. As a process, modernization is specific. Because the characteristics of modernity are formed due to the general relations of the whole world, they have common generality. Because the ways of

modernization are various, they show the diversity of historical development. The significance to clear out the difference between the two is to point out that the general value of modernity does not mean a standard way of modernization.

1. 4 The idea of historical progress

The mainstream of modern scholarship of history has been influenced since the Enlightenment by the hypothesis of that historical movement is a progressive process. Logically speaking, from such perspective, any subject of history study, including country, nation, society, culture and civilization, had no history in a certain limited period when a so-called “progressive” process did not happen. It only had “being” or “existence.” The time before the Opium War in China had been regarded as a “long stagnant” period. However, progress is a prominent phenomenon rather than the sole one in history. Regress is also a common phenomenon. The powerful trend of progress has been prominent since the modern times. Whether such trend is the nature of history still needs further research and proof of human history in future. If human beings can not handle well the internal relationship as well as the relationship between human beings and nature, or will create something difficult to rein, it is possible for human society to confront some radical crisis. Although optimism always has its use, we actually have no strict empirical evidence and logical reasons to think that progress is fundamental or eternal. In the academic circle both at home and abroad, the view about the stagnant development during the Ming and Qing dynasties is based on the historical fate of China after the Opium War. China’s misfortune in the 19th century seems to prove the previous “mistake.” But this is a reverse thinking way judging reasons from the result. China in the Ming Dynasty was a vigorous civilization system. Therefore, it would not turn to radical change without huge challenge, which after all was felt in later time.

1. 5 Theory of economy determinism

The paradigm of capitalist transformation is a study method on “social form” from the first beginning. The conception of social form includes a methodology that regards social change as the overall development on the whole. But in fact, from 1950s until recent time, the study on economy is comparatively sufficient while the research on other aspects is far from enough. Maybe it implies a theory of causality that economy “decides” other aspects of society and then “decides” the overall nature of society. If it is not the case, such description as “seeds of capitalist production relations” will not be regarded as an importance sign of the change of social form. From the perspective of property, economy has more fundamental meaning than politics and culture. But from the perspective of

process, that is, history study, their change is always in the mutual work, which interacts as basis, conditions and limitations. In other words, in the sense of historical process, the change of social form is inevitably a process of change as a whole. It is over-idealization and anti-history to study the change of social form merely from the perspective of economy, just like merely from politics or thought. Politics, social organization way and cultural spirit will not have huge change before the change of economic conditions. But when the economic change has achieved some extent, it needs changes from other aspects to work with it. In this way, it is possible to go on the development and the phenomena will change into the process. Among the relations, the change of politics, society and culture is not necessarily enough to promote the development of economy. Therefore, some change factors beyond direct economic conditions are necessary to work together. On this aspect, the pure economic study is not an effective way of illustration in the sense of history study. It is contradictory to study on the change of social form with the view of pure economy study.⁷

1. 6 Remote possibility of monomer self-transformation of social form

“Social form” is a typological concept about the organization way of human society, which has a great significance of analyzing the internal operational mechanism of different social organization ways. Although typology is different from process theory, scholars studying on the historical trend of the Ming and Qing dynasties rarely pay attention to or clearly discuss about their differences. Typology focuses on the possibility to distinguish property, characteristic and logic while process theory discusses about mechanism of change, common rules and facts. The problem of the change of social form combines typology and process theory. We have to think about the problem from the perspective of process theory: to what extent can social forms of different types make monomer self-transformation? If all known social forms can be regarded as the relationship of pregnant and birth as well as being pregnant and being given birth, not only the whole of human history but also history of groups and units such as society, country and nation can be formed into a family pedigree of different social forms. Moreover, because the origin ancestor is the primitive society, the pedigree should be the same. If we make an arrangement of all social forms in human history, we will find that two separate societies are barely possible to have the same pedigree

⁷ The theory of economy determinism was the mainstream of Chinese Marxism historians from 1950s to 1990s. But this is neither special for Chinese Marxism historians, nor for Marxism historians in general. In his book *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Kenneth Pomeranz of California University also shows some inclination of economy determinism or explaining historical change with pure economic views. See this book and a debating article by Zhao Yifeng, 2006, No.1.

except that there were some patterns of the same process from the primitive society to the early nation stage. The “mother and son” relationship among social forms is of possibility rather than of necessity. Moreover, we can only categorize the social forms in the similar sense. The social forms with the same category always have difference, even huge difference. The socially called “non-typical” may be the general and the “typical” pattern in another sense. Specifically speaking, the birth of slave society from primitive society can be called a somewhat general phenomenon but there is no typical example of slave society giving birth to feudal society. The classical Mediterranean society, which is regarded as the most typical slave society, did not “give birth to” European feudal society, which was formed during hundreds of years after the destruction of Roman Empire and whose cultural spirit and national subjectivity were both in lack of inheritance of the classical society. It is hard to find the direct transformation during the changing process of Indian society. Chinese traditional society, which has been well known to scholars at home and abroad for its “continuity,” will be regarded as “sterility” for such a long time. There were no successors with the same consanguinity in ancient Egypt. The primitive society in various lands of Pacific Ocean firstly “continued for a long time” but later was marginalized or perished. The “mother and son” relationship of social forms seems to be valid only in Europe from feudal society to capitalist society. However, the change still needed some special external conditions and occasional chances, that is, “father.” Most of the nations and countries in the world have made changes of social form during hundreds of years in modern times. And the international expansion of European capitalism is the vital external factor of all these changes. Therefore, the general changes of social forms in modern times were the combination of internal and external factors rather than the result of internal transformation. Because the external reason was the same one, the societies of modern times have more similarities than that of before. In this way, we can find that various social forms except primitive society in fact can not give birth to a new social form. The logically possible monomer self-transformation of social forms appears to be “sterile” in the process theory. Therefore, the monomer “mother and son” relationship of social forms is a special case while the “sterility” is the generality. At least, the sterility of social forms in mediaeval times was common. The social forms since modern times have more or less become isomorphic or had general relations. Their future is waiting for the practical analysis according to facts by future people.

In this way, the long continuity of the basic characteristics of Chinese traditional society is in fact not an anti-rule phenomenon. But why was there transformation impediment of social forms? This is because “social form” is conceptualized. Its existence has to be practiced in specific society and cultural system, which usually incline to affirm oneself rather than deny oneself. Or else, it is hard for them to form and exist. The common changes during the process do not cause the radical

change of social form. In other words, the change of social forms is not only a problem of evolvement but also a problem of cultural variation. The self-variation of culture is such a difficult thing that the comparatively close society is more difficult to make changes combined cultural variation and technical development. The external challenge, opportunities and information are the necessary conditions for cultural variation and evolution happening at the same time. The change from feudal society to capitalist society for Europe owned such external conditions. China in the Ming Dynasty had the inclination of cultural variation. However, it was not strong enough to promote the cultural conflux of China and the West.

2 Changes of the Ming Dynasty

What kinds of changes happened in the Ming Dynasty are “historic”? We need to make clear two concepts if we want to answer this question. One is “novelty” put forward by Zhang Yinlin, which means the novel things during the long history of China and the novel things are possible to bring about social reformation.⁸ The other is “irreversible process,” which means the society would not reverse to the origin status unless there was extremely unconventional situation in the long history of China. The changing process of social nature needs the novel and irreversible process. The trend of historical movement at the end of the Ming Dynasty and the early of the Qing Dynasty means the possibility that was made by the combination of novel and irreversible processes with reference to historical continuity.

2.1 Involvement in global changes

China in the Ming Dynasty was more and more involved directly in an unprecedented global process with Chinese opening the round-the-world voyage at the end of the 15th century and European “discovering” America. The historical significance was that the little connection among different civilizations became more and more usual and common due to the expansion of European civilization. The foundation was the development of industry and navigation technology as well as the imbalanced development of Europe and other countries in the world. The form was colonialism. The logic dominating the whole process was survival of the fittest among various nations in the world. Violence and capital were the main means of competition with the spread of European religion culture in other regions and nations. During this process, the absolute initiative and competition advantages of European countries made the colonial crisis of other nations. China is one of the nations that Western colonialism tried to cover in the end and also

⁸ Zhang Yinlin, Preface, 3–5.

one of the most powerful civilizations that Western expansion encountered. European colonialism had spread all over the world since the 15th century and then a new world trade system dominated by Europe gradually was formed. The history of other countries and regions had been involved in the early stage of “modernization” dominated by the West. There was no exception for China. In this way, Chinese history in the Ming Dynasty did no longer have the external conditions to exist and change independently. It received some fresh factors from outside world and got new chance to develop itself. But meanwhile, the civilization, cultural foundation and independent nation status began to have the possibility of being overturned. Chinese people in the Ming Dynasty did not realize that this would be a brand new world historical process and had no idea about the unprecedented challenge of this process.

In the early period of the 15th century, before European voyage, the giant fleet led by Zheng He in the Ming Dynasty once arrived at the east coast of Africa, controlling the marine trade passage of West Indian Ocean. Such kind of official marine political trade could not last long. Even if it could, the result would be different from European overseas colonialism. Although there was a ban on marine trade before the middle of the Ming Dynasty and the order of coastland was often threatened, the foreign products into China through the folk oversea trade were still extreme abundant, including some very important things. In the late period of Emperor Jiajing, because the disaster of Japanese pirates was controlled, the ban was abolished and the marine trade was allowed. There appeared a prosperous situation. Corn and potato were introduced into China in the 16th century. In the early stage of the 17th century, corn had been generally planted in Northern China and potato was introduced into China almost in the same period. These two high-yield crop needed less labor than the traditional Chinese crops such as paddy. Meanwhile, they were drought-enduring and had no much demand for the soil. Therefore, they became excellent crops in Northern China where there were abundant earth. Such change related with the rapid increase of population in the late period of the Ming Dynasty. And the increase of population during the 17th and 18th centuries was a key change among the whole Chinese history. Zhou Qiyuan during the years of Wanli once wrote in the preface for the book *Dongxiyang kao* (A Textual Study of the Eastern and Western Oceans to China), “During the years of Emperor Muzong, the ban on marine trade was abolished. And then businessmen from different parts came to do business with huge fleets in the east and west. There were countless treasures and novelties. The money of the trade was beyond tens of thousand taels each year. The common people and the officials both got benefit. It had become the southern treasure of the emperor.”⁹ In this way, the change of Chinese coinage

⁹ Zhang Xie, Preface by Zhou Qiyuan, 17.

had got a powerful motivation of materials. The main currency of the Ming Dynasty changed into white silver and then the object financial system changed into coinage financial system, which was a historic change.¹⁰

Catholicism was introduced into the inner land of China in the beginning of the 17th century with the spread of European overseas colonialism, spreading religion and cultural communication. By the end of the Ming Dynasty, Chinese government and people did not oppose this religion strongly although there were a few cases. The missionaries were not invaders but spreading religion had always been one of the important parts of European colonial expansion. They came to China with the aim of changing Chinese people according to their ideal and making China as one of the parts of Western world.¹¹ A group of scholar-officials such as Xu Guangqi began to study on the West seriously, which was the first time for Chinese upper class of politics and culture to study initiatively on Western culture. And then Chinese people got a broader perspective. Many European people were invited to work in the imperial court at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. Even after the break between Chinese government and Vatican, many Western intellectuals did not stop their activities in China. Yuanming Yuan (the old Summer Palace) was built by combining both Chinese and Western styles and European painting was popular in China. In the direct contact with Western culture and thought, Chinese culture formed some possibilities of change. China in the late period of the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty was able to communicate with the West through two islands, Macao and Hong Kong.

Therefore, China after the 16th century had actually been involved in the global historical change with the motivation of colonialism and trade. But the Chinese upper class did not realize the close relationship between the changes happened in China and the outside world. The common thought of opening culture was not strong enough to promote the social change. China at that time still had cultural vitality and its social organization way did not go to corner. As long as the society was stable, the economy would still be prosperous.¹² Under such situation, although there was much communication with the West, Chinese people did not foresee the historical significance of the Western power in the East.

2. 2 Unprecedented prosperity of market-oriented economy

Advanced commercial economy was developed early in China. At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, commercial industry became declined due to the pursuit of

¹⁰ About the change of financial system of the Ming Dynasty, see Zhao Yifeng, 1986.

¹¹ Qiong Zhang, 1996.

¹² As for the Western works about the stability and prosperity in the early period of the Qing Dynasty, see Pierre-Etienne Will, 1980. The Chinese edition was translated by Xu Jianqing, 2003.

stable agricultural society. But after the 15th century, the prosperous business was revitalized and had some conditions for further development. After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the national market system had formed on the basis of regional markets. Nobel metal became the currency used by national finance as well as common people without any control from the state.¹³ The system of taxes and corvee was comprehensively calculated by currency to remove the restriction of various relations of personal dependence to commercial exchange. Along the region under the direct control of the Ming government, many central markets were formed to make trade with minorities in boarder areas. Abundant towns of commercial and handicraft industries, which had no relationship with administrative arrangement, got rapid development. A large number of commercial towns came forth. To a large extent, the village economy was related with products exchange and trade of products at home and abroad. The floating population in the city increased largely. Handicraftsmen and folk handicraft industry got much free room. More employment of free labor appeared in production. Although the overseas trade was not completely free, it in fact achieved an unprecedented scale with the efforts of folk businessmen after the 16th century. There were a large number of products from different parts of Asia and Europe in the market. Considered all these situations, China at that time had been a highly commercialized society with strong fluidity. This society was developed on its former basis and had not yet gone to its end. There was still room for it to further prosperity with the same orientation. There were some similarities in the sense of “internal factor” between the Chinese society at that time and the European capitalism, in both of which the production and exchange relations were penetrating and even dominating all economic life. Meanwhile, there was a big difference in the sense of “external factor,” that is, Chinese commercial economy still lived in the system of “interpersonal dependent relationship.”¹⁴

2. 3 Simplification of social stratification

All human societies have hierarchical system so far. There has been no absolute equality of social status, power and rights. Moreover, there are various rules to ensure such inequality. From the general trend, the social hierarchical system has gone through the change from the stiff and over-financial compulsive one to the flexible and non-over-financial compulsive one. The stiff and over-financial

¹³ Zhao Yifeng, 1985.

¹⁴ “Interpersonal dependent relationship” is one of the important concepts of Marxism on three types of human society. See *Complete Collection of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 46, 104. The concept is used here to mean the compulsive relationship dominating other people.

compulsive social hierarchy included the aristocratic system, business system, family power system, nine ranks of official system, and so on, which not only guaranteed the rights of social benefited people, but also ensured the separation between power holder and common people of lower class. The imperial examination system made the social hierarchy much more flexible and open. Farmer, worker and businessman of “four ranks of citizens” could gain the status of “official” through the efforts of individual and family, among which wealth and social relationship may be the important foundations. In the Ming Dynasty, the imperial system interrupted in the Yuan Dynasty was comprehensively resumed and then was developed to its prime. In the Qing Dynasty, the significance that the imperial system had made on aspects of ensuring the social status and rights distribution was less than that in the Ming Dynasty. In the sense of the social status change that the imperial examination had brought about, the flexibility among the upper class and the lower class in the Ming Dynasty had exceeded all previous dynasties.

There are some other aspects showing the flexibility of social hierarchy in the Ming Dynasty. The handicraftsmen after the middle Ming Dynasty were actually no longer the social class compulsively ruled by common rights. Instead, it became a profession, which was a huge liberation. Farmers were strictly limited for their activity room and freedom in the early period of the Ming Dynasty but they were much freer after the 15th century. The “one-standard” system put into practice all over the country made farmers’ taxes nearly all gather in their earth taxes and then farmers were no longer limited strictly by the common social power. Their social status was actually the same as farmers at the beginning of the 20th century. Businessmen were regarded as the last rank of “four-rank citizenship” in feudal China. But the traditional society never denied the importance of business in social system. The lowest status among “four-rank citizenship” was actually higher than many other social members. Businessmen were given many limitations at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty but they became active very soon, from salt vendition, garrison troops, tea and horse trade to materials selling. In fact, the Ming government and businessmen had formed various contractual relations. Businessmen’s power had increased with the cooperation of government. Therefore, the businessmen after the middle Ming Dynasty were adored by others rather than discriminated. In the later period of the Ming Dynasty, the word “four-rank citizenship” was outdated, only indicating generally different people or the hierarchy before. The social hierarchy at that time became very faint. Only the two extremes, officials and common people, were clear. From the dominating trend, a polar society with officials and common people was formed in the Ming Dynasty. There was a broad way of imperial examination and a narrow road of tallage between officials and common people. Generally speaking, officials and common people were hierarchical

rather than opposite.

The nature of simplification of social hierarchy is the change from social inequality to relative equality. The modern democratic society is so far the society with simplest social hierarchy. Compared with the modern society, China in the Ming Dynasty had much stronger hierarchy, but much weaker than before as well as the middle ages of Europe. In human history, the society most approximate to the Ming Dynasty in the sense of social hierarchy is the modern citizenship society, rather than feudal society with strict order and ranks, or slave society with clear partition of noble and common people, or various clannish or patriarchal societies in which the social status was determined by kin.

2. 4 Dynamic urban life and culture

Cities developed early in China. Abundant population lived together to form a totally different way of life, organization relationship and public rules from village. Clannish or patriarchal relations were weak here and kin could not make effect. People communicated in a convenient way with rapid spread of information, common public amusement and market consumption. There were much population doing service work, a system managing the public order more effectively, many advanced public facilities as well as a large number of floating population. With the prosperity of city, the citizen culture of the Ming Dynasty became extremely active. And meanwhile, with the popularization of culture and education, there appeared a large number of intellectuals who did not live in the traditional way of “becoming an official.” These intellectuals directly participated in the cultural industry and made culture comprehensively penetrate into the daily life of common people, which meant that Chinese city life would become lively and vigorous on the spiritual level. This culture did not only belong to the “intellectuals” or the means reaching the upper class by a few people. It became the life of common people. The elite culture and popular culture were combined together in this sense. There were three most prominent phenomenons. The first was the unprecedented level of novel writing and reading; the second was the popularity of various plays; and the third was the prosperity of folk book printing industry. Besides, painting and calligraphy were more commercialized than before, becoming a fashion among citizens in town. The mainstream concepts and values of citizen cultural products at that time had the nature of secularity, which was formed by various cultural resources in accordance with the needs of secular life. It was actually a significant combination and convergence of elite culture, religion culture and mass culture, which became the basis of new cultural recognition and had a leading function for the life way and thought of common people. In the sense of culture, just as in the sense of economy, China after the middle of the Ming Dynasty had formed a vigorous

citizenship society, which had many similarities with modern citizen society. One of the significance of European Renaissance was the popularity of secular society and secular culture. European secular culture was raised on the basis of overturning the clerical culture and revitalizing the humanism tradition while Chinese secular culture was sprung up on the foundation of plural-cultural tradition of elite culture, religion culture and folk culture with commercialization and prosperity of town life as well as penetration of intellectuals into lower class life. The latter was a tender reformation from the previous tradition while the former had the feature of “revolution” in the way of challenging the recent tradition with ancient cultural resource.

2. 5 Population explosion

According to the official statistics, Chinese population from the Han Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty was at most sixty million. Although the actual population exceeded the official statistics, the latter was still a basis to estimate the total number of population. Near the end of the Ming Dynasty, there came an irreversible explosion of population. Although there was no direct support from the official statistics, according to the statistics in the early stage of the Qing Dynasty and the rule of population increase, the total number of population at the end of the Ming Dynasty had been beyond one hundred million. Enough agricultural products to satisfy the needs are the premise of population increase. And the increase of agricultural products depends on improvement of technology, increase of cultivated land and agricultural species. Although the agricultural production tools at that time had made some improvement, they still could not cause the huge increase of productive level. The cultivated land increased to some extent. And the introduction of new species was extremely remarkable. Especially the spread of corn and potato broadened the range of cultivated lands and made the extensive cultivation in most parts of the Northern China could afford a large number of population. After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, farmers' personal independence had reduced. When most taxes were merged into land tax with the Single-Whip tax reform, the tax rule according to person number had been weakened. So was the relationship between official statistics of population and national financial income. The comparatively negative control of population reduced the external restriction, which was one of the reasons for the population increase at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Although the reasons are still waiting for further research and illustration, the population increase in the Ming Dynasty is an apparent change with novelty in Chinese history, which is also an irreversible trend. Chinese history after that time had been totally different from before.

2. 6 Formation of cash financial system of the government

Although there appeared some suggestion of coinage finance in the Song Dynasty, it did not become a constructive reality until the middle of the Ming Dynasty. There was currency operation in national finance before, but it was supplementary. After the middle of the Ming Dynasty, the object element in national finance had become supplementary. Coinage of the financial system indicated that the national finance was established on the basis of economic production and exchange activities including agriculture through market-oriented economy rather than directly on the basis of agricultural economy of natural status. And then the coinage financial system put coinage into economic fields of the whole society. The financial system was just one part of systems in the whole country. In the national systems of the Ming Dynasty, the financial system made the first change but the relative systems and concepts did not catch up with the change of financial system, which sharpened the confusion on various aspects of public power at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Although the coinage financial system of the Ming Dynasty did not last long enough to make a comprehensive influence, it indicated sufficiently that the traditional managing way in China had begun to change. The national management could have closer and deeper relationship with market and coin economy. And non-financial compulsion could be replaced by property possession and dominative relation on many important fields such as taxation and labor distribution.¹⁵ After the full development of this system, the national management could no longer only concentrate on controlling people but had to take more and specific economic operation. The economic rule would also influence directly the national affairs, which required new types of managing conceptions, talents and knowledge. Because finance was a government action, the change of social system brought by the coinage financial system would be possible only when the government function was comparatively stable and healthy.

2. 7 Socialization of Confucianism

The early Ming succeeded the imperial examination tradition of the Yuan Dynasty that had taken Neo-Confucianism represented by Zhu Xi, Cheng Yi, and Cheng Hao as orthodox scholarship both for officials and common people. But the Neo-Confucian philosophy in the beginning of the Ming Dynasty was almost the lingering remnants of that in the Song and Yuan Dynasties, without new creation of thoughts. The “Learning of Mind” established by Chen Xianzhang,

¹⁵ Zhao Yifeng, 1986, No 4; 1984.

Zhen Ruoshui, and Wang Shouren became the mainstream school in the middle of the Ming Dynasty. With mind pursuing reason and containing everything, the “Learning of Mind” had the nature to tolerate Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism and Taoism both had the tendency of direct popularization while Confucianism could show the popularization solicitude only through elitism. Therefore, the more Confucianism combined with Buddhism and Taoism, the more popularized it became. In the process of pursuing the oneness of everything and thought freedom with human’s nature “consciousness,” the “Learning of Mind” paved the way for the direct popularization of Confucianism. Therefore, the “Learning of Mind” broadened the way of individual perfection. If the common people could “make his mind as pure as the way of heaven, he would be a saint.” Without complicated knowledge and abilities, “everyone could be Yao and Shun.” “What we pursue is to reduce rather than increase. If we can reduce some desire, we would gain some way of heaven. What a happy and easy thing!”¹⁶ Exploring the method of descending the “saint way” was an effort to popularize Confucianism. The thoughts of descending the “saint studies” were in accordance with the change of social secularization, which was different from Confucianism in the Song Dynasty. The latter concentrated on infusing the thoughts while the former was aimed at broadening the way for common people to culture. As discussed before, the boundary of classifying people had become more and more faint at that time and the common people were gradually prominent. Therefore, there came the philosophy for common people to pursue perfect. The successors of Wang Yangming had made great efforts to popularize “saint studies.” But there were no more Confucian philosopher with great thoughts on the level of metaphysics after Wang. The “Learning of Mind” could not “save the world” either, because it was born with the change of the world. From the perspective of culture and thought, the trend of the society at that time was secularization. Neither the “Learning of Mind” nor rationalistic philosophy could have an apparent effect on affairs in a short time. Instead, they would influence the society by the means of ethos and human spirit in the long time. Donglin School in the late period of the Ming Dynasty seemed to have strong responsibility to “save the world.” Although they wanted to make Confucianism become elite and profound as before, they could not accomplish it. After all, compared with the rationalistic philosophy, the contents and thoughts of the “Learning of Mind” could more suit the society after the middle of the Ming Dynasty. The social crisis of the late Ming became more and more serious and the ethos of officials and scholars was corrupted. Some officials and scholars who had the ambition to save the society blamed the disadvantages of the “Learning of Mind,” trying to recompose rationalistic philosophy. But the “Learning of Mind” had already put

¹⁶ Wang Shouren, 1265–1268.

huge influence on officials and scholars at that time. And then most thinkers in the late period of the Ming Dynasty made compromise with the thoughts of Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, Zhu Xi, Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming, and tried to exceed them. But they could not achieve the profound and pure thoughts due to times. Thinkers in the Qing Dynasty were restricted by nation and meanwhile they were unwilling to return to rationalistic philosophy. Therefore, they turned back to Confucianism. But the revitalized Confucianism was the scholarship of experts in study. After it became the mainstream, thinkers all stayed in the study, leaving some words play in the society. The abuse was much more serious than that in the Ming Dynasty.

Therefore, it is clear that although Confucianism in the Ming Dynasty did not lead the positive change of the society, it did some response to the change. Its most prominent change was the tendency of popularization. If we review China of the Ming Dynasty in such a circumstance, we can not deny that China at that time was in the way of gradual change, and the way was definitely different from that of Europe.

3 Imperial agric-mercantile society

Except the changes mentioned above, the history of the Ming Dynasty kept a basic characteristic of inheritance from previous dynasties. There were many inherited factors softening the change tendency, such as centralized descendent monarchism, bureaucratic system of imperial examination, remnants of aristocratism, patriarchal clan system, lack of professional exploration of science and technology, universe poverty of farmers, and so on. These traditions did not show extinct evidence of change in the Ming Dynasty. The periodic prosperity and decline of dynasties was another factor. All elements and tendencies of social change were developed when the state's control softened in the Ming Dynasty. But when it developed into a remarkable status, the Ming Dynasty collapsed, breaking the former political frame for the change of society, economy and culture. Just as each new dynasty, the Qing Dynasty went through a period of strengthening control, which played a negative role rather than a positive role in the free change of society. The Qing Dynasty brought the clannish political spirit of border land nation into the inner land, making the emperor-bureaucracy power system change into the emperor-aristocrat-bureaucracy power system. The aristocratic power once compensated the national controlling ability caused by the corruption of bureaucratic system. And the change on the level of society slowed down due to the strengthening of purpose of upper and powerful class. The unification of the Qing Dynasty accomplished the cohesion process of Chinese civilization. The civilization periphery was almost the same as the

national administrative territory, which made the confliction between boarder land and inner land during two thousand years in monarchical China, finally settle down in the unified multi-national country. The contradiction and war between past dynasties and boarder land nations was no longer a big problem for Chinese historical change. This situation was a conclusion of cohesion history of Chinese civilization in monarchical times. After the Qing Dynasty had a stable order, the social changing tendency accumulated before began to develop again in a new frame. The period from the middle of Emperor Kangxi to Emperor Qianlong was once again a prosperous time full of changes.

China at this time was a developing monarchical society based on agriculture and commerce. The basic characteristic of national system was the preservation of emperor- bureaucracy power system and the remnant of aristocratic system in the new frame of multi-ethnic group country. Until the end of the 19th century, there was no sign of replacing this traditional type by any other public power. Therefore, no matter what happened in economic field, the possible perspective should be analyzed under the background of a centralized monarchical system. Compared with various local power-division systems, the centralized monarchical system had the advantage to offer a unified system of administrative management, law and communication within the huge territory, providing necessary conditions for a huge network of economic society. But the expense was the strong control all over the society. From the perspective of economy, the basic economic elements in this society according to the extent of importance included agriculture, commerce, handicraft industry and stockbreeding. Agriculture had an autarkic basis of village society and to a large extent it was more and more involved in the market-oriented economy. Commerce was an important tie linking village and town, boarder land and inner land, domestic market and international market. Handicraft industry was partly under the control of regime system, partly operated in private ownership, and partly existed as sideline of village population. It could satisfy the domestic needs of markets in town and village. Meanwhile, there were a large number of products to afford the international market. Stockbreeding is the main industry of boarder land and the basis for boarder land people to communicate with inner land people in economy and life. This was a multi-economy based society. Due to the pluralism of economy, products had to exchange among different industries and regions. Therefore, the society had huge room for commercial development. Considering the further liberation and commercialization in economic field under such background, we can get the conclusion that the monarchical system and the economic prosperity could carry on at the same time and businessmen, citizens as well as more farmers involved in products exchange could accept the monarchical political system. All significant social trends during the Ming and Qing dynasties had the possibility to carry on for a long time in the frame of monarchical system. From the perspective of social organization, in

Chinese imperial agric-mercantile society, except a few nobles going on their descendent privilege, officials and businessmen were the most powerful classes. In theory, officials got the highest status because they participated in political management. In practice, businessmen were the most rich and stable class because they handled wealth. The combination of officials and businessmen gradually developed, which would sooner or later lead to some situation of “official businessmen” governing the country. The trade of land was opened in the 16th century. After the population explosion in the 17th century, the poverty and fluidity of Chinese peasantry as the basic social class had become a fundamental problem in China. Peasants occupied a large part of the population but they were on the inferior status in the social system. In village regions lack of fluidity, the clannish organization still held tremendous social power. Both commercialization and fluidity of farmers constituted the factors of clannish decline. Therefore, we can not exaggerate the actual function that clannish organization had made on the stability of Chinese social structure. Chinese imperial agric-mercantile society was plural in culture. There was huge difference among various nations, religions and cultural customs. Meanwhile, elite culture and mass culture were different and life way in town and village was distinguishable. But all these coexisted in a civilization community. Such feature of plural culture in a community made the society so flexible in culture and spirit that there was little possibility of sudden change. Instead, the tradition was possible to carry on.

The similar, even the same factors that Chinese imperial agric-mercantile society had as that of modern society had increased as a whole. It had been in the process of gradual change until the middle stage of the Qing Dynasty. If there were no invasion of Western colonialism, China would go on its change on the way of monarchical society based on agriculture and commerce. There would be many direct prospects such as expansion of capital, great development of market-oriented economy, strengthening of citizen class, increase of social freedom, absorbability of village by city, and so on. But there was no direct prospect of representative democratic system. If there was any possibility for industrialization, the possibility would be so remote. Moreover, it would need huge demands of market as well as revolutionary development of science and technology.

Therefore, it does not conform to reality if we say that Chinese history in the Ming and Qing dynasties was stagnant. Neither it conforms to reality nor does it tally with logic to say that China in the Ming and Qing dynasties was on the way of Western capitalist society. In the monarchical frame, China in the Ming and Qing dynasties was gradually turning to a commercialized society based on agriculture and commerce. We can make many speculations on how such kind of commercialized society would carry on for a long time. But the speculations will

be useless since China had been through another different way due to some turns. At all events, we can not find out the capitalist prospect from the traditional Chinese society. Instead, we can do out the imperial agric-mercantile society mentioned above. The legacy of such kind of imperial agric-mercantile society is the historical foundation of modern Chinese society. The specific relations between the two and the relatively theoretical reflection will be our research work in future.

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