

Notes on the Nature of Chinese Ancient Political Economy

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1 Introduction

Lu Xun: "As I turned over the pages of history, there were no dates, and on every crooked page were written the words 'benevolence, righteousness, and morality.' I couldn't sleep, so I carefully looked at it all night, only to see the words peeking out from between the lines, and the whole book was filled with the words 'eating people'!"

Here, "eating people" refers to literal cannibalism. It signifies extreme brutality and inhumanity, where people resort to harming, oppressing, mutilating, and even killing others. Lu Xun suggests that throughout Chinese history and literature, there are numerous instances where such atrocities occurred. Cannibalism serves as a metaphor for the ruthless and morally bankrupt actions of individuals and institutions. Whether it's during times of famine, entertainment, or warfare, people from all walks of life, including emperors, farmers, and soldiers, have been implicated in such heinous acts.

Lu Xun: "In a place where people have been eaten alive for four thousand years, it wasn't until today that I realized I've been caught up in it for many years myself."

2 Legalist school as the founder of totalitarianism

Since the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, the moral appeal and prestige of the Zhou royal family have declined, and conflicts between vassal states, the Zhou royal family, and among vassal states have become increasingly acute. Under the original Zhou system, vassal states were the lords of the Zhou royal family, deriving their legitimacy from the grant of the Zhou royal family and their strength from their vassals (lords and ministers). However, as the Zhou system of peace gradually collapsed as an international peace mechanism, vassal states, in the increasingly jungle-like international order, could not rely on the protection of international order and mechanisms for their survival and security, so they could only resort to enhancing their own strength. Therefore, reducing the dependence of the state on the landlord class, constructing independent state power, and strengthening this power became the pursuit of vassal states. This is easy to understand: in a country with numerous landlords, its king's mobilization power and national combat effectiveness are at a disadvantage compared to those increasingly centralized countries in the increasingly competitive and even warlike international competition.

This effort to strengthen national power has continued for hundreds of years, mainly including several aspects: (1) Financially, through efforts to monopolize industry and commerce, the state obtains and enhances fiscal sources independent of the landlord. This was pioneered by Guan Zhong. (2) Administratively, departing from feudalism and gradually implementing the system of prefectures and counties, enabling the state to bypass the intermediaries of landlords, and allowing administrative power to reach the grassroots of society (inserting a single pole to the end), thereby directly extracting the funds

and population needed from society (as soldiers, etc.). This administrative reform also includes household registration and mobilization, thereby increasing control and mobilization at the grassroots level. (3) The implementation of the legal system, the main purpose of this legal system is to maintain the king (monarch), strike against landlords, and control the common people; the significance of striking against landlords through the legal system lies in the fact that landlords are competitors from which the state extracts social resources, and striking against such competitors can help the state better control and extract social resources.

In this long-term transformation of hundreds of years, Legalist thought was born. Legalist thought is a summary of the slow institutional changes mentioned above, as well as a deepening and extremism. Legalist thought, when mature, includes the theories and practices of people like Shang Yang, Han Fei, and Li Si. Specifically, it has the following characteristics:

- (1) Fundamentally, Legalists believe that militarism is everything, and everything that cannot serve militarism should be destroyed, because only in this way can survival be ensured. The king is the personification and purpose of militarism, and all other subjects should be tools and swords in the hands of the king, with no other meaning.
- (2) Subjects (even princes) should be equal tools of the king because any other privilege (such as landlords) would constitute a challenge to the king's power. This is "the prince commits a crime, and should be sentenced just like the common people." Marx called this system the universal slavery of the East, meaning that there is only one true slave owner (the monarch), and everyone else is a slave. A small part of these slaves become servants selected by the monarch, but servants can be turned back into ordinary slaves or even eliminated at any time under the monarch's instructions.
- (3) The way the monarch controls and mobilizes his subjects relies on reward and punishment, and the standardized tool of reward and punishment is the legal system. (3.1) In order to make rewards and punishments effective, all moral values independent of the reward and punishment mechanism must be destroyed, because if someone's motivation and purpose in life are to pursue their own moral ideals, to pursue "from the Tao, not from the king (从道不从君)", then such people cannot be driven by the king's material rewards and punishments, cannot become tools of militarism, and are meaningless to militarism and should be eliminated. (3.2) Legalists firmly believe that human nature is evil, which is not only the result of empirical observation but also to provide a metaphysical basis for this legalist reward and punishment mechanism. Because only by believing that human nature is evil can people be thoroughly driven by fear and material desires, and rewards and punishments can be effective. (3.3) Legalists believe that fear is a psychological force stronger than material desires, so the reward and punishment mechanism should be "heavy punishment and light reward."
- (4) In order to reduce the obstacles to national mobilization and resource extraction, after eliminating landlords, the next target should be families and even households, to eliminate all old family ethics, and finally achieve "the father is ruthless to the son, the loyal minister to the king." Because if there is a filial son, then his father also becomes a competitor of the king's power.
- (5) Legalists are followers of jungle law, so they hold high the banner of intrigue and believe that it is very effective to use intrigues and traps to attack opponents who still have bottom lines. For example, in the Battle of Xibi (西鄙之战), Shang Yang's victory over Prince Ang (公子昂) of the Wei Kingdom used this kind of downgrade against those who still had integrity.
- (6) Because merchants are also entities independent of royal power and cannot directly become parts of militarism, Legalists all advocate thorough policies to suppress commerce, rather than just implementing state commercial monopolies.

- (7) In order to strengthen the militarism of the state, all social forces and organizations that may challenge royal authority (landlords, families, and households) must be destroyed. Afterward, subjects must continue to be weakened to prevent rebellion and resistance, ensuring that subjects become pure tools of militarism. This is the Legalist concept of "weakening the people".
- In summary, as the external international order becomes increasingly jungle-like, the survival of a country has been a major issue since the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. Legalism represents a comprehensive, deepened, and extreme summary of the reform experiences from hundreds of years ago. Moreover, Legalism also raises a new issue: under an internal jungle order based on violence rather than legitimacy, how should emperors defend and manipulate their own power? Legalists, especially Han Fei, have also addressed this question.

• In fact, in the late Warring States period, states increasingly centralized power, with Qin, originally a relatively barbaric state, experiencing less constraint from the Zhou system. Therefore, Qin chose the most extreme form of centralization, namely Legalism. Due to the minimal influence of the Zhou tradition, Qin encountered relatively little resistance from landlords during its Legalist transformation, making the acceptance of Legalism relatively smooth. As a result, Qin became a powerful authoritarian militaristic state. However, institutional reforms alone did not guarantee Qin's conquest. Qin's successful conquest included several important factors: (1) The advantage of its geographical location on the map's edge and the protection of geographic barriers ensured Qin's defense. (2) Proximity to and acquisition of the agricultural and manpower resources of Ba and Shu, neighboring states on the map's edge, doubled its national strength. (3) Eastern states lacked a mature international treaty mechanism, preventing them from forming an effective international anti-Qin alliance. After Qin's conquest, following the path indicated by Legalism, it continued to establish a long-lasting foundation. Although it later faced failures, the Han dynasty inherited the Qin system, combining Confucianism with Legalism, essentially inheriting this authoritarian system. However, this system did not bring permanent peace but rather ongoing popular resistance and periodic large-scale peasant uprisings (revolts) and major collapses every few hundred years.

2.1 The so-called "Guan Zhong Trap" is essentially the concept of "one outlet for profit" — only one channel or pathway for profit.

It means that if the state uses political, economic, and legal means to control all channels of livelihood and monopolize the distribution of all wealth, then the people must rely on the grace of the monarch (the state) in every aspect of survival and development. In this way, the monarch can freely dominate and rule over the people under his rule. This idea was pioneered by Guan Zhong, a famous politician and precursor of Legalism in the early Spring and Autumn Period.

Guan Zhong's original words were: "If there is only one outlet for profit, the country will be invincible; if there are two, the military strength will be halved; if there are three, it cannot raise an army; if there are four, the country will perish. The former kings knew this, so they blocked the people's desires, restricted their avenues of profit, and gave them to the monarch, took them from the monarch, made them poor on behalf of the monarch, made them rich on behalf of the monarch. Therefore, the people regard the monarch as the sun and the moon, and treat the monarch as their parents(国蓄第七十三)." This idea has been regarded as the golden rule for ruling the people by authoritarian monarchs throughout history, and has become the golden rule for implementing China's distinctive personal control.

The system of "one outlet for profit" enables rulers to monopolize all political power and economic benefits. This effectively grasps the throats of the subjects, granting absolute power to the rulers over life and death. The people must obey the rulers' commands unquestioningly to survive. This is the

fundamental reason why authoritarian regimes in China have been able to implement cruel dictatorship effortlessly throughout history.

The most significant characteristic of Chinese society is personal control and dependence, and all control or restraint is built on political and economic power — belonging to monarchs, nobles, officials, landlords, and parents, among others. The state deliberately controls all channels of livelihood, leaving only one pathway for survival and development: serving the authoritarian state. In such an environment, any rational person can only survive by relying on political power or the state apparatus (specifically, on officials, superiors, etc.). As a result, the fate of the Chinese people, like helpless infants, at the mercy of the rulers, has become an inescapable fate for thousands of years.

Technically, "one outlet for profit" includes two complementary and interdependent measures: political personal control and economic exploitation of the weak (poor).

The means and tools of personal control consist of the well-established household registration system and collective responsibility system.

2.2 The household registration system in China originated in the Shang Dynasty.

The household registration books submitted to the central government all had yellow covers, hence the term "yellow register" or "yellow book." The ancient household registration system not only included the registration of the population but also regular audits of the population. The registration details were extensive, including names, genders, ages, heights, weights, appearance, and other physical characteristics. Everyone had to register with the government; otherwise, they would be considered "unregistered" (blacklisted). Not only would the individual be punished, but also the neighbors and village officials responsible for household registration. For example, in the fourth year of Emperor Han Wu's reign (107 BC), out of 2 million refugees in the eastern region, 400,000 were found to be unregistered, leading to the dismissal of Prime Minister Shi Qing (石庆), who narrowly escaped execution by Emperor Han Wu.

Corresponding to the household registration system was a tightly controlled organization system that restricted personal freedom. Every town, village, household, and individual was meticulously incorporated into the state's administrative network through the organized neighborhood watch or collective responsibility system.

The neighborhood watch system was pioneered by Guan Zhong, as detailed in his work "Guanzi (立政第四)." "

Ten households shall form a group of ten (什), and five households shall form a group of five (伍). Both of these shall have leaders (长). Set up strong points and close off [the approaches to villages] with barricades. Let there be but a single road [leading into each village], and let [people] leave or enter only one at a time. Let the village gates be watched and careful attention paid to keys and locks. The keys shall be kept by / the village commandant, and a gatekeeper shall be appointed to open and close the gates at the proper time. Let the gatekeeper observe those who come and go in order to report on them to the village commandant.

All cases of leaving or entering at improper times, wearing improper clothing, or members of households or their retainers / not conforming to the accepted norms shall be reported by the gatekeeper immediately, no matter what the time. If [such irregularities] involve the sons, younger brothers, male or female slaves, retainers or guests of the head of a household, the village commandant shall warn the clan elder of the circuit. / The clan elder shall [in turn] warn [the leader] of the group of ten or five who shall [accordingly] warn the head of the household.¹

From the central government to the local level, from the capital to the borderlands, from bustling cities to remote villages, a tightly controlled organization system, based on political and economic power, was established. This system, composed of administrative power and household registration, wove a dense network, enabling rulers to easily control any subject under their rule. Under this extensive network, individuals had "nowhere to escape between heaven and earth." The authoritarian reformer Shang Yang implemented harsh household registration and collective responsibility systems in the state of Qin, leaving the people with "nowhere to escape, and no place to relocate." Later, Shang Yang was besieged by political enemies and had to flee alone. He arrived at a small inn near the border, seeking shelter, but was refused entry by the innkeeper due to lack of documentation. He sighed deeply, lamenting: "Alas! Is this the consequence of the law's flaws?" As a prime minister of a mighty state, finding no place to hide even as thousands sought him under the government's pursuit, his capture demonstrated the effectiveness of personal control.

Political personal control alone is insufficient to subdue people's will; it must be complemented by economic measures. This is where the weak (poor) are exploited.

The primary policy of exploiting the weak (poor) is agrarian dominance over commerce, advocating agriculture as the foundation while restricting the development of industry and commerce. This has been the fundamental economic principle of all authoritarian dynasties in China. Its purpose is to forcibly bind the vast populace to the land, ensuring they can be easily manipulated by the rulers at any time.

The rulers of China throughout history have had a natural political intuition that once a free economy grows and strengthens, it will inevitably breach the dykes of ignorance and impoverishment – the fundamental pillars of authoritarian rule. Eventually, these pillars will be submerged, burying the authoritarian system. Therefore, they spare no effort to keep the economy under tight control, ensuring it remains in its infancy. This intuition demonstrates profound foresight, as evident from the development of capitalism in Western Europe.

The development of capitalism in Western Europe began in the fifteenth century. Due to Europe's unique geographical environment and historical traditions, commercial freedom had always been relatively advanced. After merchants gradually gained control over wealth, they sought political power, leading to the establishment of parliaments to oversee monarchs and becoming tools for safeguarding merchants and middle-class intellectuals. This resulted in the emergence of representative systems that greatly curtailed the privileges of kings and nobles, subjecting their actions to legal supervision.

China's policy of suppressing commerce and favoring agriculture includes several measures. First, rulers emphasized agriculture as the primary occupation and denigrated merchants, imposing discriminatory regulations on their attire, housing, and transportation, and lowering their social status. Second, they

¹ Guan Zhong, Guanzi. Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China. Trans., Allyn Rickett, Princeton University Press, 2001, p103-104.

implemented policies to restrain land consolidation to prevent mass bankruptcy among farmers and stabilize the agricultural production base. Third, they strengthened household registration management to limit population mobility. Fourth, they restricted merchants and commercial activities in various ways, such as curbing their political rights, imposing punitive taxes, and monopolizing profitable industries through state ownership.

In economic activities, the production, circulation, consumption, and distribution must be coordinated and integrated to mutually promote each other. To pit industry and commerce against agriculture is a serious violation of economic laws and cannot lead to a prosperous economy. While the policy of favoring agriculture and suppressing commerce may seem to prioritize agriculture, in reality, it stagnates agricultural development and perpetuates a state of simple reproduction.

Due to the state's forceful blockade of channels for commercial prosperity, within the prescribed constraints, as a rational individual, a talented young person aspiring to success and fame has only one ready-made path: to serve the authoritarian ruler (entering officialdom or becoming an official). Serving as an official becomes the only and best way to realize one's life's value. All other professions, apart from "entering the court to become an official," are considered lowly occupations. The hierarchical arrangement of scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants in ancient China reflects this ideology, with officials occupying the highest position. This characteristic forms a prominent feature of Chinese society: "official-centricity."

2.3 The so-called "official-centricity" is simply the idea that officials are the core, and everything revolves around becoming an official.

The core of the autocratic and dictatorial system is personal control, and its foundation and guarantee lie in power. Power not only dominates people but also encompasses countless direct economic benefits derived from it. The autocratic system relies entirely on officials at all levels to maintain control. Those who wield power become esteemed figures, wielding great influence, while even lower-ranking officials enjoy numerous privileges and benefits. The mystique of officials lies in the power they hold and the various privileges and material gains derived from it. Official positions become the most valuable intangible assets, and power becomes synonymous with wealth. Power is more liquid and convenient than currency itself. In China, political power dominates financial power; Confucius might only be fit to be a servant. China's unique social structure leads to the accumulation of wealth more effectively through political speculation than direct economic activities. Lv Buwei understood this well, seeing opportunities in "rare goods."

The pursuit of fame and fortune is human nature, and the shortcut to success and wealth lies in becoming an official. The higher the official position, the greater the profit. Official position, power, and wealth form a marvelous "trinity," where the amount of wealth depends on the size of the official position and the extent of power. Therefore, the best way to realize one's value and leave a lasting mark in history is through officialdom. The consciousness of promotion and wealth permeates the souls of the people.

For centuries, there has been a popular game among the Chinese known as "The Game of Promotion." It uses a die and a board marked with various positions from ordinary students to government prime ministers. Participants roll the die to determine whether they ascend or descend the ladder. The higher one climbs, the more money they win from those of lower rank. Literate and illiterate individuals alike enjoy this game.

Conversely, economic benefits without the backing of power are unreliable. During the Western Han Dynasty, due to prolonged wars with the Xiongnu, Emperor Wu exhausted the state's finances. Liu Che, with his strategic acumen, targeted businessmen, issuing the famous "Denunciation of Hidden Profits" decree. This edict encouraged servants of merchant families nationwide to report any tax evasion by their masters. The penalty for each tax evasion was severe: confiscation of property and exile. This move brought in vast amounts of revenue for Emperor Wu while bankrupting countless merchants — "Yang Ke made hidden profits denounced all over the country... resulting in the bankruptcy of most merchant families" ("The Book of Han, Records of Revenue and Expenditure"). This was naked political plunder.

Historically, Emperor Xuanzong, Emperor Suzong, and Emperor Dezong of the Tang Dynasty followed suit, though they were somewhat more refined. They adopted a practice known as "borrowing from merchants," borrowing millions of coins each time. The result, of course, was similar to "Liu Bei's borrowing of Jingzhou — borrowing without repaying." Who would dare demand repayment from the emperor?

In summary, being an official is the most profitable and safest business. Therefore, wealthy businessmen in China would seek official positions, both for self-protection and for further advancement. Hence, historical figures like Hu Xueyan and his peers, known as the "red-turbaned businessmen," prospered and are still revered as models of successful entrepreneurs.

2.4 The direct consequence of personal control is that everyone must depend on those who are stronger and more powerful than themselves to survive and thrive. This creates another major characteristic of Chinese society — personal dependence.

According to differences in political and economic status, a hierarchical system of dependence pervades the entire nation. There is only one exception — the emperor, who embodies power itself. Consorts and courtiers depend on the emperor, local officials depend on central officials, lower-ranking officials depend on higher-ranking ones, and servants depend on their masters. Those who are depended upon have the power of life and death over their dependents (known as "having a weapon at hand, with the intent to kill"). The material interests of dependents directly stem from those they depend on. The dependent is simultaneously both dependent and a source of dependence. Furthermore, within larger systems, there are subsystems, and within subsystems, there are further subsystems. Personal dependence becomes a ubiquitous form of interpersonal relationships.

Because of personal dependence, officials at all levels cannot become independent government officials but only proxies or servants of the emperor. Similarly, since one's income and promotion are closely linked to one's immediate superior, the cost of offending one's superior is immense. Moreover, because there are numerous alternatives for such officials, subordinates always remain tools of their superiors. The entire value of officials lies in their obedience (whether effective or not), rather than their intrinsic worth.

China's bureaucratic politics carries a fatal legacy — the system of hierarchical appointments. Officials are not elected by the people but discovered and appointed by superiors. Officials do not serve the public interest but their superiors or higher-ranking officials. The most notable characteristic of Chinese officials is their ability to "manage interpersonal relationships." Their assessment and appointment depend not on their accomplishments but on their closeness to superiors. Once they please their superiors, they secure their official positions. Consequently, "reporting good news but concealing bad news," and being sycophantic to superiors while treating subordinates disdainfully, become the norm in official circles.

The pattern of personal dependence causes subordinates to be accountable only to superiors, with subordinates absolutely obeying superiors, inevitably leading to the cruel reverse (elite) elimination of Darwinian survival of the fittest evolution rules.

The so-called "reverse elimination" or elite elimination refers to elites in the political and academic fields, where some truly talented and capable elite talents often encounter cold treatment, exclusion, or even suppression due to their independent thinking or unique insights. Those with independent thinking or unique insights often find themselves eliminated from the competition due to their excellence, while some incompetent individuals without their own opinions, adept at sycophancy, become "fit" survivors. Su Zhe, a renowned figure, vividly referred to this as the "rule that gentlemen cannot contend with villains."

"Elimination" was originally the most effective mechanism for selecting talents in human society, which selects winners and eliminates losers through certain competition rules. "Reverse elimination," however, is different. It eliminates outstanding top talents, while those adept at flattery and association become "fit" survivors. The reason lies in human nature. A perennial weakness of human nature is the fondness for flattery. Elites often disdain sycophancy, relying on their own talent, while mediocrities thrive by pandering to superiors. The latter inevitably invest all their resources in pleasing their superiors. In the pattern of personal dependence, it is apparent to superiors that they appreciate the performance of the latter, thus they naturally gain more opportunities for advancement. The result of such successive elimination is inevitably the great triumph of mediocrities. Therefore, in a society where "a single hole for profit" exists, the elimination of elites is the greatest political challenge. Independentminded elite talents are stifled, leaving the entire society silent.

The institutional arrangement of "a single hole for profit" has turned China's officialdom into a vast talent black hole, attracting all the elites of the world. Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty once joyously exclaimed, "All the heroes of the world have fallen into my trap." For the vast majority of scholars (intellectuals), the only way to stand out is to become an official, because: "In life, apart from this, there is no other way to stand out."

Countless elites are crowded onto the single plank bridge of officialdom, competing fiercely, and in this brutal survival struggle without bottom line, usually only the most cunning and ruthless prevail. As a result, individuals of noble character often fall into the hands of those of low character; those with higher education often fall into the hands of those with lower education; and those speaking the truth often fall into the hands of those speaking falsehoods. This is the fundamental reason for "reverse elimination" or elite elimination.

The Chinese have always had a traditional habit of infighting (internal strife). The cruelty of infighting and the massive waste of talents in the infighting are unparalleled in the world. People often simply attribute it to the national character, as if it were the original sin of the Chinese people. Mao Zedong once famously said, "With 600 million people in China, isn't there enough room for strife?" Why has infighting been so strong in China for thousands of years? Why have the Chinese people developed a "joyful" mindset of endless conflict with others? The only explanation is "institution." There are only inferior institutions in the world, not inferior nations.

As a large agricultural country like China with a large population and few industries, opportunities for wealth are even scarcer. Everyone struggles on the verge of starvation, competing for limited resources and rewards. People often say, "Those in the same trade are enemies." In a society where someone else's success is one's own failure, this is indeed a truth. If each of the hundred people has a different opportunity to get rich, they will be able to coexist peacefully due to the division of labor, and they will even be mutually beneficial. However, if the hundred people have only one opportunity to get rich, they

will inevitably have to fight hard for it. The folksy saying is "There's no food in the trough, pigs fight each other." In a society where the amount of wealth is fixed, the more participants in distribution, the fiercer the competition. This is the fundamental reason for the fierce political struggles, the mastery of politics, the chaos in society, and the root cause of poverty and ignorance of the people in China from ancient times to the present.

The consequences of personal control and personal dependence render individuals with neither independent political status nor independent economic status. Even the material benefits they gain are unstable and can disappear at any time. The tragedy of the founding heroes throughout history originated from this. Han Xin, Bai Qi, Wu Zixu, Wen Zhong, and others are all well-known generals and advisers in history, who have made significant contributions to their emperors. However, their endings were all very tragic, despite their achievements in conquering the world, they had no power to survive. This kind of tragedy, where those who conquer the world are not rewarded and those who shake the ruler with bravery and strategy are endangered, is prevalent throughout Chinese history and intertwined with Chinese society. Why couldn't they escape the tragic fate of "the hare dies, the dog is cooked"? The answer lies in personal dependence. Without personal freedom protected by law, without the sacred and inviolable right to private property, in China, except for a select few, no one can become a free person.

Property rights are the cornerstone of constitutionalism, the barrier of human rights, the core of the market economy, the pivot of social prosperity, the fundamental right for human survival and development, and the foundation for maintaining human freedom and dignity, as well as the cradle of political civilization.

People always complain about intellectuals lacking backbone. The so-called "Without the skin, how can the hair attach?" speaks of the millennium-long malaise and pain of Chinese intellectuals. Ultimately, the main culprit behind the tragic role of intellectuals is the institutional arrangement of "a single hole for profit." Since the unification of China by Qin Shihuang, Chinese intellectuals have become "hairs" attached to the authoritarian regime. In a society where the government is the sole employer, once a person is blacklisted by government agencies, they can only be disposed of without resistance. Therefore, in such a society, the so-called independent personality of scholars, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and personal freedom can only be wishful thinking.

Dignity and hunger cannot coexist harmoniously. The iron rule of society is: controlling a person's salary can control their will. Without independent economic rights, there are no independent political rights. Only with stable economic income can one have an independent personality and complete will. Economically dependent individuals, who rely on flattery to survive, find it challenging to maintain moral integrity. When individuals lose their independent personality and their thoughts are subject to the dictates of core figures, with no concern for right or wrong, the suppression of dissent, and the lack of formation of a civil society, a civilized society cannot emerge.

"A civil society" is a concept that has evolved naturally. Originating from ancient Greece and Rome, it initially referred to the social and political life of citizens who enjoyed citizenship rights in city-states. By the 13th and 14th centuries, civil society evolved into the commercial city civilization of Western Europe, independent of feudal obligations and the shackles of divine authority, representing secular freedom. During the Enlightenment period, the connotation of civil society gradually became enriched, incorporating elements such as political democracy, checks and balances of power, social contracts, and ideological diversity. It became an independent private domain and public sphere separate from the state (the private domain refers to the economic sphere centered on the market, and the public sphere refers to the social and cultural life sphere), represented by a series of independent civil organizations, parties, associations, clubs, salons, schools, churches, unions, guilds, communications, publications, news,

charities, etc. Civil society mediates between citizens and the state, serving as a link between them, and also acts as a protective barrier for individual citizens, while also effectively constraining political states.

Mature civil societies, such as those in Britain and the United States (or relatively mature ones), are built on the idea of John Locke's "society above the state," hence the power of society is stronger than that of the state. The individual citizen is the smallest unit in the modern state, while civil society, according to non-coercive, non-violent principles, regulates relations among individual citizens from the bottom up, organizing into larger units, thus possessing power that individual citizens do not have. A mature civil society not only has tangible power from several organizations, but also has intangible power due to the belief of individual citizens in the inviolability of private and public spaces. It resolves numerous conflicts among individual citizens, making it difficult to breed problems that can only be resolved through violence. Therefore, a mature and perfect civil society can effectively resist encroachments on citizens by government power, prevent the occurrence of "unlimited government power," and play the role of a regulator of social stability, thus greatly reducing the room for potential totalitarianism.

China has never formed a civil society independent of the political state; what exists is only a typical subject society of "Under heaven, all are the king's land; within the four seas, all are the king's subjects." China's political system is one that lacks change and does not allow for internal competition. The government does not allow independent autonomous social organizations to emerge and gradually develops a stable leadership and a tradition that can adapt to reality and learn from experience and historical lessons. Additionally, China does not have an organization with self-management capabilities comparable to Western churches with centuries-long religious beliefs and secular wisdom.

As a monopolist of public products such as safety and order, the state adopts a strategy of banning all forces independent of the government, refusing to give people freedom, democracy, and basic human rights. The people lack democratic exercise, have low democratic consciousness and quality, lack training in negotiation, compromise, and tolerance, and thus cannot generate a healthy, rational, and frank political culture of communication. Therefore, social autonomy cannot be nurtured, people lack the ability to self-organize, and become a scattered mass. Social stability depends entirely on the coercive power of the administrative authority to forcibly unite the people, employing a high-pressure policy, and social management falls into a vicious cycle of "clamp down, release, chaos, clamp down again..."

In the face of political demands and resistance from the people, the government is accustomed to using political pressure to quell social resistance. Due to the lack of normal channels for communication and venting grievances, once violent conflicts occur, the ordinary lambs that are usually silent and obedient under high-pressure rule become habitual troublemakers (everyone wants to ride the wave without punishment), falling into a vicious cycle of violence and becoming extreme, leading to widespread chaos.

In Chinese, the names Guan Zhong and Guan Zhong sound similar. Guan Zhong refers to the chief manager, the one who manages everything. From the perspective of historical evolution, Guan Zhong's ideas have had a much greater impact on Chinese history and culture than his historical fame suggests. Confucius once exclaimed with heartfelt admiration, "To this day, the people continue to enjoy the benefits of his achievements—if it were not for Guan Zhong, we would all be wearing our hair loose and fastening our garments on the left."²

² Confucius: *Analects, With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Trans., Edward Slingerland, Hackett Publishing Company, 2003, pp161.

A super genius, Guan Zhong invented something brilliant for the convenience of governance in his time, yet it ensnared his descendants in an inescapable dilemma, becoming a millennium-long trap for Chinese society, perhaps something he never anticipated.

Since the unification of China by Qin Shi Huang, Chinese intellectuals have become appendages to the autocratic regime. In a society where the government is the sole employer, once a person is blacklisted by government agencies, they can only be disposed of without any resistance. Therefore, in such a society, the so-called independent personality of intellectuals, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, and personal freedom, are nothing but wishful thinking.

The "buying off" system that brings about structural inflation is, in essence, a form of "one hole out for profit" to a certain extent. It not only buys off those already within the system but also attracts a large number of individuals outside the system who are eager to squeeze into it (buying off these people doesn't require spending a penny, just providing them with an enticing prospect and a glimmer of hope). The effect of buying off is much stronger than it appears. So, it often leads to an ironic situation: occasionally, individuals within the privileged class may seek to change the existing mechanism due to conscience or other reasons, while most of those struggling at the lower levels to climb up to this class tend to be staunch supporters of the existing mechanism. North is truly a genius; the increasing returns to scale and path dependence of the system can explain many historical issues. It's like a sudden enlightenment. Why does a seemingly unreasonable system actually possess vitality far beyond estimation? The answer lies here. The increasing returns to scale and path dependence of the system also theoretically explain why many seemingly reasonable reforms cannot be implemented. Structural inflation is an intractable problem unless it undergoes a phoenix-like rebirth from the ashes. Due to the increasing returns to scale and path dependence of the system, any attempt at effective reform within the existing system is merely a futile fantasy.

3 Chinese Confucian totalitarianism

Let me quote a passage from Sima Guang to begin this section. Minister Sima Guang said: I have heard that the greatest responsibility of the Son of Heaven lies in propriety, the essence of which lies in differentiation, and the essence of differentiation lies in titles. What is propriety? It is the establishment of norms. What is differentiation? It is the relationship between ruler and subject. What are titles? They are duke, marquis, minister, and officer. With the vastness of the four seas and the multitude of people, all subject to the control of one individual, even with extraordinary strength and exceptional wisdom, none dare not serve and obey, if not guided by propriety! Therefore, the Son of Heaven commands the Three Dukes, the Three Dukes lead the feudal lords, the feudal lords regulate the ministers and officers, and the ministers and officers govern the common people. The noble should oversee the humble, and the humble should serve the noble. The relationship between superiors and inferiors is like that between the heart and limbs, the foundation and branches; the service of inferiors to superiors is like the limbs guarding the heart, the branches sheltering the roots, so that there can be mutual protection between superiors and inferiors, and the country can be governed in peace. Hence, it is said that the Son of Heaven's responsibility lies in propriety.

King Wen arranged the Book of Changes, with Qian (Heaven) and Kun (Earth) at the head. Confucius commented on it, saying: "Heaven is high and earth is low, their positions are determined. High and low are clearly defined, positions of honor and inferiority are established." This means that the positions of ruler and subject, like heaven and earth, cannot be easily changed. In the Spring and Autumn Annals, vassals were restrained and the Zhou dynasty was honored. Even though the king's status may be humble, he ranks above the vassals. Thus, it is evident that sages never cease to be diligent in differentiating the relationship between ruler and subject. Except for the tyranny of Jie and Zhou, the benevolence of Tang

and Wu, People should adhere to their roles as ruler and subject, defending this differentiation with their lives for the sake of dignity. Therefore, if Weizi were made the ruler to replace King Zhou, the Shang Dynasty founded by Cheng Tang could align with the mandate of heaven; and if Jizha were made the ruler of the State of Wu, Taibo could be eternally worshipped. However, both Weizi and Jizha would rather let their states perish than become rulers, because the fundamental principles of propriety cannot be compromised. Hence, it is said: there is nothing more important in respecting propriety than distinguishing ranks.

I have heard that propriety distinguishes between noble and humble, ranks relationships, regulates all things, and manages common affairs. Without names, things cannot be identified; without vessels, they cannot take form. Naming assigns roles, vessels differentiate them, and only then can there be clear distinctions between superiors and inferiors. This is the essence of propriety. When names and vessels are lost, how can propriety alone remain?

In ancient times, Zhong Shu Yuxi rendered meritorious service to the state of Wei, declining a fief and requesting the right to wear embroidered robes. Confucius deemed it better to grant him additional fiefs instead. Names and vessels cannot be borrowed; they are the privilege of the ruler. Failing to handle state affairs according to these principles will lead to the downfall of the country. The ruler of the State of Wei awaited Confucius to handle state affairs, but Confucius first wanted to establish proper titles and positions, believing that if titles were not correct, the people would become lost. Though embroidered robes may seem trivial, Confucius valued them; rectifying names may seem insignificant, but Confucius prioritized it. Truly, when names and vessels are in disorder, there is no stable relationship between superiors and inferiors.

There is nothing that does not start from the smallest beginnings and gradually grows stronger. Sages think deeply and, therefore, can cautiously handle and address minor changes. Ordinary people, being short-sighted, will inevitably wait until the problems become severe before trying to remedy them. Correcting small mistakes requires little effort but yields great results; addressing serious major issues, even with maximum effort, may not succeed. The 'Book of Changes' says: 'Walking on frost, one knows that ice will soon form.' The 'Book of Documents' says: 'The former kings handled countless state affairs every day.' These statements refer to such matters. Therefore, it is said: nothing is more important in distinguishing ranks than rectifying titles. Alas! King You of Zhou and King Li of Zhou lost the virtues of a ruler, leading to the decline of the Zhou dynasty, the collapse of order, the lower ranks bullying and replacing the higher ranks, feudal lords solely focused on conquest, and officials usurping authority. Consequently, the overall ritual system had already deteriorated by seventy to eighty percent. However, the regime founded by King Wen and King Wu of Zhou could still endure, likely because the descendants of the Zhou dynasty could still uphold their rightful titles and positions. Why do I say this? In the past, Duke Wen of Jin rendered great service to the Zhou dynasty and requested the burial rites of the royal family from King Xiang of Zhou. King Xiang did not consent, saying, 'The Zhou kings are different from the feudal lords. Without a change of dynasty, having two kings is something even you, uncle, would detest. If not for this, you, uncle, have land and may wish to follow the royal burial rites, so why request it from me?' Duke Wen of Jin, upon hearing this, was filled with fear and did not dare to violate the ritual system. Hence, even though the Zhou royal domain was no larger than the states of Cao or Teng, and the number of subjects no greater than those of Zhu or Ju, it remained the leader of the realm for hundreds of years. Even strong states like Jin, Chu, Qi, and Qin did not dare to invade it. Why is this so? It is simply because the Zhou king's title still existed. As for the powerful officials Ji of Lu, Tian Chang of Qi, Bai Gongsheng of Chu, and Zhi Bo of Jin, their influence was great enough to overthrow their rulers and seize power, but they did not dare to do so. Was it because they lacked strength or compassion? No, it was simply fear of being condemned by the world for usurping power. Now, the officials of Jin bullied and disrespected the ruler, divided Jin among themselves, and instead of the Son of Heaven sending troops to

punish them, he conferred titles and ranks, elevating them to the status of feudal lords. This action abandoned the last vestige of Zhou's rightful order. The propriety of the former kings of Zhou was thus utterly destroyed! Some may think that at that time, the Zhou dynasty was weak while the three Jin states were strong, so even if they wanted to, they could not refuse. This is not the case. Even though the three Jin states were strong, if they disregarded the condemnation of the world and violated righteousness and propriety, they could establish themselves without seeking approval from the Son of Heaven. If they established themselves without seeking approval, they would become rebellious subjects. If the world had rulers like Huan and Wen, they would uphold propriety and righteousness and punish them. Now, if they seek approval from the Son of Heaven and he grants it, they are receiving the mandate of the Son of Heaven and becoming vassals. Who can punish them? Therefore, the placement of the three Jin states among the vassals is not due to their violation of propriety, but to the Son of Heaven's own negligence. Alas! With the disruption of the propriety between rulers and subjects, the world relies on intellect and strength to vie for supremacy. Consequently, the descendants of the sages and the feudal lords conferred by the former kings of Zhou saw their states fall. The descendants of the early people of Zhou nearly perished completely. How can one not mourn this?"

3.1 "The Fascism of China": Power comes first, the monarch comes first, and the state comes first, these three points are common. The measures to achieve these three points: prohibit the freedom of speech of citizens, prohibit the freedom of thought of citizens, and strictly restrict the behavior of citizens according to the interests of certain families or groups, these three points are also common. The "thought" promoted by Confucius in his "Six Classics" and expressed in the "Analects" written by his disciples all clearly prove the above points. Specifically, Confucius's thoughts on "rituals and music", "three fears", "four nones", etc., all clearly express the above points. In short, the ideology of "Chinese fascism" is essentially the political ideology of Confucianism, which has been unanimously promoted by the authoritarian rulers of China for more than two thousand years.

• When it comes to "Chinese fascism", more people first think of the "Legalism" of Han Feizi in the pre-Qin period, because Han Feizi's "Legalism" appeals more to the rulers' "cruelty", and is more "ruthless and lacking in mercy"; however, Confucianism, on the other hand, always seems so "warm and affectionate", always emphasizing "the benevolent love others", "love the people like children", "the people are valued and the ruler is light", "light tax and thin duty", "harmony with the people", and so on. However, do not forget, "the ruler is the ruler, the minister is the minister, the father is the father, and the son is the son", "fear fate, fear the great, fear the words of the sage", and "do not look at what is not polite, do not listen to what is not polite, do not speak what is not polite, do not act what is not polite", etc., are never changing. The easily deceived Chinese people are so foolish, they lack the most basic political discernment ability, they simply cannot see through: whether it is "Legalism" or "Confucianism", their essence is actually all "Chinese fascism" at home, because they all advocate the maintenance of the unequal "authoritarian power system" in China forever, and their political connotations of "fascism" and the measures taken to achieve this political connotation, namely "speech prohibition", "thought prohibition", and "behavior restriction" (fascist), are completely consistent. And don't forget, the so-called "Legalism" of Han Feizi originally came from the "Confucianism" of Xunzi, and Xunzi's

Confucianism is nothing more than a slightly different "variant" of Confucius and Mencius's Confucianism. "The discerning person is a genius", while Xunzi, who leaned towards the Qin system, represents one branch. The latter rejects the warmth of ancient Confucianism with the theory of "human nature is evil", places the authority of the present ruler above the legacy of the past kings with the doctrine of "law before kingship", and subverts the ancient Confucian logic of "honoring the ruler without neglecting the father" with the assertion of "respecting the ruler without respecting the father". Xunzi thus nurtured figures like Han Feizi and Li Si, who adhered to the Qin legalism.

- This does not prove what some people say about Legalism originating from Confucianism, because from the pioneers of Legalism such as Zi Chan and Li Kui to the three branches of Legalism, which includes Shang Yang's "methods", Shen Buhai's "techniques", and Shen Dao's "strategies", Han Feizi is generally considered to have combined the best of all three schools before Xunzi. However, the Xunzi-Han Feizi-Li Si trio indeed reflects a partial shift of some Confucians towards favoring the prevailing power. The Confucian-Legalist struggle resulting from the changes between the Zhou and Qin dynasties thus evolved into a conflict between "anti-Legalist Confucians" and "Legalist Confucians" among those who claimed to be Confucians and pseudo-Confucians who leaned towards Legalism or Confucians in appearance but Legalists in essence. Represented by Shusun Tong, a large group of sycophantic Confucians, their main concern was to please the authorities in order to gain favor.
- In late Qing Dynasty, Tan Sitong once pointed out: "Confucianism branches into two main streams... Unfortunately, both of these branches have ceased to be passed down. Xunzi took advantage of the opportunity to usurp the name of Confucius and destroy the way of Confucius. He said, 'adhere to the current king's laws and honor his rule,' to subvert Confucianism... Fearful that the instruments of restraint and control would not proliferate. Once passed down, it becomes Li Si, and his calamity is evident in the world. However, regarding his teachings, ministers often quickly satisfy their pursuit of wealth and favor from their superiors, openly claiming that lowliness, flattery, and servility do not harm their ministerial integrity, and calling those who aid tyrants in their oppression 'loyal and righteous.' As for the emperor, he use them to exalt himself, debase the ministers, deceive the ignorant masses, and indulge in tyranny while restraining the hearts of the people... Therefore, it is often believed that the politics of the past two thousand years have been the politics of Qin, all great thieves; and the teaching of the past two thousand years have been the teachings of Xunzi, all hypocrites. Only the great thieves use hypocrites, only hypocrites flatter the great thieves. The two complement each other, and both are falsely attributed to Confucius." Tan Sitong himself sees himself as inheriting Mencius, "thoroughly expounding the principles of benevolence and righteousness to fulfill Confucius' aspirations," while regarding "the politics of Qin and the studies of Xunzi" as enemies.
- After the Xinhai Revolution, Kang Youwei continuously opposed democracy and republicanism while remaining loyal to the Qing Dynasty, which was understandable. Constitutional monarchy is not a bad thing, and maintaining the principles of the ancient Confucians, even when constitutional monarchy fails and adhering to the principles of "Yi and Qi," is also appreciated by the ancient Confucians. The problem arose when, after the establishment of the Republic of China, he began to praise Qin Shihuang and belittle the "Three Dynasties," which contradicted the principles of the ancient Confucians.
- At this time, Kang Youwei claimed that the "feudal" system of the Three Dynasties was unequal, and that "since the Qin and Han dynasties abolished feudalism, everyone is equal, and anyone can rise from humble origins to become a high-ranking official; although there are titles of nobility, they are merely honorary; although there are robes of honor, they are merely symbols. When it comes to criminal cases, princes, prime ministers, and commoners are treated equally. Taxes are light, even as low as one-tenth of the people's income, regardless of social status. Local people pay taxes and handle lawsuits independently, without interference from local officials. Apart from

a few ceremonial decorations like yellow and red dragons and phoenixes, everything else respects the freedom of the people. Personal freedom, business freedom, property rights, freedom of assembly, speech, publication, and religion have all been practiced for a long time. The rights of freedom and equality obtained from the French Revolution amount to more than two thousand articles; none of which are not inherent to our people, and were the first to be implemented?" Under the Qin system, there was actually "freedom of assembly, speech, publication, and religion," just like after the French Revolution? This truly implies that "without Qin Shihuang, there would be no new China"!

- The "Four Books and Five Classics" of Confucianism have long been solemnly pointed out by some people: "All six classics are history." Everything mentioned in the "six classics" is about the history of "officialdom," or, in modern terms, it's all about so-called "politics"... In other words, all the "classics" of Confucius and his Confucianism are proclamations and dogmas promoting the hierarchy of Mandate of Heaven, propriety, bloodline theory, and so on. On one hand, they resort to violent intimidation by emphasizing Mandate of Heaven, and on the other hand, they deceive people with all sorts of flowery language or make promises that are completely unrealistic. Does Confucius have morals? Does Confucianism have morals? They are blind to what morality even is; how could they possibly have morals?
- Confucius's morality is a kind of pseudo-morality and anti-morality. Morality divided by social hierarchy is fundamentally pseudo-morality that goes against human nature. The first rule of Confucian morality is: hierarchy. If the emperor uses eunuchs, it's praiseworthy; if the common people use eunuchs, it's wicked. When the emperor uses dancers, it's praiseworthy; when feudal lords use dancers, it's a great offense. If a man has multiple sexual partners, it's praiseworthy; if a woman has multiple sexual partners, it's extremely sinful. This is called "the same action, different emotions." Confucius himself "does not eat to gluttony, nor eats food that is spoilt or rotted, does not eat when the color is bad, or when it smells bad, or when it's badly cooked (八不食)" but he demands that others "gentlemen eat without seeking to be full, and live without seeking security(君子食无求饱, 居无求安)" and "scholars who aspire to the Way should be ashamed to seek luxurious food and clothing, it's trivial to discuss(士志于道, 而耻恶衣恶食者, 未足与议也。)" History has already proven that the more society advocates morality (especially during the Wang Mang era), the more it loses its morality!
- Confucian morality has no bottom line for being human, which means Confucianism can kill in the name of morality (executing those who defy the king's authority), eat people in the name of morality (killing concubines to feed the soldiers), punish people in the name of morality (dunking offenders in pig cages for adultery), and blame people in the name of morality (calling them beasts, scoundrels, etc.)—this is not only evidence of Lu Xun's "moral cannibalism," but also evidence that Confucian morality itself lacks human moral principles! The decline of morality in Chinese society is still due to Confucius!
- Confucianism openly advocates for the emperor to have hundreds of wives (which has effectively become a system of one man having thousands of wives), and to manipulate women; Confucian officials use thousands of women to surround the monarch, a foolish policy; at the same time, they implement a policy of keeping the people ignorant; thus, maximizing the interests of the Confucian group. Does Confucianism have morals? How could they possibly have morals? Therefore, Confucius and his Confucianism are the source of all evils! What does "all" mean? "All" refers to everything that Chinese people say, do, and think!
- First, Confucius and his Confucianism do not advocate for "principles", but only for "rituals and music". The so-called "rituals and music" are feudalistic, hierarchical rituals and music prescribed by the Zhou dynasty, based on bloodline and ancestral systems.

- Second, Confucius and his Confucianism demand that the Chinese people "fear Mandate of Heaven, fear the great men, fear the words of the sages". The Zhou dynasty's "rituals and music" empower the government (officials) with the authority and prestige of "propriety". The height of "propriety" extends from "heaven" to "earth", so the height of "authority" also extends from "heaven" to "earth", meaning boundless "authority", which in reality is boundless "violence".
- Third, Confucius and his Confucianism demand that the Chinese people "do not look at what is improper, do not listen to what is improper, do not speak what is improper, do not act what is improper". The common people in China have lost the most basic freedoms of action, speech, and even thought. The common people are effectively treated as poultry, livestock, and slaves.
- Fourth, Confucius and his Confucianism demand that the Chinese people "conceal from the ruler, conceal from the father", openly requiring the common people to tell lies and give false testimony for the dignity of the monarch, for the affection of the father. This is specifically in service of the highest "family", namely the family of the emperor.
- Fifth, Confucius and his Confucianism openly set a thousand-year "example" for "thought crimes", "speech crimes", "conviction by speech", "killing because of speech": Confucius cruelly killed Shao Zhengmao based on this. Confucius accused Shao Zhengmao of five "crimes": "having a treacherous mind", "speaking falsely and eloquently", "resisting criticism and remaining firm", "recording ugliness and being erudite", "being compliant and spreading falsehoods". These are specifically the "five heavy" and extremely malicious "political shackles" imposed on all later Chinese people.
- The fundamental point of "strengthening the leadership of the emperor, improving the leadership of the emperor" lies in the Three Cardinal Guilds and Six Disciplines, and personal worship. The Three Cardinal Guilds and Six Disciplines are particularly effective in stabilizing authoritarian regimes. The "Three Cardinal Guilds" refer to three absolute obedience relationships: "the sovereign over the subject, the father over the son, the husband over the wife". The "Six Disciplines" refer to the principles of human relations, namely "Uncles, brothers, (other) clan members, maternal uncles, teachers, and friends". The "Six Disciplines" completely adhere to the "Three Cardinal Guilds", with "the sovereign over the subject" serving as the core principle that the entire country and society must follow, much like today's fundamental principle of "Party leadership".
- Confucius' ideal was to rebuild the authority of the Zhou dynasty, unify the world under one rule, and have rituals and music emanate from the emperor. Anything beneficial to the emperor was promoted, such as "filial piety" and "loyalty", while anything detrimental to the emperor was "attacked with drums", and could be condemned as inhuman before being killed (like Shao Zhengmao). "What can be tolerated, what cannot be tolerated" are the words with which Confucius rebuked the "great officers" because they used the emperor's rituals and offended the emperor's dignity, which was detrimental to the spread of rituals and music from the emperor.
- The first element of the Confucianism's so called "Minben thinking" is the supremacy of the state, the collective, and the leader. Hierarchy, order, and stability are the political symbols and governance priorities pursued by Confucians. They advocate for the priority of the state, the importance of the collective, and the subordination of the individual to the family, the family to the state, and the state to the emperor. The core of their political content is "unification". What does "unification" mean? In short, it means to honor the "king"; it includes unified ideology, unified politics, and unified way of life, all of which must be controlled to demonstrate the dignity of the "king" and the spread of rituals and music from the emperor. The Cultural Revolution took this unification of centralized power to the extreme, establishing an all-encompassing system that merged politics and society, where all existing social relationships, including clans, guilds, communities, private enterprises, etc., were destroyed and replaced by state power. Thus, the social sphere between individuals and the state lost its political-cultural soil, and individuals lost the protection of family and society, having to directly face an

overwhelmingly powerful state. Since the state cannot directly control nearly a billion individuals, countless units, streets, communes, brigades, and squads were designed and established, forcibly incorporating all individuals, so that there was no longer any "private domain independent of the state", resulting in a culture of absolute obedience of individuals to organizations, organizations to the state, the state to the central government, and the central government to the leader, establishing a unified culture, unitary politics, a single authority, and a political culture centered around one leader.

- Because all "rituals" are subordinate to "heavenly mandate," "authority," and "sages," they adhere to the values of "respect for family, respect for authority, respect for hierarchy," which treat humans as "non-human" animals. Therefore, the Chinese people's "ritual nature" is completely characterized by the following "seven natures": "heavenly mandate nature, ritual nature, bloodline nature, feudalistic nature, authoritarian nature, totalitarian nature, and autocratic nature."
- Since the Han Dynasty's establishment of "sole reverence for Confucianism," the Chinese people's values have been firmly established as Confucius and his Confucianism's "respect for family, respect for authority, respect for hierarchy" values, which treat humans as "non-human" animals. This "value system" has actually led to the widespread spiritual decline of the Chinese people, to the extent that they have completely degenerated into "non-human" animal-like beings. Therefore, the idea of "freedom of thought, independent spirit (独立之精神, 自由之思想)" is nothing but an absolute fantasy for the Chinese people. Because in comparison, "freedom of thought, independent spirit" is inferior to animals! In fact, Chinese people have long lost the qualification for the free spirit of "humanity" and only retain the qualification for the body of a non-free being (slave, laborer, eater, reproducer).
- Confucius and his Confucianism condensed the essence of "fear Mandate of Heaven, fear the great men, fear the words of the sages" into three principles: respect for family, respect for authority, and respect for hierarchy, or the relationship between ruler and subject, father and son. Confucius also added the indispensable condition that one must always observe: conceal for family, conceal for authority, conceal for elders. This is the most concealed "essence" of Confucius and his Confucianism that has been passed down in China for over two thousand years. In other words, all the "learning" of Confucius and his Confucianism essentially revolves around this concept of "concealment". And this concept of "concealment" clearly negates everything "real": it neither acknowledges the "real" (truth), nor speaks the "real" (reality), nor possesses any "real" (sincerity).
- The attributes of the Chinese people are almost synonymous with "ritual". "Ritual" is the cornerstone of the Chinese people, namely: "mandate from Heaven, ritual propriety, blood lineage, ancestral reverence, rule by man, authoritarianism, and despotism" are the essence of the Chinese people. Therefore, the "benevolence" of Confucius and his Confucianism is fundamentally not a universal standard of human nature, but a relative principle that causes familial disputes. The occurrence of familial disputes inevitably leads to the need for a supreme patriarch in actual social life, namely the authoritarian monarch. When families have disputes, there is only one solution, which is to appeal to the government officials for judgment. While you may love your father, you also love the government officials; your government officials are your "father", and the emperor is your highest "father". Therefore, apart from "filial piety" and "brotherly respect", you must also be "loyal to the sovereign", which means that the principle of "benevolence" by Confucius and his Confucianism will ultimately lead to an authoritarian monarch. Therefore, under the principle of "benevolence", Chinese society develops an absolute need for an authoritarian monarch.
- From the perspective of political theory evolution, Minben is a political concept advocated by Confucianism, and just as Confucianism has its own characteristics and limitations, so does

Minben. In classical Confucian texts, the propositions that the ruler is the foundation of governance and the people are the foundation of the state are two fundamental principles. Ruler-based governance and Minben are not antagonistic; the former is the goal while the latter is the means, and they can work together to maintain political rule while enhancing the moral appeal of Minben. In a situation where the ruler monopolizes power, the notion of rulers and subjects mutually serving each other appears to be illusory. Perhaps a more accurate statement is that "the ruler serves the people" (including all leaders) is the fundamental political realization, while "the people are the foundation of the ruler" (or the government) is more like a moral consciousness for the ruler. Therefore, in the system of "family and nation under one rule," the ruler is the core, and Minben is the support of the ruler. Some scholars believe that the reason why the Chinese imperial system clearly and unequivocally regards "taking the people as the foundation" as a ruling ideology lies in the dual guarantee function of Confucian "taking the people as the foundation" proposition. Firstly, it upwardly argues for the political system and social rules of the imperial system, ensuring various privileges of the ruling class and allowing the monarch to rule in the name of representing the interests of the people. Secondly, it provides a certain degree of protection for the interests and rights of the vast ministers and people. In other words, Confucianism's "taking the people as the foundation" provides assurance for the monarch and care for the people, which is its particularity. However, the role of Confucian Minben in restraining despotic rulers who levy heavy taxes and indulge in luxury and extravagance is merely a moral constraint, which has not always been effective in history, otherwise how could there be the alternation of dynasties? Moreover, Minben has universal basic values and is supported by many other schools of thought and ideologies outside Confucianism; it is not a political concept that can only be derived from Confucianism. The reason why Minben's political achievements are mainly monopolized by Confucianism is that after Confucianism ascended to become an official school and systematized Minben ideology, Confucianism deduced, preached, and made Minben a governance strategy that enlightened rulers were willing to adopt. Thus, Minben ideology becomes a tool for expressing Confucianism's governance, imbuing Minben with deep Confucian characteristics.

- Confucius regarded "loyalty between ruler and subject, filial piety between father and son" as the foundation of "benevolence", emphasizing "heaven does not have two suns, man does not have two masters"; Mencius once said "Without father, without ruler, one is a brute", and also stated "Without a true gentleman, it is impossible to govern wild men" and "There are matters for a great person, and there are matters for a small person"; Xunzi also said "A true gentleman is the complement of heaven and earth, the sum of all things, and the father and mother of the people", which is also about respecting the ruler. While they proposed the benevolence of prioritizing the people over the ruler, they further emphasized the benevolence of respecting the ruler for the sake of the people, which is rooted in the adherence to the hierarchical order. It should be noted that the theory of no ruler has never been advocated or supported by orthodox Confucianism. Even during the so-called New Minben period in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, prominent Confucian scholars such as Huang Zongxi and Tang Zhen proposed anti-monarchist Minben, and even put forward new ideas such as using relative authority to restrict royal power, advocating for school-based governance, local autonomy, and establishing legal order. However, in essence, they were opposing monarchs after the Three Dynasties, still hoping for the appearance of a virtuous monarch. The reason why Huang Zongxi's "Waiting for Visits from the Bright and Righteous" was named this way was also to imagine that there could be a virtuous ruler like King Wu of Zhou seeking advice from Jizi. The political ideals of Huang Zongxi and Tang Zhen fundamentally cannot escape the Confucian pursuit of "the world belongs to everyone", and in terms of implementation, they also coincide in relying on "moral legitimacy" and "virtuous rulers". Such social ideals are actually based on mutual dependence among people, with obedience to authority as the core, and the hierarchical structure of the Confucian ethical culture as its extension. Its fundamental value orientation is to restrain society and maintain privileges.

• Dong Zhongshu can be described as a culmination figure. Although his benevolent and virtuous governance absorbed the thoughts of Confucius and Mencius, and he also possessed a Minben consciousness similar to "Even if one stands in the position of the emperor or the feudal lords, they are just one individual", he also developed aspects from the thoughts of Xunzi and Jia Yi, advocating for the restraint and restriction of the people. He vigorously advocated for "Bend the people to straighten the ruler, bend the ruler to straighten the heavens, the great righteousness of the 'Spring and Autumn Annals' (屈民而伸君, 屈君而伸天, 春秋之法)". He presented advice to Emperor Wu of Han, suggesting, "Those who are not in the six arts or Confucian studies should be excluded from official positions, and should not be allowed to progress together. The erroneous and deviant ideas should be eradicated, only then can the regulations be unified and the laws be clarified, and the people will know what to follow." This proposition of "suppressing all other schools of thought and exclusively honoring Confucianism" aims to educate the people, and the purpose of educating the people is to "straighten the ruler". After all, "straightening the heavens" is far less practical than "straightening the ruler". "Straightening the ruler" is what the king truly desires and strives for.

- The Confucian tradition upholds the hierarchical system of the feudal and patriarchal society, which is an important root of the inherent tendency in Minben thought to respect the ruler and slight the people. Since the pre-Qin period, Minben has gradually formed due to the need to maintain political order. Confucianism considers the feudal and hierarchical system crucial for maintaining political stability. The most distinctive aspect of Confucian ethics is the feudal system and hierarchical structure. Minben, which serves the authority of the ruler, must inevitably be integrated with Confucian principles of familial respect and hierarchy to be viable. During a time of societal decay, Confucius proposed the concept of "rectification of names," advocating for the preservation of the existing social order and the restoration of the Three Dynasties through "self-discipline and the restoration of rituals." This political ideal was later modified after the Qin and Han dynasties to uphold the existing unified monarchy. The inherent blood relations of the feudal system, characterized by "familial respect," gradually faded, giving way to a more pronounced hierarchical political system. Scholar Mou Zongsan believes that the Confucian way of governance primarily embodies the principles of "familial respect, hierarchical honor, and reverence for the virtuous." These ethical principles, applicable to both familial and ruler-subject relationships, incorporate a special requirement for the king. Confucianism's emphasis on personal cultivation and family management extends to the governance of public affairs in the state.
- The concept of "Minben" is an important tool for realizing the Confucian social ideal. It is the product of the theory of imperial authority and the cycle of chaos and governance. Its mission has always been to maintain stability and unity, adapting to the needs of power adjustment. Therefore, Confucianism, with "benevolence" as its core ethical norm, "status and role" as its hierarchical system, and "great harmony" as its goal of social ideal, has determined that Minben must serve the existing order and norms. Confucian elites use Minben as a tool to persuade and constrain rulers, relying on its moral and ethical significance. However, in terms of results, "it is only to obtain some reasonable benefits for the people rather than basic rights." The authority of the ruler is always sacred and unshakable. Confucianism must continue to be the official school applicable to rulers, and Confucian scholars must continue to play the role of "imperial teachers" advising the monarch. Therefore, regardless of how radical Minben may be with its ideas of "changing the ruler" and "overthrowing the tyrant," the concept of respecting the ruler must remain unshakable.
- Respecting the ruler comes from the hierarchical system, and Minben naturally contains a stance of respecting the ruler. Since the counterpart of respecting the ruler is slighting the people, the Minben ideology of respecting the people unavoidably carries some flavor of slighting the people. Being both Minben and slighting the people may seem contradictory, but in fact, this stance is

reflected in the writings of many Confucian scholars. Regardless of how the controversial lines of Confucius, "The people may be made to follow a path, but they may not be made to understand it (民可使由之，不可使知之)," and "When the Way prevails in the empire, the common people will not discuss it (天下有道，则庶人不议)," are to be divided and interpreted, they have aroused speculation about whether Confucius had a stance of respecting the ruler and slighting the people. Although Mengzi, hailed as the master of Confucian Minben ideology, did not have explicit remarks slighting the people, his theory of "the people are precious (民为贵)" ultimately emphasizes that the monarch should be "the father and mother of the people," responsible for protecting and rescuing them. Although "the people of the state all say he is wise," it is still up to the monarch to "then examine them" and ultimately decide, and the final decision-making power is not in the hands of the people. As for Xunzi, he explicitly stated remarks slighting the people such as "those among the common people are foolish and without discussion, coarse and without restraint." Jia Yi was also very straightforward, saying, "The people are accumulations of foolishness," and "governing them by the Dao, the emphasis is only on securing them." Later Confucian scholars, especially Huang Zongxi, who was known as the master of the new Minben, proposed "democratic monarchy," still insisting on the presence of a monarch and ministers to govern the world. Therefore, Confucian Minben serves the ruler, fundamentally being the "art of governing the people" for the monarch. From Confucius' "teaching the people" to later Confucian scholars' "nurturing the people" and "protecting the people," there is an underlying sense of slighting the people. "Being the father and mother of the people, valuing the people and slighting the ruler, and the revolutions of Tang and Wu are only specific to certain times and specific political systems; they even have obvious implications of limitation, deprivation, and disregard for the political rights of the people." In this regard, Dong Zhongshu can be considered the epitome. Although his politics of benevolence and virtue absorbed the thoughts of Confucius and Mengzi and contained the Minben consciousness of "even if alone, even if in the position of the emperor or the feudal lords, one is but an ordinary person," he also developed the side of slighting the people and limiting the people in the thoughts of Xunzi and Jia Yi, vigorously advocating "bending the people to straighten the ruler, bending the ruler to straighten the heavens, the great meaning of the Spring and Autumn Annals." He offered advice to Emperor Wu of Han, "Those who are not in the six arts, not in the arts of Confucius, shall all be cut off from their paths, not to be allowed to advance together. When deviant doctrines are eradicated, then the governance can be unified, and the laws can be made clear, and the people will know where to follow." This proposition of "dismissing the hundred schools and solely honoring Confucianism" aims to educate the people, and the purpose of educating the people is to "straighten the ruler," after all, "straightening the heavens" is far less practical than "straightening the ruler," which is what the king truly desires and truly acts upon.

- Confucianism's moral governance has become a model for state politics, and Minben naturally serves the mission of benevolent governance. Hegel once said, "Confucian philosophy is the philosophy of the state, constituting the foundation of education, culture, and practical activities of the Chinese people." Confucian philosophy encompasses ethical concepts such as the Way of Heaven, the Great Harmony, benevolence and ritual, loyalty and filial piety. His teachings became the most authoritative moral education system in ancient China, consistently used to address moral issues arising from social activities and wealth distribution. "Confucianism participates in the combination of values in the way of inner sanctity and external kingship, and is accustomed to integrating religious authority with secular authority, attaching extreme importance to morally restructuring social order." Ancient Chinese state politics can essentially be interpreted as Confucian moral governance, with Minben undoubtedly possessing the richest moral significance and accurately expressing the ethical spirit of moral governance. However, whether Minben can be implemented in political institutions and national policies depends on

various contingencies, such as enlightened rulers, loyal ministers, or even favorable weather conditions. If understanding ethical order as the political process of the state is the basic characteristic of all forms of states in pre-capitalist times, then the ancient monarchs' incorporation of Confucian moral governance ideals into royal politics was an inevitable choice. Ultimately, Confucian moral governance greatly contributed to the consolidation and continuation of royal politics, especially if ideals like Minben, with highly moral significance, could be effectively implemented. Some scholars believe that "the ideal order of virtuous moral governance does not inherently establish a desire for external legal systems; the people's pursuit of rights and interests is entirely confined within the moral objectives of state power, and a strong sense of community and moral belonging continuously reinforces authoritarianism and centralization." This assertion may be somewhat extreme in understanding Confucian moral governance, as it separates morality from institutions and overlooks the efforts of traditional politics to construct institutions and improve laws under moral governance goals. However, in terms of results, by the Ming and Qing periods, China's authoritarian system reached its peak under the guidance of such moral governance objectives, which is an undeniable fact. Minben is born for moral governance; it indeed lacks the rule of law, rather than the rule of a person, institutional environment.

- The unresolved question is, since good governance emphasizes "inner virtue" and includes a rejection of authoritarian dictatorship, such as how Minben itself is a limitation on monarchical power, and the "Tang and Wu Revolution" advocated for the rights of the people to participate in politics, etc., why then does it result in the promotion of authoritarianism instead? This question has actually been debated in academia for a long time, and to analyze it, one must return to the political framework of the ruler's authority and the concept of "all under heaven." As mentioned earlier, Minben is a tool of moral governance, and Confucius' ideal political system is one where a benevolent ruler moralizes the people from the top down, rather than where all citizens hold power over the state and manage its affairs. Whether it's the "Tang and Wu Revolution" or the concept of "changing the mandate," they oppose despotic rulers who do not follow the will of Heaven, rather than the entire political system where the monarch "acts for Heaven's will." In other words, with a ruler awakened to moral consciousness, "inner virtue" is achieved first, followed by the need for "external governance" and "rule of law." Therefore, when Confucian ideals become the state's ideals, specific political designs like Minben naturally serve moralistic objectives. Confucianism does not aim to oppose authoritarianism, so Minben does not need to elevate to the level of law and institutionalization; it's a necessity of moral governance, not of rule of law. Since Minben cannot entirely restrain the exercise of royal authority, it's more likely to become the most morally justifiable tool for monarchs to strengthen their power and reinforce authoritarianism.

4 Minben in the ancient monarchical autocracy

4.1 The utilitarian aspect of Minben: the need for monarchical political rule.

- From the perspective of political governance, the core of people-centered ideology—emphasizing the importance of the people—is evidently driven by the needs of governance, with the purpose of serving the monarchy's political authority over the nation. Although the concept of Minben began to emerge before the establishment of monarchical despotism, the nature of Minben in the pre-Qin period was vastly different from that in the post-Qin and Han dynasties. In the pre-Qin period, practices of governance that are now considered to have elements of Minben include the legendary abdications of Yao and Shun, the principle of "ruling through the people" in the Shang dynasty, Pan Geng's emphasis on "valuing and

protecting the people," Wu Ding's advocacy of "respecting the people," followed by Duke of Zhou's principles of "bright virtue and cautious punishment" and "respecting heaven and protecting the people." These practices consistently adhered to the same simple tradition of valuing the people. However, by the early Western Zhou period, this tradition, after theoretical refinement and elevation, became what is known as the ideological product of Minben, directly supplied for future rulers to govern the nation. During this period, Minben had three important connotations: firstly, although the "people" were the ruled class, they held a higher status and were respected by the ruling class; secondly, the "people" began to be recognized as the primary creators of social and national wealth; thirdly, the primitive democratic tradition still played an important role in the political life of city-states. However, in 221 B.C., when the Qin Dynasty conquered the six states and established the first unified feudal autocracy in Chinese history, the core of people-centered ideology underwent significant changes. Qin Shi Huang desired to make the entire realm his personal property, aiming for the grand objective of "within the Six directions, all land belongs to the emperor(六合之内，皇帝之土)" and "wherever people go, they shall be his subjects (人迹所至，无不臣者)." To achieve this, he reformed the central system, established the system of Three Excellencies and Nine Ministers, followed Li Si's advice to abolish feudalism and establish prefectures and counties, and implemented powerful measures such as standardizing weights and measures, currency, carriage tracks, and script. Eventually, in the nascent autocratic system, the emperor became the owner and supreme administrator of the realm. In such an autocratic system, the flexible rule of Minben did not fit the needs of the Qin Dynasty rulers. It is well known that behind the harsh governance of the Qin Dynasty was the Legalist school of thought, which held fundamentally opposing views to the Confucian school in strategies of governance. The Qin Dynasty fell after two generations, and the reflections of the Han Dynasty mainly focused on what should be adopted or rejected from Legalist doctrines. Thus, at the beginning of the Han Dynasty, alternating between Huang-Lao politics and Confucianism, although Legalist influence did not completely disappear, the trend of "Confucianism overtly, Legalism covertly" began to prevail, and Confucianism found a way to coexist with Legalism in political practice. Therefore, the essence of early Han Dynasty politics, as described in the "Han Shu: Records of Punishments and Laws," was "light punishments on the surface, but internally it was killing people (外有轻刑之名，内实杀人)." It was in the historical transformation of cooperation between Confucianism and Legalism that another ideological trend emerged. Under the influence of scholars such as Lu Jia and Jia Yi in the early Han Dynasty, Meng Xun initiated the rise of Confucianism with Minben into the political foreground. Through the transformation by Dong Zhongshu and the implementation by Emperor Wu of Han, it eventually became a code of governance, integrating with autocratic and centralized politics. The most "gentle" aspect of Confucianism is benevolent rule and moral governance, which is people-centered. Since the early Han Dynasty, Minben has transitioned from a political consciousness and theoretical doctrine to a political ideology that serves the needs of governance. The contemporary renowned philosopher Mou Zongsan has made a comprehensive analysis along the lines of Confucius and Mencius's teachings on the internal sages and external kings. He concluded that the basic conclusion of ancient Chinese autocratic politics is that the way of governance and the way of administration should be discussed separately; China "only has democracy in administration, but not democracy in politics." Measures such as the imperial examination system and selection of officials based on merit indicate that administration is open and democratic, but ancient China did not have genuine democratic politics, that is, political democracy. "Since the Qin and Han Dynasties, China has dispersed classes, and there are no established forces in society, making it difficult to form a power hierarchy. The more scattered below, the easier it is for absolute monarchy to form above." The idea that "the realm belongs to the people" with a simple democratic consciousness was essentially denied by individual families controlling the realm after the Qin and Han Dynasties because whether it's the realm, the territory, or the political power, it is the result of one family or one surname seizing and claiming it as their own. The development of history has completely negated the concept of "the realm belongs to the people." The realm is no longer collectively owned by the people; "political power is subordinate to specific individuals, and if they can take it, they do. Political power holds the source of administrative power, and administrative power follows political

power." Hegel pointed out sharply that in the East (especially in China), from the past until now, only "one person" is considered free. Therefore, even in ancient China, despite the so-called openness of administration, the monarch ruling over the realm could select the capable and wise, but administration ultimately stemmed from political power. If political power is controlled by a specific family or surname, the so-called openness of administration lacks objective safeguards. Consequently, the essence of Chinese politics after the Qin and Han Dynasties essentially revolved around monarch-centric governance, characterized by monarchy. Minben became a practical ideology or official doctrine because it helped preserve the monarchical autocratic system. It served to connect relationships between the monarch and his officials, the monarch and his subjects, and the officials and the subjects, ensuring the basic stability of the social structure. In historical periods marked by highly concentrated wealth, intense social differentiation, and conflict, Minben represented the protection of the small peasant economy needed in agricultural societies, opposed to the economic idea of land consolidation. It also reflected a political sentiment of caring for the people and prioritizing the nation, serving as a constraint and limitation on monarchic power to some extent. It can be said that Minben is a comprehensive and systematic political theory that justifies and regulates the monarchy system. Historical processes have shown that the more prosperous the imperial system, the more developed the people-first ideology becomes, and the more centralized the imperial power, the more widespread the belief that the people are esteemed and the monarch is light. Minben serves monarch-centric autocratic politics. The principle of "putting the people first" is essentially derived from the premise of family and nation, that is, for the peace of the nation, for the permanence of the state, the monarch should "put the people first," with the monarch as the subject of action and the people.

4.2 Minben and modern democracy: Is convergence possible?

- Having understood the two aspects of Minben, we may generate new questions: what is the value of such Minben in modern society? Furthermore, can the modern society's most admired democratic ideals trace back to the ancient Minben tradition in China? Is there a historical relationship between ancient Minben and modern democracy? These seemingly grand questions are directly related to the core ideology of Minben. The core ideology of Minben is to place the hope of fair governance or moral governance on the sage king, making the consideration of the people's joy and sorrow the priority in governance and making the people's welfare the political goal. Such an ideology has been inherited and become the main axis of ancient Chinese political culture, as well as the most positive factor in what modern people perceive as traditional ideological resources. In contemporary times, people have made many wishful interpretations of Minben ideology, attempting to extract from this ancient political thought some content that can be compatible with modern democratic politics. They believe that the ideological essence of Minben can still be found to converge with modern democratic thought because without the indigenous genes left by Minben ideology, there would be no unique path to modern democracy in China's recent history.
- However, upon further reflection, we discover a cruel reality, just as revealed in the preceding text, the Minben that modern people endowed with extremely high moral value, its past is so unworthy. On one hand, it was completely transformed by Confucianism, accepting the nurturing of Confucian ethics. The input of hierarchical consciousness and patriarchal views made it an inevitable concept representing the backward consciousness of the autocratic era, especially the dual connotations of respecting the ruler and neglecting the people made Minben a complete auxiliary tool of monarchism. It provided moral legitimacy for the strengthening of royal power. While there is indeed a kind of moral idealism pursued by the monarch, this is entirely the design of Confucianism, which attaches itself to royal politics to defeat other schools of thought and becomes an important means for Confucianism to become the orthodox political doctrine of traditional China. For Confucianism, Minben ideology is not original and unique to it, but

through the efforts of generations of Confucian scholars, literati, and gentlemen such as Kong, Meng, Xun, Jia Yi, Dong Zhongshu, and Huang Zongxi, Minben thought has become a universal understanding, and the result is that the backward elements of Confucianism have also become the elements of Minben. Confucianism serves royal power, and Minben must also serve royal power. On the other hand, in the rulers of the autocratic political system of generation, all or clear or dim rules have at least one thing in common, that is, the purpose of the rule, this purpose without exception is to pursue the eternal and continuous prosperity of the royal power and the kingdom. The difference lies only in the art of governance, with the incompetent ruler having more urgent and stronger methods of governance, while Minben is a flexible governance method provided by Confucianism for the wise and saintly ruler. Minben thought undoubtedly has an unquestionable utilitarian value for the ruler because of the need for rule, so it has a position for Minben. The reason why the proposition "The people are the roots of a country, if the roots are stable, the country will be peaceful" is praised by modern people is because it elevates the people to a very high position, hiding the fundamental question of who owns the "country". For this fundamental question, the answers of Minben and modern democracy are completely different.

- After all, Minben is a political ideology of the autocratic era, and its premodern nature is the institutional environment of the autocratic monarchy in which it exists, its genes and the era in which it exists determine its political value and historical limitations. In other words, it bears a certain responsibility for the various evils committed by autocratic politics. It would be disappointing to apply the concept of Minben indiscriminately to modern life without qualification. In fact, modern Chinese intellectuals have long discovered that even the most positive components of ancient ideological Minben, it is still very difficult to connect with modern thoughts, because the explanation of "for the people" conceals the true intention of "for the ruler", and where there is rulership, where does people's power come from?
- Some contemporary scholars believe that there are fundamental theoretical flaws in Confucian Minben thought, the most fatal of which is that "the governance belongs to the ruler" is taken as the most basic political value, and "the distinction between noble and humble" is taken as the most basic principle of order, and there has never been a clear and explicit thought of "the governance belongs to the people". From the standpoint of democratic politics, such criticism may not be incorrect. However, the most fair evaluation of Minben thought should be to restore the historical scene, return to the institutional environment in which it grows. Minben thought that existed in ancient China, whether its historical progressiveness or its historical limitations, can only be discussed in terms of the monarchical system, which is its host and its life carrier. The failure of the Reform Movement of 1898 indicated that the dream of constitutional monarchy with one virtual and one real power broke down, and the Revolution of 1911 announced the end of royal politics, the intellectuals of the May Fourth New Culture Movement naturally had to devote themselves to the ideals of democracy and republicanism.

Xunzi and the Transformation of Minben into Ruler-Centeredness

Xunzi sought to find the root of social disorder within human nature itself. He said: "Human nature is evil; the good in them is but deceit. Now, human nature inclines towards profit from birth. Following this, competition arises and yielding leads to ruin; born with a tendency towards evil, compliance leads to destruction of fidelity. Born with desires for sensory pleasures and indulgence, society becomes chaotic and loses its rituals and righteousness. Therefore, following human nature and catering to human

emotions will inevitably result in violating boundaries and disrupting order, ultimately leading to tyranny. Therefore, there must be a process of education and the establishment of ritual and righteousness, only then can there be yielding and adherence to propriety, conforming to norms, and returning to order. Through this perspective, it becomes clear that human nature is inherently evil, and the good within them is deceptive." (荀子性恶篇)

Human nature being inherently "evil" is the root cause of all chaos and conflict, and it is the reason why sages must engage in the task of "rectifying nature and promoting deceit" and establishing rituals. Thus, "evil" is the source of all right and wrong in the world. To cure an illness, one must first treat its source. To change the inherent "evil" in human nature requires the guidance and regulation of sages, as well as the norms and constraints of ritual and law. Therefore, Xunzi stated: "Sages rectify nature and promote deceit; deceit leads to the establishment of rituals, and rituals lead to the establishment of laws... (故圣人化性而起伪, 伪起而生礼义, 礼义生而制法度) Establishing rituals and laws rectify and regulate human emotions, guiding them and leading to order. This all begins with governance and conforms to the Way." Furthermore, he said: "Without teachers and models, human nature is unregulated; with them, accumulation occurs. However, what is acquired through accumulation is not innate. Nature alone is insufficient for governance; it is beyond our control, but it can be transformed. Accumulation is not something we possess, yet it can be cultivated." Xunzi believed that human nature is "evil," but through the guidance and regulation of sages, the education of teachers, and the self-restraint of sensory desires, individuals can conform to propriety and the Way. In his discourse, he particularly emphasized the role of "sage rulers": "Heaven and Earth are the origins of life; ritual and righteousness are the beginnings of governance; gentlemen are the beginnings of ritual and righteousness; following them, conforming to them, accumulating and enhancing them, bringing about goodness—these are the beginnings of gentlemen. Therefore, Heaven and Earth produce gentlemen, and gentlemen govern Heaven and Earth; gentlemen are the partners of Heaven and Earth, the administrators of all things, and the parents of the people. Without gentlemen, Heaven and Earth would not be governed, ritual and righteousness would not be organized, and without rulers as teachers, there would be no fathers and sons. This is what is meant by extreme disorder." In the process of transforming ordinary individuals into sages and achieving social order, Confucius focused on the expression of inner feelings—benevolence, while Mencius emphasized the role of individual willpower and moral conduct—righteousness. However, Xunzi revered the external value of "ritual and law" and the influence of "sage rulers." Therefore, he considered ritual as the "beginning of governance," the "guide to governance," the "ultimate means of distinguishing governance," and the "foundation of stability." This indicates that pre-Qin Confucianism was shifting from an emphasis on "inner sagehood" to an emphasis on "external kingship," which was a crucial transformation. In this transformation, the autonomy of the people decreased, while the authority of "sage rulers" and the mandatory nature of the rituals they established increased significantly. Xunzi emphasized human agency but prioritized the ascent of royal authority. Because, in his view, "Heaven and Earth produce gentlemen, and gentlemen govern Heaven and Earth," which is the essence of governance in the world, leaving no room for ordinary people to intervene. The role of "sage rulers" as parents of the people, with the people below and the rulers above, meant that the people only had the duty to obey. The so-called "control of destiny and its application" and the subject of "rectifying nature and promoting deceit" did not involve the people, as "rituals and laws are created by sage rulers," and the sage rulers created these rituals and laws to govern the people: "Rituals originate from the virtuous, extending from the virtuous to the common people," and "the common people must be regulated by laws and measures." Thus, we can clearly see that Xunzi's theory of social constraints operates as a top-down unidirectional model, which was evidently a profound transformation of Confucianism to adapt to the increasingly strengthened feudal autocracy in the late Warring States period.

Following this line of thought, Xunzi could only become a proponent of ruler-centered ideology rather than Minben ideology. Regarding the issue of how to obtain the world, the views of Confucius and

Mencius were essentially "obtain the people of the hill and become the emperor," but Xunzi said: "A ruler venerates rituals, respects the virtuous, and becomes a king." The common people are largely excluded, and a ruler only needs to use rituals as a weapon and respect the virtuous as a means to gain the world. In the relationship between "rulers" "venerating rituals and respecting the virtuous" and "gaining the world," rulers and their policies became the decisive factors, as stated in his other writings: "A ruler is the master of governance," "Rituals are the ultimate in governance, the foundation of strengthening the state, the path of power and prestige, the sum of achievements and fame, and the means by which kings and lords obtain the world." The ruler is the master of statecraft, and rituals are the instruments of statecraft. Their importance goes without saying. However, when compared, the ruler is the most important, so Xunzi also said: "There is governance by people, but not by law." The earlier quote of "Without gentlemen, Heaven and Earth would not be governed, and ritual and righteousness would not be organized" also expresses this idea. Since rituals, righteousness, and laws are created by sage rulers, and the rise and fall of states are led by enlightened rulers and dark lords, rulers are placed in a pivotal position among political factors: "The principal is the song of the people; the superior is the gesture of the subordinate. They listen to the song and respond, they watch the gesture and act." "The superior is the gesture, and the people are the scenery; when the gesture is correct, the scenery is correct; the superior is the plate, and the people are the water; when the plate is round, the water is round. One above corresponds to one below; two above correspond to two below."

In Mencius' view, the ruler's actions should be guided by the will of the people, but in Xunzi's perspective, there is a 180-degree shift: everything concerning the people should be directed by the ruler. Furthermore, Xunzi points out that "Those people are ignorant and lacking in reason, crude and without measure." They are an ignorant and unenlightened group, and their achievements, wealth, safety, and even their lives can only be safeguarded and achieved with the support of the ruler. His theory is: "The noble person relies on virtue, while the common person relies on power; power serves virtue. The strength of the people, the achievements await it; the unity of the people, it waits for it to harmonize; the wealth of the people, it waits for it to accumulate; the power of the people, it waits for it to be stable; the longevity of the people, it waits for it to grow... Heaven and Earth give them birth, and the sage completes them." Here, the monarch actually becomes the master, the god, and the parents of the subjects; while the subjects become the children and servants of the monarch.

Since they are children and servants, obedience becomes the duty of the subjects: "Respectful and deferential, obedient and diligent, not daring to make private decisions, not daring to take or give privately, taking compliance with the superior as one's aspiration; this is the duty of serving a sage monarch. Loyalty and trust without flattery, advising and disputing without fawning, boldly resolute and firm, with a sincere heart without partiality; if it is right, it is right, if it is wrong, it is wrong; this is the duty of serving a moderate monarch. Adaptable but not yielding, gentle but not submissive, tolerant but not disorderly, understanding the ultimate Dao without disharmony; able to transform and adjust, govern the internal, and serve the tyrant; this is the duty of serving a tyrant." Despite the differences in treatment of sage, moderate, and tyrannical rulers, the general principle is "obeying commands without disobeying", and even in dealing with a "tyrant", it is only "understanding the ultimate Dao", which is a far cry from Mencius' idea of exterminating tyrants like "lone wolves". Therefore, Xunzi explains the relationship between the two as: "A subject to a ruler is like a subordinate to a superior, like a child serving a father, like an arm bearing the head and covering the chest and abdomen." This kind of relationship between monarch and subjects leads Xunzi to the following conclusion: "The upper is the root of the lower." "The ruler is the origin of the people."

- The principle of the ruler as the root of the people, Xunzi's theory of the origin of the ruler is so clear! The Minben ideology seems to have sprouted in the early Western Zhou Dynasty, grown during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period, and seems to have been put to rest by Xunzi at the

end of the Warring States Period. We cannot say that there are no elements of Minben in Xunzi's teachings, but under the guidance of the ideology of the ruler as the core, His words on Minben cannot help but be weakened and transformed.

Xunzi's emphasis on the importance of the people and their protection is consistently framed within the context of the ideology of the ruler as the root of the state, and this is an indisputable fact. On some fundamental issues, Xunzi always directs his attention unequivocally towards the central authority. For example, regarding the downfall of the tyrants Jie and Zhou, Mencius pointed out: "The reason for Jie and Zhou's loss of the world is their loss of the people; losing the people means losing their support." This insight is undoubtedly correct. However, Xunzi states: "The one who can make use of the world is called a king. Tang and Wu did not seize the world; they cultivated their virtue, acted justly, promoted the common interests of the world, eliminated common harms, and thus the world returned to them. Jie and Zhou did not lose the world; they opposed the virtues of Yu and Tang, disrupted the distinction between ritual and righteousness, behaved like beasts, accumulated evil, completed their wickedness, and thus the world left them. When the world returns to one, it is called kingship; when the world leaves one, it is called downfall." In Xunzi's view, the key to gaining or losing the world lies with the ruler. If the ruler cultivates virtue and acts justly, they can gain the support of the people and "use" them to govern the world; conversely, if they disrupt social order, behave wickedly, and fail to win the support of the people, they will face downfall. In "The Duties of Ministers," Xunzi further explicitly points out: "Enlightened rulers respect the virtuous, appoint the capable, and enjoy their prosperity; ignorant rulers envy the virtuous, fear the capable, and destroy their achievements. They punish the loyal and reward the treacherous. This is what is called extreme darkness, and it is the reason for the downfall of tyrants like Jie and Zhou." Xunzi views the ruler's political behavior as the fundamental cause of the rise and fall of the state.

5 "Ode to Toguan Pass, Reflections on Ancient Times"

The peaks gather like a congregation,
The waves rage like fury,
The road to Toguan Pass winds through mountains and rivers.
Gazing towards the Western Capital, my thoughts are hesitant.
Where the sorrowful paths of Qin and Han once passed,
Countless palaces and halls now lie buried in the earth.
Rise, and the people suffer;
Fall, and the people suffer!
"Reflections on Toguan Pass" is a masterpiece of Zhang Yanghao's late years,

and it is also a renowned work in Yuan dynasty lyrical poetry that perfectly combines thoughtfulness and artistic expression. The reason why this work has been widely circulated is mainly due to the final sentence, "Rise, and the people suffer; Fall, and the people suffer," which expresses the suffering of the common people throughout the ages.

Regardless of how dynasties change, it is the common people who endure suffering. As Mr. Huang Yanpei once said, the history of China's ancient changes is the history of the common people's tears and blood. Therefore, the phrase "Rise, and the people suffer; Fall, and the people suffer" can still be recited to this day, presumably because it echoes the sentiments of the ancient common people. So let us take a look at the history of Chinese dynasties from ancient times to the present, starting with the Qin Dynasty established by Qin Shihuang. It has been calculated that since the establishment of the Qin Dynasty by Qin Shihuang, a war occurs in China every 67 years. The Chinese nation has grown up alongside wars,

and it is a truly combative nation. If there were not strict prohibitions on firearms and ammunition, the fighting genes inherent in the Chinese people would not be so easily suppressed.

Qin Shihuang unified the six states and established a unique centralized authoritarian system, making him an emperor of enduring influence. However, the common people living in the Qin Dynasty were so miserable that they wished for death. They were powerless to resist the rulers and unable to bear the miserable life they endured.

In fact, throughout the entire 2200 years, the unified periods accounted for sixty percent of the time, with the remaining time marked by division. Although there were many periods of unification in history, true golden ages were rare for the common people, and the duration of these prosperous eras was even shorter. Qin Shihuang is immortalized in history, but during his reign, he imposed heavy taxes and carried out large-scale construction projects, leaving the common people with little peace. Qin Shihuang's ambitious construction of the Great Wall resulted in the deaths of 500,000 people, while the construction of the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor claimed the lives of over 1.3 million.

Qin Ershi Hu Hai ascended to the throne by murdering the original heir, Fu Su. Hu Hai's cruelty surpassed that of Qin Shihuang. The tyranny of the Qin Dynasty ultimately sparked the people's rebellion, and Xiang Yu and Liu Bang rose up one after another, plunging the people into chaos once again.

During the period of contention between Chu and Han, the suffering of the common people was unbearable, and in the early years of the Han Dynasty, there were only a few decades of stability. Even during these periods, the common people did not live in abundance or peace.

In each dynasty, rulers held absolute power, and the common people had little say. They were always exploited and suffered. In the late Western Han Dynasty, Wang Mang usurped the throne, and the world continued to be engulfed in war until Emperor Guangwu of Han successfully ended the conflicts.

The Han Dynasty was able to continue under Liu Xiu, but apart from the early emperors, the remaining rulers of the Eastern Han Dynasty were weak, leading to the Three Kingdoms period in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Warlords vied for control of the Central Plains, and eventually, the Sima family established the Western Jin Dynasty and achieved unification. However, the Western Jin Dynasty lost its ruling power after the chaos of the Five Barbarians, and the Eastern Jin Dynasty was dominated by powerful clans. Following the demise of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the Central Plains entered into the period of confrontation between the Northern and Southern Dynasties. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, whoever had the strength became the emperor, and after years of chaos, the people lived in great turmoil.

The Sui and Tang Dynasties unified the country, and the golden age of the Tang Dynasty allowed the people to breathe a sigh of relief and enjoy a period of cultivation. During the "Zhenguan Reign" and the "Prosperous Reign of Kaiyuan," envoys from all over the world came to pay tribute, and the Tang Dynasty achieved both domestic and foreign submission. However, in the later years of the Tang Dynasty, the butcher Huang Chao once again stirred up chaos in the world. After repeatedly failing the imperial examinations, Huang Chao harbored rebellious intentions against the court. He despised the ruling class's inability to recognize talent. After rebelling, Huang Chao led his followers in burning, killing, and looting, with flames soaring in cities and towns, and both buildings and lives were reduced to ashes.

After the Tang Dynasty faded into history, the Song Dynasty emerged, but it suffered from inherent military weakness. Since its founding, the Northern Song Dynasty had been constantly harassed by surrounding ethnic minorities, and years of external warfare not only depleted the Northern Song's national strength but also resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives.

During the late Song Dynasty and the early Yuan Dynasty, the Central Plains once again faced new massacres as Mongolian cavalry swept southward, wreaking havoc. The rulers of the Yuan Dynasty were Mongols, inherently bloodthirsty and brutal. Every time they conquered a city, they implemented a policy of massacre, leading to a sharp decline in population during this period.

According to statistics, the population of the Central Plains decreased by half during the Yuan Dynasty's southward expansion. The Central Plains dynasties could no longer tolerate this situation and rose up in rebellion. The Yuan Dynasty, established for just over sixty years, was soon declared extinct. The Ming Dynasty was the last unified dynasty established by the Han people, but its establishment came at a great cost.

The Ming Dynasty expelled foreign invaders, but the Mongols remained unrepentant, repeatedly attempting to invade the south. During the reign of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Ming Dynasty suffered greatly from Mongol harassment. By the time Zhu Di ascended the throne, the Ming Dynasty's economy and military had stabilized. Zhu Di established the preeminent musketeer corps and personally led five expeditions against the Mongols, ultimately bringing them under complete control. However, the Ming Dynasty began to decline after Zhu Qizhen, and in its later years, another ethnic minority seized control of the Central Plains, leading to further massacres.

The rulers of the Qing Dynasty were Manchus, and initially, they also implemented a policy of massacring cities. The early Qing emperors also brutally suppressed the Han people, as seen in events like the Jiaxing Massacre, the Ten Days of Yangzhou, and the Eighty-One Days of Jiangyin. In the later years of the Qing Dynasty, there were not only uprisings like the Taiping Rebellion but also invasions by foreign powers. Before the Qing Dynasty, Chinese warfare was often fratricidal, but after the Qing Dynasty, it became enmity with foreign powers. It was only after many years of resistance against Japanese aggression that the present-day unified motherland was achieved.

In conclusion, a review of Chinese history reveals that China has always developed alongside warfare, but it is the common people who have always suffered under its shadow. In times of chaos, tragic love stories may be the domain of the upper class, but for the common people, it is a struggle for survival from one day to the next. Looking back on the development history of each dynasty, it strongly confirms the ancient saying, "In prosperity, the people suffer; in decline, the people suffer."

Why do Chinese people seem unable to escape the curse of "prosperity, the people suffer; decline, the people suffer"?

In the ancient history of the Chinese nation for thousands of years, whether it was the families of Zhao, Qian, Sun, or Li who ruled the country, in the end, it was always the common people who suffered the most, and the rise and fall of dynasties seemed to have little to do with them. What is the reason behind the fact that regardless of the rise and fall of dynasties, the ancient Chinese people could not escape the word "suffering"?

5.1 Firstly, a strong reproductive impulse restricted the development potential.

In ancient China, people's lives were inseparable from their families. In that era, a prosperous population meant a favorable position in all aspects, while a sparse population and weak descendants meant vulnerability to bullying by outsiders. In this special cultural background, the prosperity of the family depended primarily on the flourishing of the population. In such a cultural context, it is understandable that the reproductive impulse of the people would be quite intense.

In traditional China, traditional succession was a major event in life. Under the family rules of ancestors, everyone had to fulfill the responsibility and obligation of bearing offspring. In ancient times, those of higher generations were absolutely the authoritative figures in the family, and their orders even outweighed the laws of the time. The patriarch could even bypass the government and enforce family rules on you. Therefore, continuous reproduction of offspring was also an important way to realize and strengthen this authority.

When we quarreled and argued with each other as children, we always liked to say, "I'm your dad," while the other would retort with, "I'm your grandpa," escalating the argument by increasing the generational gap. In the world of sketch comedy, actors often use their seniority to elicit laughter from the audience.

As Lu Xun said: "Even the most incompetent person can always have a few children to show authority, so as not to fall into the abyss of despair. Unable to achieve the 'will to ascend,' then exert effort downward, and have more children."

Although Lu Xun's words may sound rough, they can also be considered one of the psychological explanations for the Chinese people's frenzy of reproduction. For families in dire straits, they are always constantly producing children. They never consider whether their many children will receive a good education in the future or whether there will be happiness in their future lives; none of these are included in their plans.

5.2 The second major reason for the suffering of the Chinese people during traditional times was natural disasters.

Looking at the geographical environment and climate of the world, China belongs to a monsoon climate, characterized by extreme instability. Like in the 1990s, devastating floods ravaged the land of China, and Ziyu's hometown was located by the Huai River, where floods were commonplace in earlier years. Not only during the period of New China, but throughout the thousands of years of Chinese history, disasters and turmoil have continuously afflicted our nation.

Looking back at the history of famines and disasters in China, from 206 BC to 1949 AD, a total of 2155 years, there were records of 1056 droughts and 1029 floods, almost averaging one occurrence of water or drought disaster per year. Other disasters such as locusts, hailstorms, typhoons, and epidemics were countless. In addition to natural disasters, human-made environmental destruction was also a significant cause of nature retaliating against humanity.

Three thousand years ago, the Yellow River basin was filled with birdsong and fragrant flowers, with countless creatures and abundant vegetation covering the land of China. However, after three thousand years of indiscriminate deforestation and reckless trampling on nature, the once endless virgin forests disappeared, and the once vibrant marshes turned into dry soil. The water storage capacity of the land suddenly decreased, and minor droughts turned into disasters occurring once every hundred years. It must be said that the vast northern regions of our country have changed from the "Jiangnan beyond the Great

Wall" to the current appearance of widespread yellow sand, and human complicity cannot be ignored in this transformation.

In the historical records of the Yuan Dynasty, we can see that in the nearly 100 years of the Yuan Dynasty's existence, the country suffered from major floods 94 times, major droughts 62 times, major locust plagues 49 times, and major famines 72 times. From the above data, we can analyze that there were almost 2-3 major natural disasters every year on average. In the most desperate times, people could only survive disasters by resorting to cannibalism.

In comparison, European countries, situated in a maritime climate, have a climate that is more stable than the monsoon climate. Additionally, the latitude of Western Europe is much warmer than that of northern China. Although the precipitation in northern Europe does not match the abundant rainfall in China's Jiangnan region, it is much more than that in northern China. This abundance of rainfall is more than enough for farmers in northern Europe to engage in farming and irrigation. Therefore, when looking at world history, Europe has never experienced vast stretches of barren land like those in northern China.

It's no wonder that Deng Tuo once said, "The multitude of famines in our country is unparalleled in the world." This situation has led Western scholars with knowledge of Chinese geography to call China the "famine-stricken China."

5.3 The third factor contributing to the impoverishment of China is its massive bureaucratic system.

The development of the authoritarian system made the Chinese bureaucratic system mature and complete to an unparalleled degree in the world. The excessive size of the bureaucratic system led to a tendency to detach from imperial control, gradually evolving into independent interest groups, making it a group that grew uncontrollably. After the establishment of a new dynasty, the new landlord class overthrew the old landlord class, and the privileged nobility began to receive feudal land and titles from the emperor's conquests, causing the number of bureaucrats to skyrocket. At the same time, the common people had to support these officials, leading to an increase in their burden. This trend has existed throughout China's thousands of years of history, characterized by bureaucratic positions being held without responsibility and an overstaffed administration. Initially, the ratio of bureaucrats to commoners was 600:1, but over time, this ratio increased to 30:1 and continued to decrease year by year, reflecting the historical inertia vividly.

"In creating life, few are involved; in consuming it, many," during the establishment of a new dynasty, particularly in the hands of the early monarchs, rulers understood the importance of light taxes and actively learned from the mistakes of previous dynasties, greatly improving the lives of the people. However, as the hardships of founding a dynasty were forgotten, later monarchs would revive extravagance, leading the dynasty to repeat its mistakes until the empire's subjects could no longer survive, causing the dynasty to collapse in a wave of peasant uprisings, and history would then enter the next cycle.

From the Spring and Autumn Period to the final dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, during the more than 2000 years, Chinese people could only achieve food and clothing security in the first few decades of a dynasty's establishment, while the rest of the years were mostly spent in a state of semi-starvation. According to Pang Zhuoheng's "Human Development and Historical Development," in years without

disasters, the surplus rate of food for the common people in China, after deducting food for consumption and taxes, was less than 5%. At that time, Chinese farmers could produce 464 billion kilograms of grain, but after deducting various taxes and other expenses, the net surplus was only 1224 kilograms. From these data, it can be seen that the deprivation of the poor by the bureaucratic class in ancient China far exceeded that of the serfs in contemporary European countries. The ancient Chinese peasants were squeezed of all their labor value like livestock, having to labor continuously just to barely survive, without any surplus energy or thoughts to think about changing anything.

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5.4 Psychologically, poverty can make people stupid. Poverty has never been a good thing; it forces people trapped in it to toil incessantly for their livelihood. It makes them willing to engage in mechanical labor in one place, gradually eroding their inner desires through repetitive work. Poverty deprives people of their strength, dignity, and rights, making them feel weak and submissive in the face of nature, gods, and authority, willingly bowing down.

In the 1950s, American scholar Oscar Lewis first proposed the concept of "culture of poverty." Many aspects of the poverty gene proposed by scholars are consistent with our society's culture. For example, high mortality rates, generally low life expectancy, people having to work all day for a living, having no spare time to contemplate life, suppressed emotions leading to extreme masculinity, a lack of long-term goals, distrust of the government, incompetence, unusual sensitivity to status differences, and a lack of corresponding political consciousness.

This strong consciousness of poverty leaves them in a state of constant depression and despondency, lacking the foresight and courage to find solutions to their hardships within the broader social and cultural context.

Western psychologists have pointed out that the biggest difference between rich and poor people lies not in the amount of wealth they possess but in their endurance for beautiful things, or what we commonly refer to as "delayed gratification." It means being willing to sacrifice immediate benefits for greater long-term interests. For the rich, they have the opportunity and time to wait for the fruit of wealth to grow to its fullest, while for the poor, with very low security of survival, time is life, and objective conditions dictate that they can only sacrifice long-term plans and focus on the present.

Talking about dreams and aspirations with a poor person is essentially a disguised form of bullying.

The establishment of ancient Greek civilization was based on a constant flow of money. The barren land of ancient Greece could not support the local population, so Greeks had to venture outwards for development. With the help of a powerful fleet for foreign trade, Greeks continuously exported their goods, resulting in a large amount of money flowing into Greece. An economist once asserted, "Between the 6th and 4th centuries BC, the Greek economy was rapidly rising... If you fully estimate the specific situations of different times, the impression that the Athenian economy gives is somewhat similar to that of 19th-century Europe."

When survival is no longer the primary concern, people begin to pursue higher levels of spiritual fulfillment, namely democratic politics.

The reason why medieval Europeans were able to break through old barriers and lead the Renaissance was mostly due to the rapid development of technology in Europe at the time. The originally poor serfs in Europe began to gradually become wealthy, their social status also correspondingly improved, and they began to pursue their own citizenship rights. Then, with the gradual improvement of the economic level, these people also began to receive education gradually. Eventually, as the economic level improved, people's awareness of rights began to expand, laying the groundwork for the capitalist revolution in Europe.

Meanwhile, during the same period in China, it sank deeper into poverty, while the economic situation in the West was flourishing. At that time, Chinese farmers were developing toward increasing poverty. Since the Song Dynasty, with the increase in population, China's per capita arable land has never returned to the level of over ten mu per person. The Song Dynasty also became the last glorious Han Dynasty in Chinese history. After the Song Dynasty, the intensification of poverty during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties gradually consumed China's spirit, leading Chinese culture into a long period of stagnation and regression. "The consequences of poverty on human dignity and moral degradation are immeasurable."

After a family falls into decline and poverty, its members often become spiritually depressed and vulgar, gradually becoming more short-sighted, authoritarian, and rude. China's changes are similar to this. Since the fall of the Song Dynasty, the noble temperament and humanistic atmosphere in Chinese culture have become increasingly diluted, and the confidence of the Tang Dynasty and the elegance of the Song Dynasty have never been reproduced; instead, restraint and weakness have been developing and strengthening in the character of the Chinese people day by day.

In conclusion, the deep-seated reasons why ancient Chinese people have always been impoverished can be summarized as follows: Firstly, the vigorous reproductive capacity has led to a decrease in per capita resources and exacerbated the poverty level of families; secondly, frequent natural disasters often result in no harvest for the people; thirdly, the massive bureaucratic system's support has become a heavy burden on the people; and fourthly, the poverty gene brought about by authoritarian culture has caused poverty to worsen continuously and is difficult to change.

6 Tacitus, renowned for his incisive analysis of Roman history, delves into the perplexing question of why the Roman populace appeared indifferent to the erosion of their republican institutions under the reign of Augustus. Despite earlier generations valiantly defending their rights to participate in governance, Tacitus observes a marked apathy among contemporary Romans towards the demise of the republic.

In addressing this enigma, Tacitus attributes Augustus' success in consolidating power to his astute manipulation of the outward appearance of government. While the traditional institutions of the republic—the senate, popular assemblies, and magistrates—continued to function ostensibly as before, Augustus wielded control surreptitiously behind the scenes. This facade of normalcy, Tacitus suggests, served to cloak the gradual usurpation of authority by Augustus and his supporters.

Crucially, Tacitus highlights the generational divide that contributed to the populace's acquiescence. The majority of Romans alive during Augustus' reign had never experienced the republic in its true form. Born in the aftermath of the victory of Actium or during the tumultuous civil wars, they lacked firsthand knowledge of the republican system's workings and the ideals it embodied. Tacitus laments that "few indeed were left who had seen the republic," indicating the scarcity of individuals who could recall the bygone era of republican governance.

Consequently, Tacitus suggests that subsequent generations, ignorant of the republic's former glory and the principles it espoused, unwittingly accepted their loss of freedom. Living under the veneer of normalcy perpetuated by Augustus, they failed to recognize the encroachment on their liberties and the erosion of republican values. Tacitus' poignant analysis underscores the insidious nature of authoritarianism and the insidious erosion of democratic norms when disguised beneath the trappings of familiar institutions.

7 The essence of traditional Chinese culture

What exactly is the essence of traditional Chinese culture? Since the late Qing Dynasty, this has been an unclear question. In the past two decades, it has become even more contentious. The standards of conduct set by Zeng Guofan contrast with those of Chen Yinke, much like night and day. Zeng Guofan's view can be inferred from the passage: "You should earnestly advise your younger sister to be gentle, submissive, and respectful, and not to utter a single word that violates the principles of the Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues. The lord represents the ruler, the father represents the son, and the husband represents the wife; these are the supports of the earth and the pillars of heaven. It is said in the classics: 'The lord is Heaven; the father is Heaven; the husband is Heaven.' The Book of Rites says: 'The lord is the utmost honor; the father is the utmost honor; the husband is the utmost honor. Even if the lord is not benevolent, the subject cannot but be loyal; even if the father is not kind, the child cannot but be filial; even if the husband is not virtuous, the wife cannot but be obedient'... You should earnestly advise your sister to prioritize endurance and patience. I have served in office for many years, and I have always focused on endurance and patience."

As early as 1927, in the "Preface to Mr. Wang Guantang's Elegy," Chen Yinke succinctly stated: "The definition of our Chinese culture lies in the Three Cardinal Guides and Six Disciplines, first expounded by Ban Gu in his book 'Baihu Tongyi'." The meaning is the highest state of abstract ideal, akin to what Plato called the Idea. If we talk about the cardinal guides of ruler and subject, the ruler could be Emperor Li Yu and the subject could be Liu Xiu; if we talk about the rules of friendship, the friend could be Li Ji and the correspondent could be Bao Shu." I ask: Since the Chinese began to reflect on their traditional culture after contact with foreign regions, has anyone offered such a comprehensive and clear conclusion? About a decade before Chen Yinke made this statement, the May Fourth pioneers had already launched a comprehensive attack on traditional culture, opposing the so-called "Confucian teachings and norms, the Way of the ruler and the duty of the subject." At that time, Chen Yinke was still studying abroad, so he cannot be considered a "May Fourth figure," but his later opinions were more concise. Although his words were few, they were more comprehensive and complete. Where modern scholars might use "spirit" or "essence," he directly called it a "definition." What a remarkable intellectual feat!

Here, Chen Yinke has essentially pointed out that the definition of traditional Chinese culture is authoritarianism that leaves no room for escape.

As for the future of this traditional Chinese culture, Chen Yinke also has a clear view. In the "Preface to Mr. Wang Guantang's Elegy," he said: "The cardinal guides and disciplines are abstract and ideal things,

but they must have something to rely on for concrete expression. This reliance is actually on tangible social systems, with economic systems being particularly important. Therefore, if the reliance does not change, it can be preserved. In our country, there have also been those who contradicted the Three Cardinal Guides and violated the Five Constant Virtues, such as those who preached the absence of father or lord; they were the foreign teachers of Buddhism. Although Buddhism spread and flourished in China, and although it was handed down from generation to generation, the traditional principles did not change, so they could still be used as a place of refuge. In recent decades, since the reign of Emperor Daoguang to the present day, due to the invasion of foreign races, there have been drastic changes in the social and economic systems; the cardinal guides and constant virtues have lost their foundation and are now sinking and declining unconsciously, even though there are people who, by making a lot of noise and forcefully clinging on, ultimately end up in an incurable situation." It must be said that Chen Yinke has some attachment to the core of traditional Chinese culture, the doctrine of the cardinal guides and disciplines, on an emotional level, and he regrets its inevitable extinction; however, he also sees the inevitable trend of events with great clarity.

There is another "second definition" of what can be called traditional Chinese culture, and it also comes from Chen Yinke. This is a passage from his "Review Report on Feng Youlan's Second Volume of History of Chinese Philosophy" in 1933: "Since the Jin Dynasty, Chinese thought can be represented by the three teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. Although this is a popular saying, when examined against the facts of ancient history and verified by the current state of affairs, it proves to be an unchanging argument." Although this is a popular saying, only polymaths and scholars like Chen Yinke can definitively establish it, leaving no room for doubt in the future. However, due to my own lack of insight, I still want to add the words "nine streams" after "three teachings." This does not refer to the "nine streams" mentioned in the "Records of the Grand Historian," but rather to the so-called "three teachings and nine streams" or "lower nine streams" that still exist in society today. Because like the cultures of other nations in the world, the primitive witchcraft of ancient times in China has not been completely eradicated and has continued to develop. In many dynasties in history, it served as a foundation in their early stages. Even within the orthodox traditions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, they have not been completely cleansed from thousands of years of evolution. Moreover, in Daoism, which is considered the only indigenous religion in China, it still exists in large numbers. As for various folk beliefs, superstitions, and cults, they are even more prevalent, with significant influences on historical, contemporary, and even future Chinese social life. I discussed this in an article titled "Discovering Another China" last year. Although I am not able to conduct research myself, some contemporary young scholars have gradually begun to pay attention to this issue. Drawing on the Western concept of a single cultural tradition with two types of traditions major and minor traditions, there will be many future discoveries. In fact, Chen Yinke's research on the Heavenly Master Dao has already set the stage for this.