

A Brief Analysis of Political Thought in Early Western Han Dynasty

Li Zhen

Department of Special History, Normal College, Qingdao University
Qingdao, Shandong Province, China
Email: li.zhen520@163.com

Abstract

During the seventy years of the early Western Han Dynasty, the situations of both politics and economy were complicated. The rulers devoted themselves to develop the economy and maintain social order. At the same time, the rulers dedicated to build a ruling thought encompassing Confucianism, Taoism and Legalism. It included the comprehensive utility of penalty and ritual. It also emphasized the interpretation of Wuwei which is the core of Daoism. These three schools interacted with each other and contributed a lot to the stability and economic development of the early Western Han Dynasty.

Keywords: Western Han Dynasty, penalty and ritual, penalty and ritual

Introduction

The Western Han Dynasty holds a significant position in ancient China. Its ruling ideology which was adopted by future generations plays an important role in Chinese culture history. In early Western Han Dynasty, the immoderate law of Qin Dynasty was corrected and a comprehensive cultural ruling thought was established, including Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism. It involves attaching importance to educate the people with legal knowledge, building the ritual system, promoting the order of family ethics, and so on. Chinese scholars value the research in this area. The important achievements are *The Ruling Ideology and the Changes of Schools in Western Han Dynasty* (Haoyuan, 1977), *The Development and the Evolution of the Ruling Ideology in Han Dynasties* (Zhang Yizhong, 1987), *On the Ruling Ideology in Early Han Dynasty—The Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu* (Chen Zhiqiang, 1989), *On the Changes of the Ruling Ideology and the Reasons for it in Early Han Dynasty* (Chen Jinhua, 2006), *On the Changes of the Ruling Ideology from Daoism to Confucianism in Han Dynasty* (Li Sina, 2009). This thesis lays emphasis on illustrating the cultural integration of the ruling ideology in Western Han Dynasty.

1. Penalty and ritual

In early Western Han Dynasty, the social economy languished because of the war. People could not earn a living, what was worse, “Famine happened everywhere, people were forced to practice cannibalism in order to survive. Almost half amount of the population died. And even the emperor could gather four same color horses to draw a carriage, whereas the high officials only could drive ox cart” (*History of Han Dynasty · Food and Money*, p. 950). The rulers were eager to maintain social order, and develop the economy. So the emperor Liu Bang issued a series of decrees in order to get rid of the hard situation. “Let the soldiers return home”, “admit the ranks and estates of people”, “release the people who had sell themselves because of starving” (*History of Han Dynasty·Records of Emperor Gaozu Volume 1*, p.17). All of these records reflected the decrees. At the same time, through drawing lessons from Qin Dynasty, the rulers of early Western Han Dynasty explore ways of ruling thought which includes both Confucianism and Legalism.

1. 1 Using lenient laws to guide the people

In early Western Han Dynasty the rulers adopted lenient laws. When Liu Bang came to Guanzhong area, he made three commitments with the local people, “murder should be killed. Those who hurt others or stole should shoulder the punishment. All the old laws of Qin should be abolished” (*History of Han Dynasty·Records of Emperor Gaozu Volume 1*, p.17). These easy polices were very popular among the local people. By performing these policies the economy was revived, and social order was rebuilt. After the found of Western Han Dynasty these policies continued to execute. In *History of Han Dynasty* the imperial edict required the officials “govern the people by teaching them law and ritual instead of beating them” (*History of Han Dynasty·Records of Emperor Gaozu Volume 1*, p.40). During early Western Han Dynasty the rulers inherited the policies of Qin Dynasty. It required the people follow the example of the government officials. In Emperor Han Wendi’s edict: “Sanlao are people’s teacher” (*History of Han Dynasty · Records of Emperor Wendi*). While in Emperor Jingdi’s edict: “honest and incorruptible officials are people’s model” (*History of Han Dynasty · Records of Emperor Jingdi*). But there were tremendous differences between Qin Dynasty and early Western Han Dynasty in the policy of learning from the government officials. The rulers of Han Dynasty were more concerned of moderate guilt. Corporal punishment was abolished by Emperor Han Wendi. Comparatively mild whipping punishment was adopted. What is more, the authority formulated the size of barnacles, and determined which part should be tortured in order to keep the criminal survived. It implied huge progress of the Western Han Dynasty.

1.2 Respecting persons of virtue

The ruler of early Western Han Dynasty paid much attention to the election and application of the talents. As *History of Han Dynasty* recorded: “now I am blessed by the gods, and with the help of the talents. So finally I unite China again and build my empire. I hope my empire will last forever, and those who had helped me during the war should be rewarded” (History of Han Dynasty, Book I-Records of Emperor Gaozu, Volume 1, I, p.52). The promise of wealth and status appealed a lot of talents came to Liu Bang and those talents made marvelous contribution to the recovery of the economy. *History of Han Dynasty* also recorded: “officials should recommend the talents, and these talents should point my mistakes” (History of Han Dynasty, Book IV · Records of Emperor Wendi, p.84). In the following year Liu Bang offered sacrifices to Confucius with highest level. It was the first time an emperor had offered sacrifices to Confucius. Objectively it promoted the revival of the Confucianism. Emperor Wendi made the recommendation of talents a policy. Later almost hundreds people were recommended to the emperor and lots of them were chosen by the emperor.

1.3 Human relations and Confucian orthodoxy

Qin dynasty manages state affairs by law, overlooking morals and ethics' role in educating people. Western Han Dynasty corrects its shortcomings, and gradually establishes and improves the idea of governing the country by morals and ethics. In the early Western Han Dynasty, Han emperor Liu Bang, in order to avoid his father kneeling down to him, issues the edict to revere fathers, reading: “Father-son relationship is the closest human relationship in the world, therefore, everything a father possesses would pass on to his son. In return, the son receiving everything should respect his father. This is the most basic principle.” (Records of Emperor Gaozu, Volume II, p.46). The edict issued by Liu Bang is of great practical significance. He conveys to the society an important message: filial piety was one of the fundamental ideals of the establishment of Western Han Dynasty. It is the earliest policy put forward by the government. It is carried forward during the reign of Emperor Wendi, who proposes pension plans, “The government distributes monthly to the old over eighty years of age 120 jin of millet, twenty jin of meat, and fifty liters of rice wine.

The government also adds eight zhang of silk and three jin of cotton on the basis of that to those who are over ninety years old or the older ones. These materials to be distributed require detailed examination of Zhangli, and thus the implementation of Cheng Ruowei. The materials to be distributed to those under ninety years old will be implemented by Qiangfu and Lingshi. Xun Zushi will supervise the incompetent officials. However, this policy does not apply to the guilty.” (Records of Emperor Wendi, p.82). It can be inferred from the highly detailed level of the regulations that the ruling ideology which attaches importance to ethics of Western Han Dynasty has become more perfect. For that time, Emperor Wendi puts the idea of filial piety on the top list of ruling philosophy. According to him, filial piety is the fundamental rule to ensure the stability of the country; hard-working farming is the basic livelihood of the people. He also holds that an important reason for national harmony is the harmony of families and the fixed order between the old and the young.

1.4 Emperors restrict themselves with “morality” and rule their subjects by etiquette

Morality and etiquette are important ruling ideas in Western Han Dynasty. The early Western Han Dynasty rulers always restrict themselves with morality. As long as one natural disaster happens, emperors always attribute this to his error by his misconduct of morality. This is so called “An emperor is doomed to be punished by God if he had no morality and implemented policies unfairly.” (History of Han Dynasty · Records of Emperor Wendi, p.84). Emperor Wendi is a typical representative who governs the country by morality, *History of Han Dynasty* praises him: “The Emperor Wendi dedicates exclusively to educate people by morality, so the country is prosperous and people pay attention to etiquette training, as a result, there are only several hundred cases, and no civilian is punished due to committing serious crimes.” (History of Han Dynasty · Records of Emperor Wendi, p.97). Emperor Wendi demonstrates morality to the subjects to instruct them to do good things and be farming-oriented so as to develop economy and ensure political stability.

Therefore, Han morality mainly refers to the monarch's morality, and the subjects are unqualified to use morality. “Etiquette” is the counterpart of “morality”. Rulers establish a strict hierarchical order by virtue of etiquette. If morality is emperors' own requirement, then etiquette belongs to their subjects. Since Emperor Liu “to have Shu Sutong draw up the Rite System to fix the etiquette order between the monarch and his subjects” (History of Han Dynasty · Etiquette and Music, p.883), etiquette system in the initial years of Western Han Dynasty witnesses its gradual development to become an important part of the ruling philosophy. Naturally, the etiquette system in early Han Dynasty is borrowed from Qin Dynasty, and is not perfect with its main purpose to help monarch and his subjects to find their own places, and to restrict behaviors of his subjects and dukes. A relatively more complete etiquette system is accomplished during the reign of Emperor Wudi. The four points above are just a brief summary of the ruling philosophy in Western Han Dynasty. And each point, which is based on social reality, has its historical inevitability. The Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu was playing an important role at the beginning of Han Dynasty.

According to *Records of the Historian-Aristocratic Family of Cao Prime Minister*: “Caocan was the Prime Minister of Qi under the rule of Emperor Han Huidi. And he adopted the advice from the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu that governing a country does not lie in the blind interference. Thus, people can live in peace and security. He applied the method to administrate Qi for nine years. During his administration, the state was stable. All the people spoke highly of his talent”(*Records of the Historian-Aristocratic Family of Cao Prime Minister*, Volume 54, p.1622). After Xiaohe died, Caocan had the rank of Prime Minister, because of his contribution to Qi. He insisted Xiaohe’s administrative strategies—governing on noninterference. The multitude misunderstood his behavior at first, but it did have a very good effect. People sang the praises of him that “Xiaohe legislates fairly and Caocan held the policy united. He governed on noninterference, so people led a comfortable and stable life”(Records of the Historian-Aristocratic Family of Cao Prime Minister, Volume 54, p.1624). After Emperor Han Huidi, Emperors Wendi, Jingdi, and the Empress Dowager Dou all believed in the Emperor Hang and Lao Tzu, especially the Empress Dowager Dou.

According to *Shih Chi*, the Empress Dowager Dou advocated the learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu. The emperor, the prince and the royal relatives had to read the books about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu, and deferred to the learning(Records of the Historian-Aristocratic Family of Royal Relatives, Volume 49, p.1584). This led to the dispute over Confucianism and Taoism. After the Empress Dowager Dou passed away, Emperor Wudi was free. He began to expand Confucianism. Therefore, Taoism declined gradually. The Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu was not merely limited to laissez faire in the incipient Han Dynasty. Rather, it assimilated other studies in its further developments. It’s easy to notice its integration with Legalist School Thoughts and the combination of Law and Virtue was demonstrated in its administrating philosophy as well as strategies. Law was considered as Yang while Virtue was Yen, and only through the balance between Yen could the society develop in a healthy and steady way. Therefore, the combination of Law and Virtue became an essential reference in formulating cultural policies at the beginning of Western Han Dynasty. The royal court of this period, on the one hand, ruled the country through moral cultivation without any forcing policies, but implemented laws and regulations to control people’s ideas on the other hand. The laissez faire of Taoism is, in fact, a relatively positive concession. With this idea, the ruler is supposed to take back a step in order to progress forward, enabling the people to be free from too much burden, or keeping people instead of pushing on them. Because of this guidance, the rulers of incipient Western Han Dynasty were able to improve the economy and accumulated substantial fortune.

According to the *Records of the Historian*, “The fortune in the capital has amounted to millions, so that the strings which were used to tie the coins together went rotten. Besides, the number of coins is hardly to be counted and barns are filled with grains of last seasons, which are about to overbrim and go rotten.” Politically, the Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu displayed features of legal administration. As what illustrated in *Reflection on Salt and Iron: Zhou and Qin*, currently, if a son kills his father or the younger brother kills the father, their relatives and neighbors are all supposed to be punished. This is like the leaves of a tree will be hurt when its root has been hurt and the wound in one’s finger will normally affects the whole body. Since the implementation of this “All-involved” punishing policy, people bound with blood consider more of other family members and more criminals are legally punished.” In the respect of ideology and culture, the Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu had certain impact on Confucius. Lu Jia, Jia Yi, Han Ying, Dong Zhongshu, who were great scholars of Western Han Dynasty, were influenced by this study to various extent. Dong Zhongshu’s idea concerning that Law is Yang and Virtue is Yen, along with augural conception of taking the emperor as the noblest god, were deeply indebted to the Learning about the Emperor Huang and Lao Tzu and exerted far-reaching influence on Confucius in the middle of Western Han Dynasty.

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