

The Political Governance Ideas of the Han Dynasty Reflected by the Differences in the Food Culture Class of the Han Dynasty in “On Salt and Iron”

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Abstract: Based on the book “On Salt and Iron”, this paper studies some of the ideas of the upper strata of society in the Han Dynasty on the governance of the state and society from the perspective of the class differences of food culture. The book is evidence of the obvious class differences in the Han Dynasty, and by documenting the policy debates in the Han Dynasty’s Salt and Iron Conference, it clearly reflects the Han Dynasty’s upper class’s control of important means of production and social materials, as well as the process of building a governance model of “unity of ritual and law” through the combination of economic control (Legalist means) and cultural stratification (Confucian ritual system), and reflects the governance idea of the Han Dynasty’s upper class to consolidate its rule. While this approach has strengthened power in the short term, it has created the potential for social unrest by exacerbating the unfair distribution of resources. Understanding the class differences of food culture in the Han Dynasty is helpful for understanding the national ecology and economic and social development of the Han Dynasty.

Keywords: “On Salt and Iron”, Han Dynasty food culture, class differences in the Han Dynasty

1. A review of the social situation in the Han Dynasty combined with the analysis of relevant texts in “On Salt and Iron”

1.1 Introduction to the Historical Stage

“On Salt and Iron” is the content of the famous “Salt and Iron Conference” of the Western Han Dynasty during the period of Emperor Zhao of the Han Dynasty, which was compiled into a book by Huan Kuan, which was finalized in the period of Emperor Yuan, and was a vivid feedback of the social, political, economic and cultural culture at that time. Since its publication, this book has been an important classic in the study of the political, economic and cultural culture of the Han Dynasty. Among them, the economic policies implemented during the period of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, such as the official management of salt and iron, the monopoly of liquor, and the equalization of losses and losses, were the focus of discussion in the conference and this book[1]. From this book, we can get a glimpse of the differences in the food culture of different classes in the Han Dynasty according to the relevant policies described, and then introduce some ideas for the rulers of the Han Dynasty to govern the country. Therefore, this paper will analyze this book based on the period of Emperor Zhao of the Han Dynasty, extend it forward and backward, and expand the history of the Han Dynasty in stages, so as to provide background support for the research of this paper.

The period of Emperor Zhao of the Han Dynasty was about the middle and early period of the Han Dynasty, inheriting the glorious era of Emperor Wu, but at the same time inheriting some of the shortcomings left by the previous dynasty. Since the beginning of the Han Dynasty, the Legalist idea of “ruling by inaction” has been implemented, and the policy of “fifteen taxes and one”, and even Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty has implemented the policy of “no tax for eleven years”; During the reign of Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty and Emperor Jing of the Han Dynasty, the social economy generally recovered, and there was a situation of “the rule of Wenjing”. However, with the gradual accumulation of wealth of the upper class, the gap between the upper and lower classes of society gradually widened. During the reign of Emperor Wu, the centralization of power was strengthened through policies such as salt and iron official camps and equalization of losses and equalization, which supported foreign wars, but the burden on the civil economy also increased. The convening of the “Salt and Iron Conference” during the Zhao Emperor period marked an attempt at policy adjustment, but the social stratification had been solidified, and the contradiction between the extravagance of the upper class and the poverty of the lower class had become acute[2].

1.2 Natural Condition Background

The emergence and embodiment of food culture are closely related to the natural environment background, and what kind of crops and food production levels can be provided determine the establishment of dietary policies to a large extent.

The middle and early Han Dynasty belonged to the late Holocene in geological history, and the natural conditions were relatively favorable, which was conducive to the cultivation of agricultural crops. The main food crops cultivated in the Han Dynasty were millet, grass and beans, followed by millet, hemp and rice. At that time, the Yellow River Plain and the Guanzhong Plain were the main grain-producing areas in China, and cultivation was gradually developing in the south. The production of grain crops was not only the guarantee of the basic food of the Han Dynasty, but also provided important raw materials for by-products such as wine[3].

In the middle and early Han Dynasty, salt production had already reached a considerable scale. According to historical records, the total number of salt producing areas in the Han Dynasty was 49, and the salt production was widely distributed, covering various types such as sea salt, pond salt and well salt. The development of the salt industry not only meets the domestic demand, but also becomes an important source of national revenue through policies such as salt and iron government.

As an important means of production and economic resource, iron ore was also widely available in the Han Dynasty, mainly located in the core production areas of the Central Plains and Guanzhong. The Han Dynasty was also an important stage of development for the iron smelting industry in ancient China. According to archaeological discoveries and documents, iron production in the Han Dynasty had reached a fairly high level at that time.

1.3 The social situation of the Han Dynasty is reflected in the diet in "On Salt and Iron"

Judging from the original text of "On Salt and Iron" and the social background of the Han Dynasty, the overall level of society in this period has improved and developed compared with the previous generation. Thanks to the progress of productivity and the accumulation of national strength year by year, the dietary level of the residents of the Han Dynasty has jumped to a considerable extent, which has a negative effect on social life and also builds an important cornerstone of the culture of the Han Dynasty. Different social strata have shown great importance to food, and the connotation of etiquette, morality, customs and habits carried by food since ancient times has been further strengthened[4].

In "On Salt and Iron", it can be seen that the diet of the upper class of the Han Dynasty was extremely rich, including not only various food crops, but also a large amount of meat, seafood, fruits and vegetables. For example, "On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion" mentions: "Today's folk wine and food, the overlapping of the corpse and the brigade, the burnt case, the turtle and the carp, the muntjac eggs, the quail, the orange wolf, the mackerel, the snakehead and the snakehead, and the miscellaneous tastes of all things." This shows that the wealthy class not only has a wide variety of foods, but also pays attention to the taste and order of food. The upper class not only valued precious ingredients, but also pursued luxurious eating environments and etiquette. "Today's rich man has a silver mouth and yellow ears, and a golden jade bell." It shows that the upper class at that time was also quite particular about eating utensils.

The diet of the middle class was more pragmatic, with fewer things to squander, focusing on practicality and economy, but there were also more elaborate parts of eating utensils and sacrificial rituals than those of the previous generation, reflecting the eating habits and culture of ordinary people at that time. Among them, the staple food is mainly grains, such as millet, wheat, rice, etc., supplemented by a small amount of meat and vegetables[5]. "On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion" mentions: "The ancients, the people drink grass, pick trees, eat the flesh of beetles, and sometimes suffer from diseases and poisons. Therefore, Shennong is the beginning of teaching the people to sow grains, the land is suitable, the dry, damp and fat are high, taste the taste of a hundred herbs, the sweetness and bitterness of the water spring, so that the people know what to do."

The diet of the lower classes is based on cereals, with very little intake of meat and vegetables, mainly dependent on cereals, and in limited quantities, often facing hunger and malnutrition. "On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion" mentions: "Today's rich people pray for the name of Yue, look at the mountains and rivers, beat the drums of the vertebral ox, and advocate love." And the poor do not receive chaff, and they lack clothes in the cold. This reflects the plight and survival pressure of the lower classes.

It can be concluded that in the record of "On Salt and Iron", there were differences in the content, method and quantity of different levels of food at that time in the Han Dynasty. These differences led to differences in the living conditions and living standards of different classes in the Han Dynasty, which caused a considerable social impact.

2. A brief analysis of the root causes of class differences in food culture in the Han Dynasty and the reasons why food became the control of power

2.1 Analysis of the root causes of the class differences in food culture in the Han Dynasty

In “On Salt and Iron”, the political debate between Legalism and Confucianism is the keynote. Exploring the differences in political ideas between Confucianism and Confucianism is helpful for understanding the logic behind the phenomenon of diet as a control tool.

In “On Salt and Iron”, the logic behind food culture, as a tool of power control, is closely related to the political propositions of Confucianism and Law. Through the state’s monopoly and circulation of important materials such as salt and iron, the Legalists firmly grasped social resources from the material level and realized social control[6]. This economic means not only increased state revenues and strengthened centralized power, but also consolidated the hierarchical order of society through unequal distribution of resources; Confucianism, on the other hand, emphasizes the use of rituals to regulate social order and maintain hierarchical differences. The etiquette and utensils in the food culture are not only a reflection of material enjoyment, but also a symbol of social status. This kind of hierarchical etiquette and legal system makes people of different classes gradually different in their lifestyles and values, thus maintaining the status of the upper class of society at the cultural level.

By combining Legalist economic control with Confucian ritual culture, the rulers of the Han Dynasty constructed a governance model of “unity of ritual and law”, combining social control with cultural identity to further consolidate their rule. The immediate practical effect and consequence of this behavior is that there is a difference in food and drink between social classes. The difference in food culture exists as a powerful governance tool, but why the implementation of the “unity of etiquette and law” policy will be reflected in the difference in food needs to be considered in combination with reality.

2.2 Why diet is the reason for the control of rights

2.2.1 Legalist level

Controlling people’s daily dietary resources, as an important tool in political economy, is conducive to maintaining upper governance. According to “On Salt and Iron: This Proposal”, “salt and iron are both lost, so the government adjusts the urgency through the financial commission”, and the state realizes the control of the people’s right to subsistence from the material level by monopolizing the production and circulation of dietary necessities, cooking utensils, and agricultural tools. This policy enabled the upper classes to grasp the “order of the people” and form coercive dependence. On the surface, the policy of “equalizing the loss and equalizing the loss” regulates grain prices, but in fact, it strengthens its ability to penetrate into grassroots society through the government-led grain distribution system. The Changping system, established during the reign of Emperor Wu, became an important tool for the distribution of power during the famine.

As a result, the upper echelons of the Han Dynasty were able to achieve a monopoly on important means of production and materials. This monopoly tilts the distribution of resources towards the upper strata of society, which can enjoy abundant material resources, including high-quality ingredients. The lower classes face survival difficulties due to lack of resources. This inequality in the distribution of resources reflects the intention of the upper strata of society to use economic means to consolidate governance. On the one hand, the government-run policy of salt and iron increased the state fiscal revenue and strengthened the centralization of power; On the other hand, it also exacerbates the gap between the rich and the poor between the social classes, leading to the increased dependence of the lower classes on the upper classes, thus maintaining the hierarchical order of the society to a certain extent[7].

2.2.2 Confucian level

From a Confucian point of view, the propagation of the ritual system that constructs its core idea is itself to promote the stratification of society. In the Han Dynasty, food culture was not only the embodiment of material life, but also an important part of ritual culture. The lavish diet and elaborate manners of the upper classes reflected the emphasis on hierarchical differences in Confucian etiquette. Through the stratification of food culture, the rulers further consolidated the hierarchy of society.

The difference in the use of “the rich man’s silver mouth and yellow ears, and the golden jade bell” contained in “On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion” is actually the practice of the Han Dynasty in “The Book of Rites and Rituals” “Nine tripods of the Son of Heaven and Seven tripods of the Princes”. Through the hierarchical regulations of eating utensils and etiquette, material differences are transformed into cultural symbols of legitimacy. The upper echelons monopolized the religious power to communicate with the heavens through the grand sacrificial activities of “spine ox drumming”. The “On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion” criticizes the people’s transgression of “cooking and killing for no reason”, reflecting

the strict control of sacrificial food and rituals. The upper class of society pays attention to eating utensils and etiquette, which is not only the embodiment of material enjoyment, but also a symbol of social status, which makes it have a unique superiority in social life[8]. This cultural stratification makes different lifestyles and values of people from different strata, thus maintaining the status of the upper strata of society at the cultural level. At the same time, the promotion of Confucian etiquette also made members of society more identify with this hierarchical order, and reduced the sense of rebellion of the lower class against the upper class.

2.2.3 Modern Theoretical References

This paper focuses on the analysis of the social class governance logic behind food culture, so while analyzing the ancient background, combined with modern theories, we can find the commonalities between the two and summarize the rules, which is also of great help for research.

This phenomenon can be analysed using Bourdieu's sociological theory of "habit". Habitual habits refer to persistent and transferable cognitive and behavioral patterns formed by individuals in the long-term process of socialization. In food culture, habits are expressed in the differences in food choices, cooking methods, and food etiquette between different classes. These differences are internalized into the "tastes" of each class through long-term social practice, and become an important symbol of social stratification. Through long-term practice, dietary differences are internalized into the "tastes" of each class, so that they reproduce social stratification, widen the gap between classes, and form a stable segregation in it.

At the same time, we can also find the contradiction between the productive forces and the distribution system. The popularization of iron tools has promoted the increase of agricultural output, but the government-run policy has led to "many bitter tools", and the upgrading of means of production has not benefited the bottom. In this way, the fruits of the development of the productive forces do not benefit the whole or the majority of the people, but in a subtle way, like a sieve through a screen, a small part is sprinkled on the lower strata that have done the most labor, while the greater part that remains in the upper strata is seized by the more comfortable upper strata[9].

In addition, the problem of solidification of the dual structure of urban and rural areas also appeared in the Han Dynasty, where urbanization gradually developed. The difference between the "burnt case" in the capital and the "endless brown clothes" in the border counties reflects the characteristics of imperial governance in which resources are concentrated in the political center. Cities have a well-developed economy and are able to provide a relatively diverse range of dietary options; On the other hand, rural residents have difficulty accessing diverse dietary resources, mostly because of the poor economic level of their regions. From the perspective of economic development, the difference between urban and rural development has increased the gap between the economic strength of the people, and gradually formed a solidified system, which has made various differences in their lifestyles; The abundance of resources in the political center contrasts sharply with the scarcity of resources in the border counties, further exacerbating the disparities between social classes. At the micro level, the differences in food culture are becoming more and more obvious[10].

3. The practical effect and historical impact of the policy

3.1 Realistic effects

In the short term, the existence of social food class is conducive to the construction of cultural identity and the consolidation of social order. Through the stratification of food culture, the rulers further consolidated the hierarchy of society. For example, "On Salt and Iron: Insufficient Dispersion" mentions: "Today's folk wine and food, the overlapping of the corpse and the brigade, the burnt case, the turtle and the carp, the muntjac eggs, the quail, the orange wolf, the mackerel, the snake-head and the snakehead, and the miscellaneous tastes of all things." This luxurious food culture not only improves the quality of life of the upper class, but also promotes the promotion of etiquette to a certain extent, so that people of different classes have differences in lifestyles and values, so as to maintain the status of the upper class of society at the cultural level. This cultural stratification makes members of society more identify with this hierarchical order, and reduces the sense of rebellion of the lower class against the upper class.

Moreover, policies such as the salt and iron government camps allowed the state to concentrate economic resources in favor of foreign wars and internal governance. This economic control not only increased state revenues, but also further strengthened centralization. Through a combination of economic and cultural means, the Han regime achieved social stability in a short period of time. The luxurious diet and exquisite etiquette of the upper class, coupled with the control of production and living resources, further consolidated the social order.

However, in the long run, there are still serious hidden dangers in this system. The government-run policy of salt and iron led to unequal distribution of resources, with the upper class monopolizing a large amount of wealth and resources, while the lower class faced resource scarcity and survival pressure. This inequality in the distribution of resources has ex-

acerbated the contradictions between social classes, and the long-term monopoly of resources and economic burdens have increased the poverty and survival pressure of the lower classes[11].

The long-term monopoly of resources and economic burdens have made the lower class more dependent on the upper class, but at the same time, it has also accumulated strong discontent. This discontent, when built up over a long period of time, can lead to social unrest. For example, the many peasant uprisings that occurred in the late Han Dynasty were largely due to the outbreak of discontent from the lower classes against the upper classes.

The government-run policy of salt and iron not only exacerbated the inequality in the distribution of resources, but also further solidified social stratification. The upper classes further consolidated their dominance through economic control and cultural stratification, resulting in reduced social mobility. This solidified social structure not only affects the development and progress of society, but also lays hidden dangers for social unrest.

4. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of “On Salt and Iron”, this paper explores the logic of political governance behind the class differences in food culture in the Han Dynasty. Through the analysis of the class differences of food culture in the Han Dynasty, we can see that food culture is not only the embodiment of material life, but also an important tool for social class governance.

From the original text of “On Salt and Iron”, it can be concluded that the rulers of the Han Dynasty constructed a governance model of “unity of ritual and law” through a combination of economic control (Legalist means) and cultural stratification (Confucian ritual system) in order to consolidate their dominance. This model of governance has achieved remarkable results in the short term, such as increasing state revenues, strengthening centralized power, promoting the promotion of rituals, and consolidating social order.

However, in the long run, this model also brings serious hidden dangers, such as unequal distribution of resources, increased social class contradictions, increased poverty and survival pressure in the lower classes, and reduced social mobility. The rulers further consolidated the hierarchy of society by controlling the distribution of important means of production and materials, as well as promoting Confucian etiquette. Although this governance model is effective in the short term, in the long run, it exacerbates social inequality, leads to the accumulation and intensification of social contradictions, and ultimately lays the groundwork for social unrest.

The research in this paper not only helps us to understand the political governance ideas of the Han Dynasty, but also provides useful reference for the development of modern society. By combining modern theories with ancient texts, we can delve deeper into the logic of social class governance and its long-term impact on social development. This research method provides a new perspective for our understanding of history and modern society, and also provides a new direction for future research.

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