

Research on the Tusi System in the Gansu-Qinghai Region during the Ming Dynasty

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Abstract: The tusi system in China evolved from the “gimi system” of the Tang and Song dynasties, representing a significant innovation in the administrative management of border ethnic minority regions during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. The Gansu-Qinghai region during the Ming dynasty was one of the ethnic areas with a relatively dense distribution of local officials and tusi rulers, whose tusi system exhibited distinct regional characteristics. The Ming Shilu contains extensive records regarding the tusi rulers in Gansu-Qinghai, and historical scholars have adopted this system as a model to study issues related to “tusi” and “local officials.”

Keywords: Ming Dynasty; Gansu-Qinghai region; Tusi system

1. Introduction

Following the end of the chaotic period at the conclusion of the Yuan Dynasty during the Ming Dynasty, a unified multi-ethnic system began to take shape in China. Within this multi-ethnic state, political, economic, and cultural development varied significantly across different regions and among various ethnic groups. Consequently, the governance policies implemented by the central authorities in frontier areas inhabited by ethnic minorities differed considerably. The Gansu-Qinghai region, situated on a plateau with rugged terrain, suffered from poor transportation conditions and significant barriers to communication, giving rise to a distinctive culture where most residents practiced Buddhism. Effectively governing such ethnically concentrated areas posed a major challenge for the Ming central rulers.

2. The Formation of the Tusi System in the Gansu-Qinghai Region

In the first year of the Hongwu era, Emperor Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang appointed Xu Da and Chang Yuchun as generals to lead northern military campaigns. The Ming forces achieved overwhelming victories wherever they advanced, compelling numerous ethnic minority leaders to surrender. The Ming army swiftly entered Tongguan, Xi'an, Lanzhou, and Lintao, stabilizing the northwest region. A Provincial Administration Office was established with Xi'an as its capital, overseeing eight prefectures, twenty-one states, and ninety-five counties; the Provincial Military Command established twenty-six garrison divisions; while the Shaanxi Provincial Military Command headquarters was located in Ganzhou, governing twelve divisions including Ganzhou, Suzhou, and Xining—covering most areas of Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. Beyond Shaanxi, the Xi'an Provincial Military Command was established in Hezhou, administering Xining, Hezhou, Taozhou, Mangzhou, as well as the Duogan and Wusizang regions under direct central authority.[1]

The Tusi system in the Gansu-Qinghai region during the Ming Dynasty comprised two main types: one under the garrison division system and another within the monastic official framework. Most garrison division positions were hereditary, making it common for local ethnic leaders to hold these roles. Although many Han officials also served in these positions, their limited local roots prevented sustained influence. Compared to Han officials, ethnic leaders enjoyed distinct advantages: familiarity with local religious traditions, command of native languages, and deep understanding of regional customs, making them ideal administrators for local governance. Furthermore, these leaders of ethnic minorities not only commanded their respective tribes but were also appointed as officials in the imperial court. This unique status, combined with the tradition of hereditary succession, made them Tusi rulers who governed specific regions over generations. The Tusi system under the Weisuo system was widely prevalent in what is now Gansu Province; [2] In the Gansu-Qinghai region, another significant form of Tusi governance alongside the Weisuo system was that under the monastic official system. Most monastic officials were appointed to key positions such as National Masters or Monastic Administrators; like local military and administrative officials, they held hereditary titles and managed major regional affairs, known as Fan Sengguan (monastic officials). [3]

3. Origins of the Tusi Authorities in Gansu and Qinghai

The establishment of Tusi authorities in Gansu and Qinghai during the Ming Dynasty began after the creation of Hezhou Guard. The primary distinction between Tusi authorities in these regions and those in southeastern Chongqing lies in their origins: while most Tusi officials in southeastern Chongqing were local indigenous leaders, those in Gansu-Qinghai had more complex backgrounds, broadly categorized into three types. The first group consisted of local clan officials appointed during the Yuan Dynasty. Most served in regional positions, possessed deep knowledge of local politics, and wielded considerable influence. After the Ming army launched western campaigns, many former Yuan officials pledged allegiance to the Ming government, who then granted them official positions as administrators in the region.[4] The second group comprised non-local officials—most not belonging to northwestern scholar-official clans but transferred here during the Yuan period before submitting to the Ming and receiving appointments. A prime example is Tuohuan, who was later appointed as Tusi and became the founder of the “Lianchenglu Tusi” lineage.[5] The third group included tribal leaders from various ethnic minorities in Gansu-Qinghai. Unlike agricultural minority groups in southeastern Chongqing, most Tusi here were itinerant tribal leaders. Additionally, to strengthen governance over Tibetan-inhabited areas, the Ming appointed respected Tibetan Buddhist monks from Anduo to serve as Tusi officials and established multiple Monastic Administration Offices, including those in Xining, Hezhou, Wuseng in Taozhou, Chongjiao Temple in Juzhou, and Hongshanbao Temple in Zhuanglang.[6]

4. Regarding the organizational structure of Tusi officials

in Gansu and Qinghai, the system was relatively uniform: the southwestern region employed both civil and military Tusi officials, while the northwestern region had only military Tusi officials.[7] Most Tusi officials in these regions were stationed within military garrisons (weisuo), whereas the remaining officials existed merely as nominal positions, primarily held by leaders of ethnic minorities. Those serving in garrisons were referred to as “weisuo officials,” while those not stationed there nominally represented the imperial court in local administration. The Ming Dynasty established numerous Tusi officials in Gansu and Qinghai, all appointed from among ethnic minority leaders; they formed the core component of the Tusi system in these regions, governing according to local customs and representing the dynasty’s grassroots governance framework.

5. The relationship between the local chieftains of Gansu and Qinghai and the central government

The tusi served not only as officials under the central dynasty but also as supreme leaders of local ethnic minority regions. They were obligated to pay tributes, report their governance performance, and comply with imperial directives. This obligation manifested in three key aspects: First, the continuous strengthening of central authority required local authorities to follow imperial orders; second, tusi regularly paid tribute and reported progress to the central government, with a portion allocated for local fiscal needs and the remainder contributed as taxes; third, while retaining their own local armies, they were required to maintain military readiness and accompany central forces on campaigns when dispatched. These principles formed the fundamental relationship between regional tusi and the central government. During the Ming Dynasty, the tusi rulers in Gansu and Qinghai demonstrated exceptional obedience and loyalty to the imperial court, ensuring these regions remained under effective central control. The harmonious relations between local tusi and the central government revealed unique characteristics that hold significant value for studying the tusi system in this region.

6. Conclusion

China has always been a multi-ethnic country, and successive rulers have proposed their own solutions to address issues in ethnic regions. The tusi system emerged as an effective governance mechanism, reaching its peak during the Ming Dynasty. Due to various influences, the tusi system in the Gansu-Qinghai region exhibited distinct regional characteristics, reflecting the diversity and flexibility of the Ming central government’s administrative framework. It consolidated the Ming government’s rule over border ethnic minority areas, further refined and supplemented the historical “Jimi System,” and provides valuable references and insights for addressing contemporary ethnic regional challenges.

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