

Between the State and the Society: the Path Selection of Response to Extreme Climate in Ancient China*

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Abstract:

Frequent extreme climate not only brought huge damages to Chinese traditional agricultural society, but also impelled the government to establish a successful disaster relief system. This paper studies the response mechanisms to extreme climate in ancient China from the state and society, which change along with the strength of national power. As a result, the national relief system becomes more perfect with social spontaneous activities being more important. No doubt, the social behavior submitted to and served to the state authority.

Key Words: Extreme Climate, Chinese Traditional Society, Disaster Relief, the State and the Society

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1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change has frequently caused or contributed to widespread destruction and dislocation on earth. Extreme climate refers to the unusual, severe and unseasonal climate in a specific period, including drought, flood, heat/cold waves, etc. China is a country that prone to natural disasters, especially flood, drought and typhoon disasters. Some major disasters were followed by large-scale peasant uprisings, which sometimes led to the collapse of regimes and dynasties. Historical statistics compiled by Deng Tuo in the 1930s show that there were a total number of 5079 disasters and famines from the Qin and Han Dynasty (221 BC-220 AD) to the Ming and Qing (1368-1911), which means the disaster and famine happened about 2.4 times per year. Thereinto, the amounts of drought and flood occurrences are 1035 and 1037, both about 0.5 times per year.¹ Although the foregoing statistics do not include all disasters in Chinese history, it cannot be disputed that China has experienced an enormous number of disasters in history.

Responding to the variable climate change and frequent extreme climate, ancient China established a successful disaster relief system. Therefore, China in 18th century was credited as welfare-state by western countries². Our study argues that the success of ancient social relief system depends not only on the support of the state, but also on the activities of the groups of clans, landlords and monks, especially in the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912). However, the previous literatures mostly focus on the study of the response of the state, such as tax reduction/exemption, food/money relieve, work relief, irrigation projects, etc.³ Little attention is paid to the efforts of the society. Therefore, this paper tries to analyze the path selection of response to extreme climate in ancient China from the perspective of state and society, in order to find out the causes of the path selection, and explore the laws of the development of Chinese history.

2. STATE OR SOCIETY: TWO CHOICES OF RESPONSE TO EXTREME CLIMATE IN ANCIENT CHINA

The relationship of the state and the society is a controversial topic in the study of ancient Chinese history. Many researchers highlight the role of local elite group in the operation of Chinese Empire. At the beginning of 21st century, Max Weber, the German economist and sociologist,

¹ Deng Tuo 鄧拓, *History of Chinese Famine 中國救荒史*, (Beijing, 1937).

² Will, P. and Wong, R. B., *Nourish the People: The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650-1850*, (Ann Arbor, 1991).

³ See Chen Yexin 陳業新, *Study of the Nature Disaster and the Society of Han Dynasty 災害與兩漢社會研究*, (2004). Lei Wen 雷聞, "Pray, Between the Prayer for Rains and the Society of Tang Dynasty" 祈雨與唐代社會, *Chinese Studies 國學研究*, 8 (2001), 245-289. Lin Juan 林涓, "Prayer for Rains and its Regional Differences: A Preliminary Survey on the Custom of the Jiangnan Delta during the Ming and Qing Dynasties" 祈雨習俗及其地域差異——以傳統社會後期的江南地區為中心, *Collections of Essays on Chinese Historical Geography 中國歷史地理論叢*, 1 (2003), 67-75. Yan Shoucheng and Li Jun 閻守誠和李軍, "The Measure of 'Yin Zai Lu Qiu' in the Tang Dynasty" 唐代的因災慮因, *Journal of Shanxi University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 山西大學學報(哲社版), 1 (2004), 103-107. Li Jun 李軍, "The Emperor's 'Yin Zai Qiu Yan' in Tang Dynasty" 論唐代帝王的因災求言, *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)* 首都師範大學學報(哲社版), 1 (2006), 21-25. An Deming 安德明, *The Particular Dialogues between Heaven and Human 天人之際的非常對話*, (Beijing, 2003).

proposed the limited bureaucracy theory, advocating that the governing power of imperial state is restricted to urban and its surrounding area.⁴ William J. Goode, the American sociologist, had the same idea that the administrative machinery of imperial state did not permeate to the rural area, which was governed by clan forces.⁵ Another American scholar, Gillbert Rozman, pointed out that clans and imperial state were the two endpoints of governing, and there was no other intermediary formations which have political functions between them.⁶ Chinese scholar Fei Xiaotong presented that there were two dimensional powers constituting the governing system: one was the imperial power which was downward, the other was the power of clans and landlords which was upward. These two powers worked parallelly, and the latter played a primary role in rural governance. This pattern strengthened the constraint of local elite's stratum, and weakened the buffering effect of the institution between state and society.⁷

In ancient Chinese society, state and its administrative system including county-level regime, and home-town organization, provided a guarantee for rural fundamental order, such as legal system, river management, social security, famine relief, etc. In fact, the central power of an actual weak nation was difficult to spread to rural area effectively. Therefore, it is inevitable that rural non-governmental organizations based on clans would play an important role in rural governance. Rural geopolitical and blood lineage organizations charactering as autonomy gradually highlighted their importance. And one of the most important roles of clan-based rural governance was providing public goods related to farming and living which were crucial to improve the efficiency of agriculture and maintain the agricultural production.⁸

The causes of state's permission of society self-governance by common law are that the state did not intend to provide a set of laws, institutions and organizations needed by society's daily life.⁹ Specific to the response to extreme climate, collapse of moral and economy would take place without reliefs from clans and religions, ethical and ideological constraints from the society, which will increase the cost of the government's disaster relief and must face the danger of social collapse.¹⁰ Other Historian, such as Li Wenzhi, also implied that the clan relief had a positive effect on the maintenance of the national legal system and social order.¹¹ Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen defined the spontaneous relief of society generated by famine as the informal social

⁴ Weber, M., *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, (New York, 1951).

⁵ Goode, W. J., *The family*, (New Jersey, 1982).

⁶ Rozman, G., *The Modernization of China*, (New York, 1981).

⁷ Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, *From the Soil, The Institutions for Reproduction 鄉土中國 生育制度*, (Beijing, 1998). Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, *Rural recovery 鄉土重建*, in Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, *Collected works of Fei Xiaotong 費孝通選集*, (Tianjin, 1988).

⁸ He Xuefeng 賀雪峰, "The Innate Village Order in Traditional Chinese Society" 中國傳統社會的內生村莊秩序, *Journal of Literature 文史哲, History and Philosophy*, 4 (2006) 150-155.

⁹ Liang Yeping 梁治平, "Common law, society and country" 習慣法、社會與國家, *Dushu 讀書*, 9 (1996), 45-55.

¹⁰ Gamsey, P., *Famine in History*, in Janine Bourriau (ed.), *Understanding Catastrophe*, (Cambridge, 1992).

¹¹ Li Wenzhi and Jiang Taixin 李文治和江太新, *Chinese Clan System and Zu-Tian 中國宗法宗族制和族田義莊*, (Beijing, 2000).

safety system, which was meritorious in preventing rural communities controlled by unreliable foreign aid.¹²

The relief activities of society, such as the clan and the gentry, were usually assisted and supported by local government in ancient China. The system of *conferring honour on Yimin* (義民旌表) established in the Ming Dynasty is a formal encouragement and recognition of society relief by formal government system. *Yicang* (義倉) which was one of the important relief activities of society could hardly be operated without the support and supervision of the state. On the one hand, the supervision of the state could help county government know the grain warehouse and relief situations timely for better macro-control. On the other hand, the supervision could minimize the chance of bending the law for personal gain and engaging in fraud.¹³ Chen Hua considered that the intervention of public authorities could help non-governmental relief organizations such as *Pujitang* (普濟堂) to solve the disputes of real estate, and numerous, continuous and stable fund support from the state solved the shortage of funds of society in the Qing Dynasty.¹⁴ Because of the characteristics of dispersion, independence, shaky physical foundation, locality, etc., the relief activities of society cannot long sustain, and was paralyzed when facing the long-duration, large-scale nature disasters. Xia Mingfang pointed out that even in *Jiangnan* Delta where the relief activities of local non-governmental organizations were well-developed, the scope of their funds and activities were limited to local area. Not until in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, relief funds of *Jiangnan* Delta were used in other regions.¹⁵ Therefore, large scale relief activities must depend on the force of the state.

Religious relief organizations also played an important role in Chinese traditional society, which received lots of attention of the state. In order to make sure the relief activities successfully and efficiently, officers were appointed to supervise these organizations. There was a bottom line held by the state. Once the activities of society were close to or beyond the bottom line, the activities would be forced to cancel. Therefore, the development of religious relief organizations not only showed their moral superiority, but implied the incompetence of the state.¹⁶ Because of

¹² Dr èze, J. and Sen, A., *Hunger and Public Action*, (Oxford, 2006).

¹³ Zhu Xi, one scholar of Song Dynasty, expounded the details of the way of state's intervention to the society's grain reserves in "Issues of Shecang". See Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Collected Works of Zhu Xi* 晦庵先生朱文公文集, Vol.99, (Beijing, 2006).

¹⁴ Chen Hua 陳樺, "Modern Transformation of Succor in Chinese History" 中國社會救助活動的近代轉型, *Academic Monthly* 學術月刊, 12 (2007), 120-128. However, the intervention of state could bring new problems such as the impact of officials' preferences. For example, Li Jinming pointed that the relief funds would decrease when the official who is keen to relief service. See Li Jinming 李瑾明, "The Operation of Social Relief System and State Power in Song Dynasty" 宋代社會救濟制度的運作和國家權力, *Study of Chinese History* 中國史研究, 3 (2005), 125-136.

¹⁵ Xia Mingfang 夏明方, "Chinese Disaster Relief in Perspective of History" 歷史視野下的"中國式救災", *China Reading Weekly* 中華讀書報, (2010), December 15.

¹⁶ Liang Qizi 梁其姿, *Charity and Moralization* 施善與教化, (Shijiazhuang, 2001).

the idea of Chinese traditional political philosophy that the state had the property of state, it was considered that the state should be the primary, even the exclusive supplier of social welfare.

Based on the above analysis, there are two path selections of response to nature disasters caused by extreme climate in ancient China -- one is the state, the other is the society. The state reliefs refer to a series of formal institutions formed gradually by the Chinese Empire rulers reacting to extreme climate disasters, including economic relief and *exorcising disasters institution*(禳弭制度).¹⁷ Economic relief refers to the institution based on the imperial state's decrees and policies of famine relief which was the duties of all officials. *Exorcising disasters institution* is the institution formed by some supernatural pray of rulers in order to prevent and eliminate nature disasters.¹⁸ The establishment and implementation of the state relief played an important role in the stability and development of ancient China society, and is a political and economic treasure of Chinese traditional culture.

The society relief refers to a series of self-relief and mutual-aid institutions formed gradually by society, including local self-relief and disaster invocation. The local self-relief contains specific measures of microscopic household disaster preventions and macroscopic social relief and daily conduct norm including village rules, ethics propaganda, etc. The relief activities of society are complements of the state relief, playing a positive role in preventing nature disasters and maintaining social stability. Besides, the society relief activities are usually self-aid behaviors constraint by moral principles, resulting in low relief costs for government. Considering the victims liquidity preference, victims would swarm into cities for the relief of the state after nature disasters. But in remote rural areas, victims depended more on mutual aid between clans for lacking effective aid from the state.

3. TRENDS AND CAUSES OF PATH SELECTIONS RESPONDING TO EXTREME CLIMATE IN ANCIENT CHINA

Both the state and the society played an important role in responding to extreme climate disasters, forming two mutually exclusive paths. However, the two paths showed different changing trends accompanied with the strength of centralized authority and financial resources in the history.

The state always served as a leading role in responding to extreme climate with more concrete response measures. Take the tax reduction/exemption policy for instance, there was no fixed standards before Tang Dynasty. The state decreed temporary standards according to the practical conditions, which was detrimental to timely calamity relief. However, as Table 1 shows that, along with the improvement of social system, the tax reduction/exemption policy became

¹⁷ Li Jun and Hu Peng 李軍和胡鵬, "Discussion on the Choices and Causes of Institutions for Disaster Relief Operations in Chinese Traditional Society" 中國傳統社會救災模式選擇及原因探討, *Agriculture History of China* 中國農史, 1 (2014), 67-75.

¹⁸ Duan Wei 段偉, "A Study of the Institution of Dispelling Disasters through Sacrifice in Han Dynasty" 迷信與理性: 漢代禳災制度初探, *Journal of Shanxi University(Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* 山西大學學報(哲社版), 6 (2008), 70-75.

institutionalized and more detailed, avoiding unnecessary loss costs caused by institutional sluggish. So was the system of reporting disasters. The time limit and regional division of the reporting system became more and more detailed. In Qin Dynasty, the farming laws ruled that local officials should faithfully and timely report the situations of drought, flood, locust plague, etc., but did not set up the specific time and steps. The reporting steps were established in Tang Dynasty. At that time, the township chief called *Lizheng* (裡正) was the junior official being in charge of household registration, farming exhortation and order maintenance. He must report to the county magistrate called *Xianling* (縣令) who was in charge of county's farming and financial issues. After standardizing the degree of crop failure in person, *Xianling* would report the situations of disaster to provincial officials. In the early Song Dynasty, summer disasters should be reported before the end of April; autumn disasters should be reported before the end of July; southern district should report disasters before the end of August.¹⁹ The reporting steps were similar to the Tang dynasty. The primary data of disasters would be reported to and been graded by county magistrate, then the county magistrate reported the situations of disasters to provincial officials who reexamined the content. Finally the situations of disasters were collected and reported to the state. In the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Hongzhi (1470-1505) stipulated the reporting deadlines of summer and autumn disasters to be the end of June and September. Emperor Wanli (1563—1620) changed the deadlines into May and July in hinterland, and July and October in borderland. In the Qing Dynasty, the reporting deadlines of summer and autumn disasters were the end of June and September. People who procrastinated or misrepresented the disaster situations would be punished. Besides, in the Qing Dynasty, there was a periodical reporting institution about precipitation, harvest and food price. Since Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722), local officials were required to report the situation of local precipitation and food price twice a year usually in summer and autumn. Based on the report data, the Emperor could judge the basic economic situation of the country. Therefore, the changes of reporting system became more scientific and might reduce the negative effects of information asymmetry.

Table 1 Standards of Tax Reduction/Exemption in Ancient China

Time	Standards of Tax Reduction/Exemption
Emperor Xuan of Han (BC91-BC48)	drought, exempt farm rent and other levies
Emperor Cheng of Han (BC33-BC7)	Harvest reduction >40%, exempt farm rent
Emperor Cheng of Han (BC7-BC1)	harvest reduction >40% and family property < 100 000 Guan, exempt farm rent and other levies
Emperor Gaozu of Tang (618-626)	harvest reduction >40%, exempt farm rent; harvest reduction >60%, exempt textile tax; exempt levies and labour rent

¹⁹The dates presented in this thesis are according to the Chinese traditional lunar calendar.

Emperor Hongzhi of Ming (1487-1505)	100% harvest reduction, 70% tax reduction; 90% harvest reduction, 60% tax reduction...40% harvest reduction, 10% tax reduction
Emperor Shunzhi of Qing (1643-1661)	80-100% harvest reduction, 30% tax reduction; 50-70% harvest reduction, 20% tax reduction; 40% harvest reduction, 10% tax reduction
Emperor Kangxi of Qing (1661-1722)	90-100% harvest reduction, 30% tax reduction; 70-80% harvest reduction, 30% tax reduction; 60% harvest reduction, 10% tax reduction
Emperor Yongzheng of Qing (1722-1735)	100% harvest reduction, 70% tax reduction; 90% harvest reduction, 60% tax reduction; 80% harvest reduction, 40% tax reduction; 70% harvest reduction, 20% tax reduction; 60% harvest reduction, 10% tax reduction
Emperor Qianlong of Qing (1735-1795)	100% harvest reduction, 70% tax reduction; 90% harvest reduction, 60% tax reduction; 80% harvest reduction, 40% tax reduction; 70% harvest reduction, 20% tax reduction; 50-60% harvest reduction, 10% tax reduction

Source: Li Jun 李軍, *Disaster Relief of Chinese Traditional Society: Supply, Retardation and Evolution* 中國傳統社會的救災——供給、阻滯與演進, (Beijing, 2011), 130-131.

From the standpoint of the society relief, the role of spontaneous of non-governmental organizations to extreme climate became important increasingly, especially along with the rise of rich class, the increasingly close relationship of clan promoted by neo-Confucianism of Song and Ming dynasties and the distress of national financial resources. Japanese scholar Umehara Kaoru found out that the non-governmental relief organizations such as *Juyangyuan*(居養院) thrived just at the time when Cai Jing(1047-1126) usurped authority and the political situation was unrest in the period of Emperor Huizong(1082-1135) of the Song Dynasty.²⁰ Chen confirmed that the Qing imperial state encouraged and supported the relief activities of the society in consideration of its own limits on relief. Non-governmental organizations became the dominant player in work-relief system which was the main disaster relief system.²¹Proportion of non-governmental organizations' participation of water conservancy projects increased gradually. As shown in Figure 1, non-governmental organizations began to widely participate in the establishment of water conservancy projects after the Song Dynasty. The number of water conservancy projects carried out by non-governmental organizations accounted for more than 60% of the number of official projects. Previous studies showed that the rich class in the Song dynasty was involved in all aspects of disaster relief, replacing the position and role of the state in disaster relief to a large extent. As a result, the disaster relief characterized in village units, which was compensated for the state relief as well as reduced the disequilibrium of food

²⁰ Umehara, K. 梅元鬱, "Relief Institution in Song Dynasty" 宋代の救済制度——都市の社會史によせて一, in Nakamura (ed.) 中村賢二郎, *Social History of Cities Kenjiro Minervashobo* 都市の社會史, (Tyoto, 1983).

²¹ Chen Hua, pp. 120-128.

acquisition of villagers.²² Since then, *Yizhuang* (義莊) and non-governmental relief organizations such as *Pujitang*, *Huiminju* (惠民局), etc., based on clans achieved rapid development. In the mid-19th century, especially after the flood in 1849, the relief activities of the society dominated in disaster relief, while the state changed as an initiator, award-giver and sponsor.²³

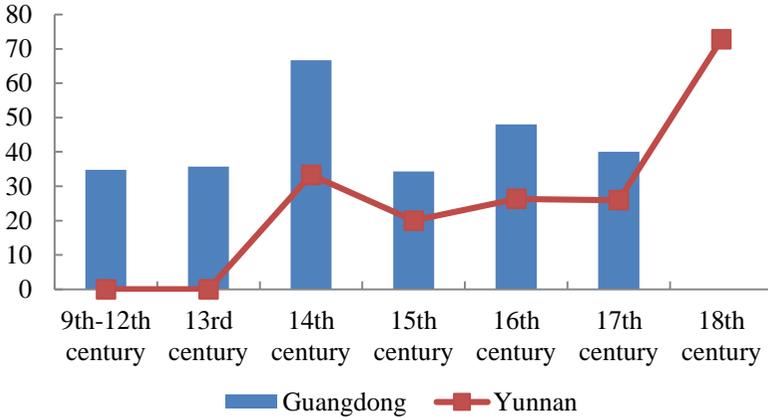


Figure 1 Proportion of Number of Water Conservancy Projects Carried out by Non-governmental Organizations in Guangdong and Yunnan from the 9th to 19th century

Source: Perkins, D., *Agricultural Development in China 1368-1968*, (Edinburgh, 1969),

Appendix 9.

The will of rulers that mainly influenced by the preference of physiocracy and ideology of *heaven-human interaction* (天人感應) was the determinant of the path selection of response to extreme climate in ancient China. With the preference of physiocracy, rulers believed that all real income originated from agriculture. And the ideology of *heaven-human interaction* could induce uncertainty that the rulers tried their best to avoid. Therefore, the relief activities of the society were allowed to exist. But when the personal interests of rulers were faced with the risk of being violated, the rulers would not hesitate to repress the activities of the society, even though the repression might reduce the social welfare.

Figure 2 illustrates the effect of institution on the state and the society clearly. The abscissa axis denotes the society, and the ordinate axis presents the state. The ordinate value of point *P* denotes

²² Lin Wenxun and Gu Gengyou 林文勳和穀更有, *Rural Social Powers and Local Governing* 唐宋鄉村社會力量與基層控制, (Kunming, 2005). Gernet, J., *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, (New York, 1998).

²³ Guo Jianming 郭劍鳴, “Public Budget Restriction Mechanism Construction and China Anti-corruption Mode Improvement” 試析晚清災疫防治中以紳士為仲介的政治整合模式, *CASS Journal of Political Science* 政治學研究, 3 (2008), 116-126.

institution. The circle denotes operation rules. The shaded area which is composed of the abscissa, ordinate and P denotes the equilibrium degree of interactions between the state and the society. The contradictory interaction between the state and the society must follow a constraint rule (the circle), which is reflected by the motion of point P . The law of the motion of point P is as follows: when point P moves close to the ordinate, it indicates that the power of the state becomes strong enough to control the function of society and ensure the operation of institution; otherwise, when point P moves far away from the ordinate, it means that the power of the state becomes weak resulting in the weakness of society control and the idleness or even failure of the institution. The maximum shaded area stands for the maximum balance of the power of the state and the society. This optimal point is also the most efficient institutional arrangement of responses to extreme climate.

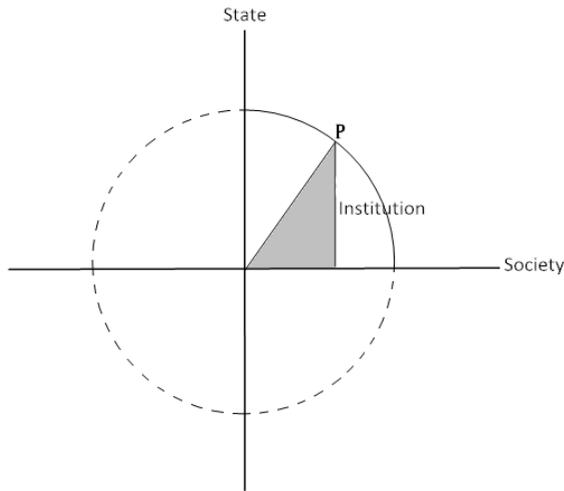


Figure 2 The Interactions of State-Institution-Society

4. CONCLUSION

The state and the society are interdependent and synergetic in extreme climate disaster reliefs in ancient China. The autonomous relief activities of the society reduced the cost of national political and economic operation, which were preserved and supported by the state. But there was a bottom line held by the state that the society cannot cross. The ethics principles and village rules should run under the formal framework of national laws and regulations enacted by the state. All the activities of the society were subjected to the state's ideology of the whole china unification which was decided by the idiosyncrasy of the state's property of the state.

The relief activities of the state to extreme climate in ancient China are low-efficient or even inefficient from the modern scientific view. But the institutions can maximize the interests of

rulers, and intensify the idea of common domination that “everywhere under heaven, belongs to the emperor; all the land are the emperor’s servants”. Therefore, the activities of the state were preserved by laws and regulations, especially the institution of exorcising disasters. Even the economic institutions of disaster relief are just symbolic in most cases. For example, Yu found out that the implementation of food price control policy had significant limitations. It was nothing but a symbolic gesture of the state to show its concern to famine victims.²⁴ And this is perhaps one of the major causes for the development of society reliefs in the late empires.

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²⁴ Yu Yaohua 余耀華, *A History of Prices in China* 中國價格史, (Beijing, 2000).

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