



Political Intervention and Class Control in the Medium Term of Chinese Feudal Society: Analysis of Political and Social Ideas of Reforms of Wang An-shi

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Abstract

Starting from the political ideas of the reforms of Wang An-shi, the political and social ideas of the medium term of Chinese feudal society are studied in the article. The political ideas of the reforms of Wang An-shi contained the political meanings such as the humanism and the pragmatism, which paid attention to the public feelings and opinions, and alleged putting them into social practice. The reforms of Wang An-shi presented the ideas of political intervention surrounding the economic control in the medium term of Chinese feudal society and establishing economic entities to strengthening the national management. In addition, the strategy of political intervention in the reforms of Wang An-shi largely influenced the macro social stratification in the medium term of Chinese feudal society, and it emphasized to restrain the declining tendency of the high class expanding, the middle class shrinking and the low class collapsing, and kept the stable social structure by recovering the basically harmonious proportion of these three hierarchies.

Keywords: Political meanings, Government intervention, Stratification control, Social structure

The reforms of Wang An-shi happened in the medium term of Chinese feudal society, and this term was stable on the surface, but in crisis in deed. Wang An-shi was called as "the reformer in the 11th century" by Lenin, because he saw the crisis hiding in the stable society, and started and charged comprehensive reform with drastic and deep influences, and his many ideas with insights were on strategic layer, so he deserved that reputation. To reasonably evaluate the social ideas needs certain judgment standards. Any social idea was the product of certain social and historical conditions, and it was influenced by the material production level, the economic base, the superstructure and even the situation of the society. The reforms of Wang An-shi happened in the stable term of Chinese feudal society, so its basic spirit was certainly to maintain the feudal system of the time and adapt the development of the social situation. Reasonable social ideas have common characters or common measurement standards, i.e. they should accord with the social and historical conditions and the tendency of social development and advancement of the time. Only according with the social and historical conditions of the time, they could be implemented in the practice, which is called as the standard of feasibility. And only according with the tendency of social development and advancement of the time, they can suit with the tide of historical development, which is called as the standard of advancement. Here, the historical scene and field of "of the time" is particularly emphasized, because the feasibility and advancement are relative, and they are meaningful only relating with the social and historical situation of the time, because the concrete tendencies of social status and development in different historical terms are different. To study the political and social ideas of the ancient time, the thinking mode of "historical standard" is necessary, only the feasibility and advancement in concrete scene and field are meaningful for the present society.

Starting from the political ideas of the reforms of Wang An-shi, taking the feasibility and advancement as the standards, the reform ideas including the spirit, methods and measures of managing state affairs, and the influences on the society of the time are main analyzed. There are many researches about its limitations, so they are not mainly discussed in the article. Though the reforms of Wang An-shi included the political measures, but they were very limited, such as to

strengthen the centralized state power and the absolute monarchy, centralizing the local powers to the central government, and decentralizing the power of the central government to balance each other. That was the main rhythm of that times, though this system brought many malpractices, but Wang An-shi only adjusted the local parts a little. Though Wang An-shi had not broken the instinct feudal system, but he had implemented maximum reforms under the premise of keeping the basic system, which largely and deeply influenced the whole social structure and the social status.

1. Political meanings of humanism and pragmatism

Wang An-shi lived in the times of Song Ren Zong, Song Ying Zong and Song Shen Zong, and the Song Dynasty at that time accumulated poorness and weakness, and “can not but worry about the society in the interior of the empire, and foreign aggressions in the exterior (Wang, 1974)”, and the accumulated abuses of the society had not been neglected, so the voices of reforms ran up increasingly, and occupied the windward. However, the opinions how to reform were different, for example, Ou Yangxiu emphasized the “official governing” in his “New Deal of Qing Li”, and Li Gou claimed to recover the Jing Tian system, and Su Shi claimed savings, averaging registered permanent residence and checking the farmland contracts. Being different with others’ reforms, Wang An-shi’s reform ideas had significant self-characters, and it embodied the simple and unsophisticated political ideas of humanism and pragmatism.

Wang An-shi first demonstrated the idea of “everything can change it in ten thousands forms”, and obtained the conclusion, i.e. the social development was new things replaced old things, so the reforms were imperative under the situation. For the problem how to reform, he claimed respecting but not recovering the ancient system, which could not only achieve the intention of the reforms, but try to obtain the supports of the ancient-recovering group and the reform group. He pointed out that the cause that Song dynasty was poor and weak was that the laws and systems were neglected, and further emphasized that “the present laws and systems have not accorded with the laws and systems of ancient emperors (Wang, 1974)”, so it was necessary to reform the present laws and systems. And he confirmed the direction and principals of the reforms, i.e. “even the stupid persons who want to change the laws of ancient emperor a little will fell very difficult”, and “the reform needs only imitating the ideas of the ancient laws and systems (Wang, 1974)”. That means the reforms were not to recover the concrete laws and systems of ancient emperors, but imitate and follow the ideas of the ancient laws and systems, because the ancient situation was different with the present problems. As for who was the ancient emperor and what were the ideas of ancient emperors’ ideas, he didn’t point out, but that was tacit. To enrich the country and strengthen arms, relax conflicts and maintain the social order and feudal governance was the laws and systems of ancient emperor in fact. Actually, that was a kind of ideal spirit with strong power in people’s heart. The reform opinion of “imitating the ideas of the ancient laws and systems” made the reforms to possess large space. On the one hand, the camouflage of “imitating the ideas of the ancient laws and systems” could deal with the ancient-recovering group and the old school to reduce the resistance of reforms, and on the other hand, it could eliminate the worries of recovering ancient laws and systems, and give the green light to the reforms. Though the function of the camouflage is very limited, but it embodied the flexibility of the reforms of Wang An-shi, i.e. it was good at striving for supports and reducing resistances as possible.

The ideas of the reforms of Wang An-shi had not possessed the creative epoch-making meanings, which might be related with the times that Wang An-shi lived. But he absolutely didn’t copy the ideas and opinions of the ancient people, and “claim his opinions based on others”, and extensively absorbed and flexibly utilized the ideas and experiences in former reform practices to make his reform idea possess the characters of humanism and pragmatism particularly.

1.1 Humanism

Wang An-shi’s political philosophical ideas emphasized the factor of human being, artificial power, acquired learning and the function of human subjective initiative, which is the philosophical base of his humanism. In the “*Ten Thousands Words Submitting to the Emperor*”, he spent large numbers of length to discuss his ideas of “teaching, cultivating, allowing and adopting”, which could indicate his emphasis of talents. For the reforms, “proper talents will help to implement it, and improper talents will harm it largely (Wang, 1974)”. In fact, the reforms failed then, and except for the reforms offended the benefits of big landholders and big bureaucrats, improper bureaucracy was an important factor. His humanism was mainly embodied in the talents construction and the official governance, but it over emphasized the function of the emperor, but neglected the function of common people, which was decided by the benefit group which he was in. Though his ideas of humanism is widely divergent with modern people-oriented ideas, but following characters still have important values.

(1) Emphasizing officials’ benefits and individual characters. “The ancient emperors must appoint officials according to their talents and the actual situation (Wang, 1974)”. Though he didn’t deny the obligation between emperor and officials, but affirm the necessity and rationality of the obligation between emperor and officials, but he opposed to blindly enslave officials by virtue of the obligation between emperor and officials. Wang An-shi had assumed the office of local government for long, and he deeply felt the difficulties and abuses of officials under the obligation of emperor and officials under absolute allegiance. Only the emperor considered officials individuality, talents and the situation which they were in to appoint officials and properly cared their benefits and demands, he could obtain the optimal effects. Or

else, “officials will overtly agree but covertly oppose (Wang, 1974)”. Wang An-shi also thought that over low salaries would increase the corruptions. Therefore, he claimed to increase salaries to make it form a system, and punish the luxury behaviors and malfasants at the same time. Though the increase of salaries could not solve the problem in deed, but to change the situation that middle and low-class officials’ too low incomes, increase the incomes in the system, and try to reduce the incomes out of the system as possible, and restrain the luxury tide, still has important practical meanings.

(2) Emphasizing the exertion of officials’ subjective initiative. He said that “doesn’t worry about officials don’t do it, but worry about they can not do it, and doesn’t worry about officials can not do it, but worry about they can not make great efforts (Wang, 1974)”. He emphasized to encourage officials, and though the measure had deep color of material gains, but the idea to inspire officials’ enthusiasms was feasible. In addition, he opposed that “the emperor limits officials by laws for all things (Wang, 1974)”, and too many controls would limit officials’ talents. He thought the post of officials should be professional, and the term of officials should be long, which could exert and identify officials’ real talents. Short term and unprofessional post would induce many abuses, for example, the official who just understood the situation and his work only entered into the route was transferred to another post, so his talents would not be embodied, and the normal development of work would be interrupted. In the Northern Song Dynasty that the social division was not developed, he had put forward that the post should be professional and the term should be long, which was still very important in modern society. Wang An-shi dared to emphasize officials’ benefits, demands and personality, and though he could not awake the people under the absolute regality, but his opinions had infused fresh air into the feudal times with secret authority, though that was not his original idea.

(3) Emphasizing the public feelings and public opinions. For the talent selection, he required considering the public evaluation, and he agreed to “the ancient selected talents from in the public, and certainly considered the public’s opinions (Wang, 1974)”. And he was good at experiencing and observing public opinions and he liked to survey in the public among women, farmers and artisans who other scholar-bureaucrats neglected in the reforms. Wang An-shi thought that the political reform should take improving people’s survival situation as one of starts, i.e. “reforming according to the situation and human troubles (Ma, 1984, P.100)”, and the situation was to consider the feasibility of the reforms, and the human troubles could be regarded as the advancement standard of the reforms.

In human society, the human being is the principal part which is the most active power. In the human-governed society, the factor of human is the extreme important, and the talents are related with the stability of the society and the country, and the public feelings and opinions are also should be considered by the governor, and “waters can carry the boat and cover the boat”, which is the basic cause that Wang An-shi generated his ideas. Even in the days emphasizing the legal governance, the factor of human still is one of central factors, and the establishment and implementation of all laws and systems can not leave human being, and human is the software which has infinite flexibility. In the human-governed society without complete laws, there were many abuses, but in the legal governance society where the factor of human is neglected and human benefits and common demands can not be fulfilled, there are many abuses too. In different times, the humanisms of different hierarchies would be different, but they have common characters, so Wang An-shi’s ideas of humanism might contain many bureaucratic components of the time, but they still can be used as references.

1.2 Pragmatism

The other political philosophical idea of Wang An-shi is the pragmatism. Wang An-shi gave emphasis to solve the problems from the sources, and the working style dealing with concrete matters relating to works. This kind of idea is very rare in the feudal society, and it is active for the development of economy, the flourish of the society and the improvement of people’s life, and to emphasize the sources and pursuing long-term strategy is also the principles which should be followed.

(1) Giving emphasis to solve problems from sources. Wang An-shi was a far-sighted ideologist and politician in feudal scholar-bureaucrats. In his poem, he said that “the person who is on the top position will be shaded by could drifts”. In his youth, he traveled with his farther who assumed the office of the local government, and he subsequently assumed local official, and he cared about people, and deeply saw the social abuses. “The person who is good at governing the whole country must establish long-term strategies and future achievements (Wang, 1974)”, that was consistent with his idea solving problems from sources. To solve problems from sources needs foresights and long term, not narrow and shallow sights. He emphasized expanding financial sources, rising productions, and developing natural resources, and he opposed blindly clawing, and he thought that saving expenses was not the real method to solve the financial problem, though he also opposed wastes. “The person who is rich will support his country, and the country which is rich will support the society, and who want to enrich the society will support the nature (Wang, 1974)”, which undoubtedly knocked the alarm to the cruel officials, and expostulated with the emperor to give emphasis to production and solve problems from sources, and offered new ideas for enriching the country. In the reforms, the Qing Miao Laws, the Recruiting Laws and the Farmland Water Conservancy Laws all directly or indirectly embodied the idea of emphasizing sources and production.

(2) Doing concrete matters. The spirit of doing concrete matters was widely embodied in the reform ideas and behaviors of Wang An-shi. The governmental institution had not be reformed largely, and old institutions had not be abolished for a great lot, and many of them were endowed new functions, and the powers of various departments were adjusted properly to make them serve for the reforms, at least they would not block the implementations of new laws. Though that way was not thorough and optimal for the push of the new laws, but it was the feasible method when the conservative group strongly opposed the reforms, which had embodied the uniform of the spirit of doing concrete matters and the flexibility. For the education, Wang An-shi thought that the education contents should include shooting, defending and other military items, and the education should cultivate the talents who governed the country, not those bookworms without strategies. Though he completely politicized the educational functions, and his cognitions of education was partial and limited in times and class, but it was still advanced to sustain that the education should do concrete matters. In the style of writing, he thought that the articles should contain thinking contents and reasons, and accord with the practice, and he opposed and hated the style of writing that “the phraseologies don’t accord with the ration, and the rations don’t accord with matters. The literates take rare accumulation and old stories as the knowledge, and take the elaborated sentences as the fresh and extractive learning (Wang, 1974)”. As a feudal scholar-bureaucrat, Wang An-shi could do concrete matters, the present people should more get rid of floating style, and the society should establish the mechanism to encourage doing concrete matters and limiting floating behaviors.

2. Political intervention in the economic control

Feudal countries had adjusted and controlled the economy from the ancient times, such as encouraging the farming and fighting, reducing taxes and establishing monopolization system. Wang An-shi’s ideas of economic control combined with restraining merger and adjusting interior benefits in the landed class. The economic control idea in the feudal times is different with modern idea whether from intention to content, or from width to depth, but it is worthy to analysis. Wang An-shi’s economic control idea represented the political intervention in the medium term of Chinese feudal society.

Merger was the necessary product of the feudal society, and this problem could not be solved essentially in the stage of the feudal society and in the feudal system. So any reform and measurement could only release the merger, and there were better projects in various projects, but there was not the best method. The feudal government could publicly forbid the merger, but this method was difficult to be implemented, and it was opposed largely because it tried to recover the past systems before Song Dynasty, and the history facts also proved that this method was not feasible, especially when the influence of big landowners expanded, and the decree of forbidding merger would be blank. Wang An-shi adopted the indirect merger restraining method to weaken the economic strength of big landowners, and break the monopolization of big landowners and gamblers, and make farmers to avoid abnormal production or minatory poor status. This method could more approach the sources, and the resistances were relatively small, which was smarter than simple forbidding decree.

The Recruiting Laws and the Farmland Averaging Tax Laws were to restrain the merger and increase the incomes of the government by the tax reforms, and their starts were advanced undoubtedly. These two laws took the property and the lands as main taxing standard to increase big bureaucrats and big landowners’ tax burdens, and reduce middle and small landowners and kulaks’ burdens and increase national financial incomes, and adjust the redistribution of national incomes. The essential of this idea was to reform the past unreasonable tax system, and reconfirm the taxation standard and the assuming proportion of various classes. Though farmers’ burden was still heavy, but the government incomes still increased largely when the farmer’s tax burden had achieved the limit, and most of increases came from landowners, so the reforms successfully restrain big landowners and big bureaucrats, which was marvelous in that times.

As to the Qing Miao Laws and the Market Trading Laws, in the Song Dynasty, the dear money was rampant, and the gambles prevailed, and the governments, farms and hucksters were casualties. The dear money happened when farmers’ survival was threatened seriously, and the debtors adhered with big landowners, big bureaucrats and big businessmen, so this trading behavior happened under the unequal and involuntary conditions, and farmers paid heavy costs which didn’t accord with economic rules, and bankrupted finally. Bid businessmen monopolized the market by virtue of their own economic strength and privilege to obtain large profits and strike small businessmen. Under this situation, the governmental intervention on the dear money and gamble behaviors was very necessary. In the reforms, the government implemented the Qing Miao Laws and the Market Trading Laws and established corresponding institutions such as the market trading department. But these institutions were not only the management institutions but economic entities, and they not only managed the economy but engaged concrete economic affairs. This system discounted the implementation effects of the Qing Miao Laws and the Market Trading Laws, and when the relative officials were not proper, the implementations even would break the initial intention, for example, some officials made bold to increase interests when the government provided loans or forced to trade and gain private benefits by virtue of the Market Trading Laws. In the middle term of the Song Dynasty, though the commercial economy developed to some extent, but it had not

formed complete market mechanism, and it was impossible to cultivate economic entities and strengths outside the government to restrain the dear money and gamblers. The simply compulsory management of the government could only obtain a few effects, and the costs were large. So it was a mode to establish the economic entity by the government, and if the economic management function could be divided with the economic entity, the effect would be better when the supervision mechanism was perfect. However, the costs of political intervention always exist, and the cost of good political intervention would be relatively small.

The economic control is the idea and strategy to discuss the political intervention from measures and modes. But at that time, the political intervention in the economic control would largely influence the social stratification in the middle term of Chinese feudal society. To some extent, Wang An-shi's ideas about the reforms made epochal contributions to the class control and harmony of the time, which were analyzed and discussed as follows.

3. Social stratification and class control

The feudal society possesses the pyramid stratification of the society with strict classes, and the populations in various classes increase with the decrease of statuses, i.e. the class in the bottom layer has more population, so under low social productivity, the luxury life of the high class can be sustained and the social could be basically stable. In Max Weber's stratification standard, according to three standards such as economy (including the occupation of production materials, the distribution of property, and the market opportunity), reputation (the immaterial influences confirmed by the evaluation mode cognized by the public), and power (the ability to dominant others for realizing his own wills and neglecting others' wills) (Max, 2005, P.108), the whole society could be divided into three classes, i.e. the high class, the middle class and the low class. In the Song Dynasty which was in the middle term of Chinese feudal society, the social structure and the system arrangement were basically stable, and these three standards were highly superposed, and one person was basically consistent in economy, reputation and power, and various standards could be translated each other. Rich persons could buy the position of officer and obtain power and reputation, and officials could have privilege and strength to buy lands and obtain economic incomes and reputation.

In the society of North Song Dynasty, the high class included big bureaucrats, big landowners and big businessmen, and the relationships among these people were very close, and some people possessed these three identifications together. The middle class included middle and small landowners, rich dirt farmers, and officials on the bottom layer, and the relationships among them were loose, and the low class included poor farmers, and when the class conflict was very acute and the insurgence happened, they would be united because of common benefits. In the system of absolute monarchy, the emperor grasped all political powers and represented the country in honor, and he should adjust the relationships among various classes, maintain the feudal system and governance order, and he should be treated specially. In the term of Song Shen Zong, the high class expanded increasingly, the middle class shrunk seriously and the survival situation of the low class was very bad, which made the hierarchical structure present thick top part, thin middle part and powerless low class, and the original stable structure of the society had be broken, which directly threatened the social stability and the governance of Song Dynasty (Ye, 1996).

The idea of the reforms of Wang An-shi was to maintain the feudal governance and social stability, and to strive for the support of Song Shen Zong, the tendency of the declining tendency of the high class expanding, the middle class shrinking and the low class collapsing should be restrained, and the basic harmonious proportions among three classes should be gradually recovered to keep stable social stratification structure. The reforms were to restrain the merger, strengthen the strengths of middle and small landowners, and properly improve farmers' economic and living status by various economic strategies and political intervention, which could make the social resources to be allocated reasonably in the feudal system and keep the normal operation of the social production. In another words, the government should ensure the stability of the social structure by rationalizing social stratification structure.

Because economy, reputation and power were highly superposed and easily translated each other, so the relative occupation of any of them changed by the reforms, the stratification structure of whole society would change. The reputation was the feudal grading consciousness, which could not be changed. The core of the economy was the landlordism of production materials, and the power was the basic political system of the feudal society essentially, such as the centralized state power and the absolute monarchy, which could not be changed too. But for the economy and power distribution, some of them could be changed, i.e. under the premise that the feudal political and economic system was invariable, the distributions of the economic benefits and political power of various classes in the society changed a little by the reforms. The Land Tax Averaging Laws and the Qing Miao Laws adjusted the beneficial relationships among three classes by using of taxation system and financial intervention from property distribution to change the relative occupations of various classes for the property. The Market Trading Laws and the Qing Miao Laws could change the trading opportunities in the market, establish economic entities by administrative power, limit and break the monopolization opportunity of usurers and big businessmen, enhance the market opportunities of the government and middle and small businessmen, and make the debtors, i.e. the farmers, to benefit.

In addition, he also opposed the Guan Yin theory (it emphasizes the inherence and transfer of nobles and officials) and

denied the grading theory of humanity (it emphasized that the born gentle and simple and unequal concepts among peoples), and he thought that individual endeavors and morality culture could change the fate, that opinions could help to break rigid social structure, promote the flow of the society, strengthen the social energy, and influence the interiors of various classes, but it could not change the power proportion and the social hierarchy structure of all classes. That would certainly weaken the economic powers of big landowners, big bureaucrats and big businessmen, and improve the economic status of middle and small landowners and farmers to some extent, change the proportion of economy, power and reputation of three classes more or less, and change the stratification of the whole society to recover the stable status, so the intention of the reforms would be achieved. Though the reforms failed, and his ideas and measures in the reforms had not change the situation that the farmers were exploited and were in the bottom layer of the society, but the ideas of adjusting the unreasonable social stratification structure and affirming the reasonable social flow would be valuable in the feudal society.

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