

How was the feudal rule in the Han Dynasty Positively Affected by Confucianism?

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Abstract.

As a mainstream school that has ruled Chinese society for thousands of years, Confucianism has been the topic of constant research in recent years. In the Han Dynasty, Confucianism gradually dominated and became the mainstream of ancient Chinese society, even profoundly influencing modern society. In this paper, the study of how Confucianism positively influenced imperial rule in the Han Dynasty will be based on the introduction of some core Confucian ideas, such as the idea of “Great unity” proposed by Dong Zhongshu in the Han Dynasty and the attitude of the Han government towards the promotion of Confucianism. This paper proves that a series of theories put forward by the Confucian scholars of the Han Dynasty led by Dong Zhongshu provided the rationality for the feudal rulers’ dictatorship. However, the vigorous promotion of Confucianism by the emperors and governments of the Han Dynasty unified the social ideology of the Han Dynasty to a large extent. Confucianism became the mainstream thought in the Han Dynasty because it complied with the dynasty’s changes and society’s development.

Keywords: Confucianism; the Han Dynasty; Feudal Rule; Emperor.

1. Introduction

With the victory of the Revolution of 1911, the rule of the Qing Dynasty was overthrown, and the feudal society that had lasted for about two thousand years in China ended. In the long course of history, although the dynasties have been changing, the dynasty, or the royal power, has always occupied the dominant position in ancient Chinese society. Feudal dynasties can last long, and many factors exist, such as history, culture, society, etc. Culture has played a very important role in the development and evolution of Chinese history. As an ideological system deeply carried out in China for thousands of years, Confucianism, as an invaluable classic, has a close connection with China’s long history. As a feudal dynasty lasting more than 400 years, the Han Dynasty was the most powerful empire in the world at the same time, with immortal achievements in ideology, history, literature, art, and other aspects.

In the past decades, plenty of research focused on the Han Dynasty. However, most of the research is based on the development of Confucianism itself during the Han Dynasty. These articles only briefly mention how Confucianism influenced imperial rule in the Han Dynasty. Although scholars have also discussed the influence of Confucianism on the Han Dynasty, most of them focus on the legal system of the Han Dynasty rather than on the imperial power of the Han Dynasty and the whole society. This article mainly talks about how Confucianism affected the feudal rule of the Han Dynasty in ancient China. In this long 400 years, studying how Confucianism helped

the Han Dynasty solve a series of social problems left by the previous dynasties and strengthened imperial centralization in this turbulent history is very important. This article will briefly introduce some of the core Confucian ideas that influenced imperial rule in the Han Dynasty and then discuss in detail how these ideas positively impacted feudal rule in the Han Dynasty. This paper aims to help people better understand the dominant position of Confucianism in Han Dynasty society and its positive influence on the consolidation of imperial power in the Han Dynasty. In addition, the research of this paper helps maintain and inherit traditional Chinese culture and is helpful to better understand the history and culture of ancient China.

2. The Core of the Ideology of Confucianism

Benevolence, righteousness, etiquette, wisdom, and faith are the five major thoughts that constitute the core of Confucianism. As the core concept of Confucianism, benevolence played an important role in the formation of feudal rule in the Han Dynasty of ancient China. Ren can be understood as an embodiment of kindness and human virtue, emphasizing the importance of treating others with kindness, compassion, and respect. Confucian scholars advocate the “benevolence” of individuals and emphasize the importance of self-cultivation and moral development^[1]. This emphasis on “benevolence” as a personal virtue encourages individuals to prioritize the well-being of others, resulting in strong interpersonal

relationships based on mutual respect and ethical behavior. Righteousness emphasizes moral principles and obligations. This concept emphasizes the importance of filial piety, loyalty, and respect for authority figures. Rulers are expected to lead by example and show noble behavior, while subjects are expected to obey and be loyal. In the context of the Han Dynasty in ancient China, the concept of rites played a crucial role in forming the feudal rule and social structure of the time. Rites can include social norms, rituals, codes of conduct, and moral codes that govern the behavior and interactions of individuals in society^[2]. These norms and norms were deeply rooted in Confucian teachings and were considered necessary to maintain order and harmony within the feudal system. “Wisdom” is the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Confucianism holds that wisdom can be acquired through constant learning and self-reflection. Wisdom enables individuals to make informed decisions, discern right from wrong, and develop a deeper understanding of the world. Trustworthiness refers to trust and sincerity. It emphasizes the importance of honesty, trustworthiness, and loyalty. Faith is essential for building strong relationships and fostering a sense of trust in society. Individuals are encouraged to keep their word, honor their commitments, and act with integrity by cultivating faith.

Dong Zhongshu, as an important representative of the Gongyang School in the Western Han Dynasty, put forward the idea of “Great unity,” which is composed of three core ideas. The first is to oppose the division of the state by the vassals and pay attention to weakening the power of the vassals. The second is the centralization of power in the hands of a single king. The third is ideological unity, attributed to the Confucian system^[3]. “One” is the unity of all things in the world, the primordial, which corresponds to political unity. Political unity is achieved, the “exclusive” status of the monarch is revealed, and then the “ideological” unification and “social” unification are realized. “Dethronement of all schools of thought, exclusive respect for Confucianism. „Establishing a unified ideology provided a prerequisite for political unification, thus strengthening the centralized rule^[4]. The people follow the rule of the emperor, the emperor’s rule conforms to the will of God, and the will of God comes from the result of the emperor ruling the people and governing the country^[5]. The national administrative management system thus constitutes a virtuous circle of unity and closure. This theory is deeply rooted in the idea that the emperor was the state’s leader in the people’s hearts. To remain at the top of the imperial power structure, the emperor needed to strengthen the central authority in various ways, ensuring that no other person or organization could challenge his dominance.

The idea of “great unity” provided the rationality for the imperial dictatorship and, on this basis, derived a series of rigid hierarchies that were difficult to shake at that time. These restrictions on multiple social relations were designed to ensure the exclusivity and nobility of the monarchy.

3. The Positive Effect of Confucianism on the Feudal Rule in Han Dynasty

After the end of the Qin Dynasty in a short period, the continuous war led to the people’s poverty, and the situation that the people were in dire straits ended with the establishment of the Han Dynasty. At the beginning of the establishment of the Han Dynasty, the quiet and undoing social governance policy gave the empire a rest. Still, the prosperity and long-term stability of the country needed a complete set of centralized political systems. Some social problems left over from the past forced the rulers of the Han Dynasty to devote themselves to finding an ideology that could solve various intractable political problems. Confucianism was not paid attention to immediately after the establishment of the Han Dynasty^[6] but was continuously carried forward by some Confucians who believed in Confucianism and entered the society’s vision^[7]. It was not until the reign of Emperor Wudi that it was regarded as the only ideological and political system of the Han Dynasty. At that time, Dong Zhongshu’s governance thought came into view. Based on the social situation of the Western Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu put forward the thought of “great unity” based on absorbing the experience of the previous dynasties, which provided conditions for the construction of Han’s national governance.

3.1 Benevolence, Justice, Propriety, Wisdom and Faith

The core ideas of Confucianism emphasize that people should have good personal morality, be loyal and obedient to the Ruler, and be responsible for social and family relations. Confucianism ensures the happiness of the people and the stability of society by repeatedly emphasizing the people’s moral, ethical, and social responsibilities. In Confucian ideals, the concept of a Junzi holds great significance as a model of a noble personality. Junzi, often translated as “gentleman” or “noble person,” is an individual who embodies moral excellence and cultivates virtuous qualities. This concept influenced the feudal rule of the Han Dynasty in ancient China, as it established a moral framework for governance and set standards for rulers and officials to follow. The Junzi was expected to possess various virtues, including benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity. These qualities were essential for maintaining social harmony and ensuring the well-being of the people. In the Han Dynasty, rulers and officials who aspired

to be Junzi were encouraged to cultivate these virtues through education, self-discipline, and introspection. By embodying the ideals of a Junzi, they were believed to set an example for others and inspire virtuous behavior within society^[8]. The influence of the Junzi concept extended beyond the personal attributes of rulers and officials. It also played a significant role in shaping the Han Dynasty's governance structure. The emphasis on moral excellence and virtuous conduct meant that individuals who lacked these qualities were deemed unfit for positions of power. The selection and appointment of officials were based on their moral character, as well as their knowledge and skills. This ensured that those in positions of authority were capable and possessed the moral integrity necessary for effective governance.

3.2 The Idea of “Great Unity”

At the time, Emperor Wudi was desperate to find an idea to help him govern the country, and Dong Zhongshu's Confucianism, with its “great unity” at its core, solved his problems. From the rulers of earlier dynasties who called them “King” to the first Ruler of the Qin Dynasty, who began to call themselves “Emperor,” the supreme rulers all tried to keep the land and people's land rights firmly in their own hands and gradually formed the concept of centralized power. This collective centralization consciousness was initially only an idea in the minds of a small group of people. Then, with the continuation of kingship and the increasing influence of centralized political systems, “Concentrating power in the hands of one person” gradually became a collective social concept and finally formed “This land belongs to the emperor.” All the people who live on this land are the subjects of the emperor's collective centralization consciousness. Conversely, Confucianism believed that heaven determined the emperor's appointment, and everyone, from the emperor to the common people, was subject to the emperor's orders without exception^[9]. Emperor Wudi hoped that the rule of the Han royal family could last for a long time, so he made people believe that the rule of the Han royal family was the will of heaven through rituals such as sacrifices^[10]. This move of linking the Ruler with the grand and mysterious things such as heaven, the universe, and gods helped the emperor gain the support, deep-rooted respect, and conviction of more subjects. It is why Confucianism became the main social and ideological form in ancient Chinese feudal society. It is precisely because Confucianism provides the theoretical foundation for the autocracy and supreme authority of emperors that the majestic image of ancient emperors has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people for thousands of years. As the theoretical foundation of the

imperial autocracy, the Confucian thought of “great unity” provided legitimacy for the monistic leadership system in which power was concentrated in the emperor, which not only solved the problem of maintaining the rationality of the centralized system but also provided practical political goals for maintaining a stable social order. Therefore, “great unity” is not only a thought, consciousness, or concept but also a political method and rule technique. This makes the originally relatively abstract political theory operable and plays an incomparably important role in maintaining traditional China's long-term unified and stable political situation.

3.3 The Position of Confucianism in Society

In addition to the rulers' deification of their power through Confucianism, the whole society and even the royal family's respect for Confucianism directly resulted in the supremacy of Confucianism over other ideas. Dong Zhongshu's three propositions played a decisive role in the promotion of Confucianism, which was enveloped in the Han Empire, and all social classes began to accept this trend of thought, which was accompanied by the continuous improvement of the social status of Confucian scholars and the opportunity to participate in the political rights of the country. Other schools of thought could not compete with Confucianism at this time. The government intended to reuse Confucian scholars and appoint them as officials in the imperial court, and Confucian scholars naturally integrated into the Han political system in large numbers. With the government's intervention, Confucianism soon became the mainstream of Han society^[11]. By studying Confucian classics, Confucian scholars not only improved their social status but also got to participate in national politics. By accepting the social ideology advocated by the state, Confucian scholars gained practical benefits. This leads numerous scholars in society to flock to it. As more and more Confucian scholars were used by the Han government and gained great wealth and high social status, more and more Confucian scholars realized that they could also use their years of knowledge to help the government solve social and political problems. Many intellectuals joined the imperial administration and served the political rule of the Han Empire under their acceptance of the highly unified ideology of the empire. The formation of this political culture with Confucianism as the core of the Han Empire made Confucian scholars, a special class of society, accept the political attitude of the Empire and recognize its ideology. The political beliefs of the Han Empire also held firm ideas.

Furthermore, the government was committed to making Confucianism the foundation of the Han educational

system, thereby fundamentally ensuring the dominance of Confucianism in Han society. Dong Zhongshu advocated the organization of education by the state, the establishment of imperial schools in the central and the establishment of local order, and the organization of education work in the name of the state; the biggest purpose is to enable Confucianism to be widely promoted and people to accept the official sense of guidance. As a result, Confucianism was promoted to the bottom of society, and more people began to learn Confucianism independently, and Confucianism was deeply rooted in the whole society. Up to the emperor and the common people, Confucianism remained an unshakable mainstream of society for a long time.

Rather than letting Confucianism slowly penetrate every corner of society over time, the Han Dynasty spared no effort in promoting Confucianism, and the foundation left by the previous dynasties undoubtedly allowed Confucianism to quickly dominate Han society. While the status of Confucianism was on the rise, other ideas did not disappear from the Han society, although they were greatly devalued by Confucians such as Dong Zhongshu. Although Emperor Wudi of Han ostensibly proclaimed Confucianism as the only idea of governing the country then, he adopted some internal legalist ideas to ensure the further stability of imperial power. Legalism directly serves the monarchy's centralization, while Confucianism emphasizes the rule of moral forces, weakens the coercive measures of law, and retains a certain degree of social flexibility, thus leaving enough space for social classes. In this way, on the surface, Confucianism was the dominant state. Still, Confucianism was the dominant state, with legalism as the supplement, so the Han society was stable, and the Han Dynasty had enough social resources to resist the intrusion of some neighboring countries on the border. Therefore, Emperor Wudi became one of the most famous emperors in ancient Chinese history.

4. Conclusion

In general, this paper draws the following conclusions by analyzing how Confucianism influenced the imperial power of the Han Dynasty. Dong Zhongshu led a group of Confucian scholars in the Han Dynasty to put forward the idea of "great unity" and the theory of "royal power is given by heaven," which provided the rationality for the feudal monarchy and laid a solid foundation for the imperial dictatorship. In addition to the spread of Confucianism, the government's recognition of Confucianism is also one of the reasons why Confucianism has become the mainstream of society. The Confucian classics, such as "benevolence,

wisdom, propriety, righteousness, and faith," promoted Confucianism and, improved its status in Han society, and gradually became the mainstream school in the Han Dynasty, which unified the social ideology of the Han Dynasty to a great extent. In the author's opinion, one of the main reasons why Confucianism became the mainstream thought in the Han Dynasty is that it gradually developed into a mature school with considerable scale after various turbulencies in the previous dynasties, and adapted to the development of The Times, became the best choice for the early Han Dynasty society to urgently solve various remaining social problems. The rulers of the early Han Dynasty also saw the positive influence that Confucianism could bring to them and vigorously promoted Confucianism as the mainstream ideology of the country.

The study of this paper helps readers to better understand from the perspective of Confucianism why the rulers of the Han Dynasty chose Confucianism as the mainstream of social thought and how Confucianism provided the rationality for feudal kingship and helped the emperors to consolidate their autocratic position. However, this paper also has some limitations. For example, this paper only discusses the positive influence of Confucianism on the Han Dynasty society. It does not mention the negative influence on the society at that time and even the later generations, such as the more extreme development of Confucianism in the Song Dynasty. However, these limitations do not affect the reliability and importance of the results of this study. In future studies, the scope of the research can be expanded to address the limitations of the research, deepen the understanding of the feudal kingship in the Han Dynasty, and make greater contributions to the development of related fields.

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