

Comparison of Forms and Concepts of Confrontation against Monarch Power in Ancient China and in Medieval Western Europe

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Abstract: Monarchy existed in both ancient China and the Middle-ages Western Europe. It is an inevitable phenomenon of power dynamics for the above two that other societal groups would rise to confront the sovereign authority of the monarch. However, because of the differences in the historical environment between ancient China and the West, the form of the antagonism toward the power of the monarchy and the political concepts embodied therein are naturally quite distinct. In ancient China, resistance against imperial power, both in form and concept, can be roughly divided into “revolution” and “admonishment,” while the political concepts of the Middle-ages Western Europe legally reserved reasonable channels for those opposing the power of the monarchy.

Keywords: Monarch power; Resistance; Concept

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1. Introduction

For ancient China and medieval Western Europe, monarchy is nothing unfamiliar. The monarchs of China and Western Europe sustained their power in a hereditary way, and governed the territories and people they could put under control with the authority granted by the gods. It is true that the population and land under the rule of the ancient Chinese emperors is much larger than that of the ancient European monarchs. The ancient European monarchs are mostly different from the ancient Chinese emperors on the basis of specific ruling methods and legitimacy, but the same is that, as long as power is concerned, those who are regulated by it would naturally resist it. Because of the differences in political, economic and cultural environments between ancient China and the Western world, the ways in which people confronted the power of the monarchy, and the concepts embodied in these ways were also different.

2. Ways and Concepts of Confrontation with the Sovereign Power in Ancient China

According to the traditional view of the academic circles in mainland China, the monarchy in ancient China has been a highly concentrated monarchy system since the Qin and Han dynasties. But in ancient China, there was never a lack of behaviors and concepts opposing the power of the monarchs. The methods and concepts of confronting the imperial power in ancient China can be roughly divided into the “revolutionary” acts aimed at overthrowing and replacing the existing imperial power, and the “admonishment” acts to restrain and control the exercise of the existing imperial power.

Since the transition from Shang to Zhou, the concept of celestial destiny used to legitimize of rule of

the emperors has undergone tremendous change. On the one hand, there is what was described by Fu Sinian and Xu Fuguan as “the dawn of humanitarianism” ^[1] and “the leap of humanistic spirit” ^[2], who believed that the view of celestial destiny that explained the legitimacy of the rule of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties reflected the importance of man. But on the other hand, the realistic motive behind this change is that the rulers of the Zhou dynasty urgently needed a set of theory to explain the lawful and reasonable point of their own rebellion against and replacement of Shang. Professor Luo Xinhui argues that: “The view of destiny at the time of Zhou differs greatly from that at the time of Shang in that it puts forward the notion that destiny is not constant, and injects moral factors into destiny. Destiny changes according to human affairs, thus the absolute will of heaven over man is denied ^[3].” The notion of “morality” often mentioned during the Western Zhou Dynasty, as Professor Luo Xinhui said, should not be exactly understood as morality as it is today, but as something close to a “rule of the people with gentleness.” It is undeniable that the concept of the change of destiny advocated by the Western Zhou Dynasty was essentially a legal defense of the Zhou’s takeover of the former Shang dynasty. This defense, although for the purpose of protecting the rule of Zhou, in terms of power operation, stresses that the emperors of Zhou have indeed been given the destiny. But, in fact it is precisely this concept of destiny and its change, as well as the theory of its transmutation that have provided the pretext for the wars and concessions of a series of dynasty of generations to come. In other words, the Zhou dynasty’s view of destiny provided ideological support for the “revolutionary” method of confronting the imperial power with the purpose of overthrowing and replacing the existing imperial power. It can be said that the view of destiny was instrumentalized in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

Throughout the Warring States Period, the Zhou Dynasty continued on its downward journey, and a series of theories represented by Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism flourished. The religious legitimacy of the ruler’s authority was temporarily shelved to make room for the fierce conflicts prevalent then, and the concept of valuing the people over the heavens was gradually severing the connection between the heavens and man. But later in the Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu suggested that Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty should reconnect the heavens and man by equalizing “disastrous phenomena” with “the will of heaven” and instilling the concept of “interaction between heaven and man” ^[4]. The long-standing proposition of monarch power and divine grant was relevant again. Since then, up until the Republic of China, all political and military activities that attempted to subvert the existing imperial power and replace it were all under the name of “heaven”. From the theory that Usurper Wang Mang relied on to legalize his seizure of power, the slogan of “The Blue Sky Has Passed, So the Yellow Sky Shall Come” during the Zhang Jiao Uprising at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, to the legitimacy anxiety of the Qing dynasty, all manifested the concept of “change in destiny” as is passed down from Zhou. It is quite a weapon against the monarch and its power. In ancient China, the “revolutionary” confrontations, that is, the subversive activities against the power of the monarch, were mostly carried out under the pretext of “mandate of heaven”. In short, we can characterize it as follows:

- (1) The subverting of the existing monarch was mostly by coup, coercion or violence
- (2) The purpose is to replace the existing monarch, establishing a new dynasty, or taking over its authority
- (3) The source of the legitimacy of the actions taken is the political concept of “change in destiny.”

Corresponding to subversive confrontational activities, there are those aimed at restraining and limiting the power of the monarch, which can be called “admonishment.” The main characteristics of the confrontational behavior of “admonishment” are as follows:

- (1) Persuasion is used as the main method, but coercing or directly abolishing the monarch is not completely ruled out
- (2) It is not aimed to replace the existing dynasty and establish a new one, but to sustain the current

one

- (3) The legitimacy of the actions comes from the authorization of the monarch. This type of confrontation can also cause great harm to the power of the monarch. As an example, the entrusting will of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty fundamentally led to the formation of Huo Guang's authority status^[5], and Huo Guang did not attempt to replace the young successor, so Huo Guang's actions to abolish the monarch of Emperor Wu's choice and establish a new one should also be classified as "admonishment."

Another example comes from Song, a dynasty where literati and officialdom enjoyed very high political status. In the Song Dynasty, when "the emperor rules the world with scholar-officials," bureaucratic power was greatly manifested. In the Song Dynasty, the remonstrance house was set up by the emperor himself, which enjoyed the privilege of "pass accusation even on flimsy evidence such as hearsay". It then became a powerful supervisory institution, which even included the words and deeds of the emperor into the scope of its supervision and remonstrance. But in fact, under the monarchy in ancient China, the monarch holds the dual supreme powers of legislation and administration, and ministerial power is also derived from the authorization of the monarch in jurisprudence and conception. As the organ that exercises the power of supervision, the remonstrance house still obtains its power from the jurisprudence and conception of the emperor and is still responsible to the emperor. Mr. Yu Yunguo believes that the collapse of the standing remonstrance (Taijian) system stems from the mistakes of the monarchical authority^[6], which is precisely because all power of the system comes from the monarch in terms of conception and jurisprudence. At the same time, as stated in the saying "ruling the world with the scholar-officials, not with the common people," those who were in confrontation with the power of ancient Chinese monarchs were the scholar-officials authorized by the monarchs, not the common people ruled by the monarchs or the scholar-officials authorized by them. Due to the notion of "all lands are the emperor's lands," the "admonishment" style confrontational behaviors, although often performed out of self-interest considerations, are still conceptually and nominally for the interests of the monarchs.

To sum up, in ancient China, the emperor, as the celestially destined monarch, has the dual supreme authority in both the religious and secular senses. All secular power in the world comes from the monarch's authorization, and the bureaucracy is also an agent authorized by the monarch in concept, whose power comes from the monarch. Only the monarch itself changes, but the monarchical power never changes. Therefore, the only way to oppose the power of the monarch is the down-against-up acts of rebellion, that is, the "revolutionary type" acts, and the "admonishment type" acts which agents of the monarch makes within the scope of the monarch's authorization for purpose to restrict the monarch's power. In the process of fighting the power of the monarch, the main body of the fight can only be carried out in a manner restricted by the monarchy, or for the purpose of the monarchy itself, and either party to the fight is under the monarchy.

3. Ways and Concepts of Confrontation with the Sovereign Power in Medieval Western Europe

The monarchy power of Western Europe in the Middle Ages, according to Thomas Eitman in "The Birth of Leviathan, The State and Power Construction in Medieval and Early Modern Europe^[7]," could be roughly classified as hereditary absolutism (for example France) and hereditary constitutionalism (for example the United Kingdom). In this book, Eitman attributes the historical differences between hereditary absolutism and hereditary constitutionalism to military and financial factors and the rise and fall of the representative system. However, even such two seemingly different models have their endogenous similarities. That is, the power of the monarch is conceptually derived from the authorization of God.

The Carolingian dynasty officially replaced the Merovingian dynasty, and William the Conqueror initiated the conquest of England, both of which received support from the Pope in Rome. This is enough

evidence to reflect the ability of religions in Western Europe to interfere with royal power. Although in the conflict between the monarch and the church, even the pope often fails politically, but in terms of concept, the strong could not do as they will. The trip to Canossa was often regarded as a symbol of the struggle between papal authority and imperial power. The Pope at Canossa was the one who put forward the concept that the pope has the right to anoint and oust the monarch. His favorite example to support his argument is Pope Zagalí who allowed the dwarf Piping to depose Morovan's last descendant Hilderik III ^[8]. This concept declares that the pope has the right to determine who is "competent" to be a monarch, that is, the monarchy should come from the pope and the church he represents. Although this concept is too radical to be accepted, it does declare that the church, which represents God and the church whose power comes from God, has its own voice when faced with the power of the monarch. In fact, in the conflict between Henry II and Beckett, the Archbishop of Canterbury he helped to this position, it can be seen that even in reality the latter was supported by the former, the church that conceptually obtains its power from God can still put up a fierce opposition to the monarchy.

The medieval Europe was most well-known for its feudalism. The so-called feudal relationship is in fact a personal dependency relationship. The feudal relationship between the feudal monarch and the vassals is maintained by the feudal contract witnessed by celestial ceremonies. Generally speaking, on the one hand, the vassals need to bear the obligation of obedience and support; on the other hand, the monarch needs to provide protection and support for the vassals and their properties. However, the existence of multiple loyalty dependency relation and the absolute dependency transcending the general vassal relationship, makes the situation more complicated. In fact, due to the two-way nature of the contract and the existence of multiple loyalty targets, the dependent vassals could have the excuse to fight against their own monarch, either in the name of surrendering to another monarch, or the accusation that the monarch has failed to fulfill the feudal contract. At the same time, because of the existence of absolute dependency, the vassals are required to give priority to the object of absolute dependency, but what often happens is merely the form of ordinary dependency, gradually reducing absolute dependency to a formal thing or even a commodity ^[9]. Since in the Middle Ages in Western Europe, neither the family nor the nation could provide a stable bond to maintain a systemic relationship, the monarch had to rely on the feudal relationship to maintain its power. However, due to the two-way nature of the contractual concept and the evolution of the feudal concepts, the absolute concept of the monarchy has been challenged by the vassals, although this conceptual confrontation is less fierce than the one with the church.

In addition to the church and the feudal nobles, there was another active political force in the Middle Ages stage, that is, the cities. The civil class of the cities did not constitute the majority in the medieval society dominated by agricultural production, but because they gathered to live together, their voice was particularly loud when they cried out for freedom. In Western Europe, the struggle of the civil class in pursuit of freedom was initially targeted at the bishops and the feudal aristocracy. This kind of struggle was eventually acquiesced or protected by the king most of the time. The civil class often bargained for a fair price for personal freedom from the bishop or feudal aristocracy under the arbitration of the king or the court ^[10]. Then, as the king sought political, military or financial support, parliaments gradually appeared. The monarchs of Western Europe regarded the municipality as a political force and included it in the parliament. The citizens of the municipality elected their own representatives and joined the game of the representative system. Since the power of the representatives of the municipalities came from the voting of the citizens, they have greater power and motivation in legal principles and concepts than the bureaucrats directly appointed by the monarch on issues such as taxation or conscription. They often bargained and even protested against the motions advanced by the monarch. Castil's parliament succeeded in obtaining the power to pass the national taxation bill, and the civil class in France's three-tier parliament became a very active member. Turmoil broke out in Britain when John, the Lackland, tried to demand the priests,

lower aristocrats, and the civil class of England for support beyond the quota for his war on the European continent. The turmoil finally ended with the King of England receding and re-issuing the Magna Carta. In addition to the above-mentioned entities with political power, in medieval Europe, even an ordinary Christian had the right to confront and regulate the authority of the monarch, and even “kill the tyrant.” John of Salzburg reinterpreted the meaning of “the sword bearer shall die by the sword” in the Bible, thinking that it is impossible to expect a tyrant to die by its own sword, and non-Christians cannot be counted on to accomplish this task, so a Christian has the right and obligation to kill a tyrant with a sword. For itself and for the benefit of the world, the Christian has the right to and must kill the tyrant. When a Christian does not resist in the face of the brutality of the monarchy, it constitutes a “crime against itself and the human state ^[11].” Therefore, ordinary Christians also have the conceptual right to oppose the power of the monarch because of the authority and duties granted by God. Such radical confrontation is directed at the “tyrant” as an individual, but does not question or covet the monarchy granted by God.

To sum up, in medieval Western Europe, the main body to oppose the power of the monarch, in addition to the bureaucrats who derived their power from the monarch, was more likely the church, aristocrats, municipalities, etc., and even the ordinary Christian out of their interpretation of the biblical obligation. Although most of them were governed by the secular power of monarch, their power was not sourced the authorization of the monarch in political concepts, and the church represented the divine will of granting power to the monarch. At the same time, the behaviors against the power of the monarch do not center on the power of the monarch. Even if it is aimed at subverting the rule of the monarch, it is more relevant to the tyrant as an individual, rather than the monarchy as the system. Therefore, the behaviors of Western Europe against the power of the monarch in the Middle Ages are often more like two parties at a negotiating table, bickering over the small details of the contract or legal provisions, only to pull in more tangible benefits for themselves.

4. The Similarities and Differences of the Concepts of Opposition to Monarch Power in Ancient China and Western Countries and Their Impact

The most salient feature of the confrontation against the power of the monarch in ancient China, as mentioned above, is that any party in the confrontation is under the monarchy, regardless of whether the result is to overthrow the existing monarchy and replace it, or to restrict the exercise of the existing monarch’s power. It does not affect the status or conceptual category of the power of the monarch, and the proposition of the confrontation, either in concept and name, is always for the benefit of the owner of the monarch power after the confrontation. In the Middle Ages Western Europe, the main body confronting the monarch power was much more complicated. When confronted with representatives of the church and municipalities (communities) whose power was not conceptually derived from the monarchy, the monarch and the counterparty conceptually fought for their own interests, and the monarch always wins nominally regardless of the outcome of the confrontation.

This difference in concept left the medieval Europe and ancient China, even though both practicing the monarchy by divine order, on different paths. On the one hand, because the monarch and the power it held was in an opposed position to the common people in the Middle Ages Europe, with the support of religious and theological theories, Western Europe gave birth to the theory of civil rights and democracy. In such interpretation and pursuit of humanity, anarchism and other theories that directly deny the power of the government were derived. The confrontation against the power of the monarch continues to the confrontation with the power of the government even as of today when monarchy is gone in most Western countries. Today, a considerable number of people in the Western world who have long been fed with such Western European ideas and values maintain a sense of mistrust toward the government of their country, something inconceivable to the Chinese people, as a result of which the power of the government has been

put under multiple supervision to ensure its fairness and justice. On the other hand, in China, the confrontation always stays inside the category of the power of monarch, such power has been continuously concentrated and strengthened, and its conception has been gradually sanctified until it is completely defeated by the impact from the Western world. But after the defeat, the authority of monarch inured to the Chinese people gradually spread to the entire government. Today, contrary to some of the Western world, the Chinese put high trust in the government that many Westerners find it hard to understand, and the Chinese government also undertakes more political, social, and moral responsibilities than most Western governments because of this trust.

Disclosure statement

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