

Research Paper**Scholar Officials and Intellectuals in Ancient China****Swati Mishra***Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University***Abstract**

The article examines relationship between state, society and intellectuals in China and discusses the role of elite Activism in deciding state-society relationship. It analyzes how intellectuals have played a significant role in ancient Chinese state and society and have worked as a bridge between the two, the state and the society. It further examines how intellectuals have always been challenged and questioned state policies directly, wherever they felt and how state has reacted to it in various eras.

Keywords: *State, Society, Intellectuals, China, Activism, Activists, Democracy*

Introduction

Chinese history illustrates that whenever there had been political and social chaos in the society, activists/intellectuals came ahead and gave ideas on how to control the situation. On this issue, Confucius is being quoted as saying, “the world is our responsibility”¹. Here the word “our” represents intellectuals and activists. Most of the intellectuals of this category however did not belong to ‘state intelligentsia’¹ category and thus in principle they were not responsible towards the state and the society. But due to their self forced consciousness, they came forward and gave ideas and solutions to both, the state and the society. The above mentioned statement by Confucius and the word ‘our’ which he probably used for intellectual class indicates the commitment of the class mentioned towards the state and the society.

Historically, on the contrary, China also has had a very interesting and somewhat unique culture of interfering in state society matters by the intellectuals when the class felt that either state or society is not on right path. There seemed to have an unbreakable connection between intellectuals/activists and state and society. Thus this, practice even in ancient context can be interpreted as activism. As activism in its totality as seen today was practically absent, what existed was a form of ‘elite activism’. In its earliest form, it consisted of preaching of philosophers/poems/dissent writing and historical records. They (intellectuals) expressed their views through their writings and other form of communication medium. They strived for “ideal” and harmonious relationship between state and society. Their role involved reminding the rulers about the legitimacy of mandate of heaven². Also, that the king is the Son of God and he is sent to this earth as the benevolent ruler whose primary duty is to take good care of his citizens and rule the empire gracefully. These intellectual activists also felt it their moral responsibility to oversee the rule and expose violation of moral fabric of state society relations at various levels through art and through prose and poetry. The State sometimes rewarded them for their noble intentions and sometimes punished them for their intervention. Just like today’s China, there were always boundaries. If the state sensed a threat in the expressions of the activists, they were banished, imprisoned or executed. Intellectuals also exhibited a large degree of resilience and often continued their work in spite of punishments. Later, in the Ming Qing period in form of drama and opera, public intellectuals often wrote/performed/played in attempt to bring needed changes in the society and the system. These often-criticized rules and practices of the ruling class to transform the ideas and approaches of society and people at large. Thus, in sum these elite activists (dissident riters/poets/philosophers/historians/artists) played very significant role in transforming the society. To some extent, as mentioned earlier they played the role of a bridge between two, the state and the society. In the given background, it is justified to some extent that both that the society and the state needed them, relied on them. They were highly educated in tradition and influential in social interactions, in contrast to many illiterate and powerless masses. They performed various roles ranging from direct participation and advice in day to day affairs to the roles of critics or rebels. Each court had a bunch of advisors with a leading advisor instructing the emperor on how to rule successfully.

But even though their role was mostly seen in favor of the societal well-being, this class has remained obfuscatory in state ordinance. And thus, this obfuscation between two, intellectual and the state becomes a question to the outsiders, why their

¹ Intellectuals who are employed under the Chinese state and thus directly belong to Chinese Communist Party system.

²The Mandate of Heaven is an ancient Chinese belief and philosophical idea that god granted emperors the right to rule based on their ability to govern well and fairly. According to this belief, heaven bestows its mandate to a just ruler, the Son of Heaven, and withdraws it from a despotic ruler, leading to the overthrow of that ruler. The Mandate of Heaven would then transfer to those who would rule best. The fact that a ruler was overthrown was taken by itself as an indication that the ruler had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

relationship is often seen bitter? Though in the words of Timothy Cheek, “(Chinese) intellectual attitudes toward the state have been characterized by fierce patriotism; their behavior with superiors, peers and subordinates reflects an acceptance of patronage; and their self-expression reflect a profound elitism and sense of paternalism”ⁱⁱ One of the earliest records in this connection we find during Qin Dynasty. Qin Dynasty was founded by Qin Shi Huangdi³ after defeating Qi, Chu, Wei, Zhao, Yan, Yue, and Han. The dynasty advocated Legalism⁴ which flourished in the Zhou dynasty under the parasol of Hundred School of Thoughts⁵. As this school of thought differed with Confucianism in many ways, Qin Shi Huangdi ordered his officials to burn all the books which talked of Confucius principles and bury all the scholars who supported Confucianism. It was the first recorded case of suppressing ideas in the history of China as the activities and ideas of Confucianism seemed a threat to the state’s ideology. Books were burnt and scholars were buried alive.

In the next dynasty, the Han Dynasty which preceded Qin, another case of threat from intellectual ideas appears. Historian Si Maqian, the great court astrologer and well-known historian who wrote Shi Ji (the book of history) defended Li Ling in Han Wudi’s reign⁶. For Han Wudi, the most significant enemy was Xiong Nu tribe⁷. But as Li Ling, the army general of the Han Army, surrendered to the Xiong Nu, Han Wudi with other ministers in court condemned Li Ling for this. Si Maqian raised his voice in his defense. It offended the emperor. For offense, he was imprisoned and humiliated with castration. Si Maqian was later sentenced to death. Those days execution could be commuted either by money or castration. Since Simaqian did not have enough money to fight against his “crime”, he chose the latter. He was then thrown into prison where he stayed for three years. He described his pain: “When you see the jailer you abjectly touch the ground with your forehead. At the mere sight of these underlings, you are sized with terror. Such ignominy can never be wiped away.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the Chinese cosmopolitan empire, the golden age of Chinese literature Tang Era (618-907 CE) and in Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) with the development in the field of literature, written dissent developed. Noted poets like Li Bai, Bai Juyi and Su Shi were sent to exile in remote areas on account of slightest doubt of conspiring against the state. With the corruption in court, cases of written dissent increased and as a result the era witnessed suppression of voices, as seen in the case of Li Bai, Bai Juyi and Su Shi. More the suppression of voices of expression and increase in corruption in imperial courts, more the forms of dissent in form of painting, prose, poetry, ballet etc. evolved and thus there developed a more ambiguous and artistic form of literature.

Li Bai in his poems expressed his political ideology and exposed and criticized the corruption in the court. His poem expressed his love for the country and sympathy for the people and sorrow. Li Bai is one of the most celebrated poets in Chinese history. I thus present one famous and rather popular story on his (Li Bai’s) concern on right and wrong in state system and the society. The story goes like this; once he (Li Bai) went for sightseeing. In the Huayin County he heard about the greedy county magistrate who had brought much affliction to the people. Hearing this, Li Bai planned to catch him red-handed. When he arrived at Yamen⁸, he told his assistant to go away and alone he rode around the Yamen gate. When the magistrate saw that someone is riding a horse in his presence and not getting down to express his respect to a magistrate, he got angry and asked his officers to bring him to the Hall for questioning. Li Bai pretended to be tipsy with wine. He ignored the questions which were asked to him. As a result, he was locked in the prison. Next day he was asked to write a confession on how and why he did the mistake. Li Bai then wrote in detail about him and his official position. When the magistrate heard this, he was very scared. He bowed down to express his apology. Other officers rushed to pay honor to Li Bai. Li Bai at last asked them whether they all paid by the imperial court? In that case he questioned them for their habit of greedily cheating people and said that they all will be forgiven only when they mend their ways.” All the officers involved in the case then promised to not to repeat it again. Later many assumed that it was intended, and Li Bai was on a secret court assignment to inspect the merit of local government. Whatever the case was, stories of Li Bai’s love for the country and people made him popular not only among court officials but also among the masses. He was thus named by the masses Tian Shi, the heavenly Poet. Wangwei and Dufu, other great poets from Tang Dynasty are known for exposing corruption of state functionaries through their poems. By doing so their voices reached to the masses. Bai Juyi, another noted poet from Tang dynasty, who was an insider of the court, invited trouble for himself by writing radical poems. His poems satirized the actions of greedy officials and highlighted the sufferings of the common folk. He thus got the punishment by the state and was sent into exile.

³ Qin Shi Huang (260–210 BC) was the King of the state of Qin. He conquered all other Warring States and united China in 221 BC. He called himself ‘Qin’shi Huangdi; The first emperor of China as it was the first time China was under one umbrella and thus it was unified in real sense. The title Huangdi for an emperor was later continued to be borne by Chinese rulers for the next two millennia.

⁴ Legalism is one of the schools of thoughts which flourished during spring and autumn period. The laws supported by the Legalists were meant to support the state, the emperor, and his military. The three main precepts of these Legalist philosophers are the strict application of widely publicized laws (fa), the application of such management techniques (shu) as accountability (xingming) and “showing nothing” (wuxian), and the manipulation of political purchase (shi).

⁵ The Hundred Schools of Thought were philosophers and schools that flourished from the 6th century to 221 BC, during the spring and autumn period and the Warring States period of ancient China.

⁶ Emperor Wu Di was the fifth emperor of Han Dynasty (156-87 BC)

⁷ By 350 BCE, Chinese officials knew of three powerful groups of mounted, nomadic pastoral people north of China which from time to time attacked China. One of these groups, the Xiong Nu was in the Ordos region and most of Mongolia (including Inner Mongolia). To the east of the Xiong Nu, in eastern Mongolia and the plains of Manchuria, there was the second group, the Donghu. The third group, the Yuezhi, was west of the Ordos region, in the region of Gansu.

⁸ A Yamen (: 衙门) is local bureaucrat’s, or mandarin’s, office and residence of the Chinese Empire. The term衙门has been widely used in China since ancient time.

In the late years of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), secret police⁹ forces were established by eunuchs who got the court under their control as they were the emperor's favorites. Such police officers were sent everywhere to overhear people talking. Anyone who was overheard talking anything against the emperor or the dynasty would be arrested and persecuted. The Jinyiwei (imperial military secret police) were constantly used as a means of eliminating political opponents through assassinations and legal prosecutions. The tactic they used was doing some friendly conversation with the suspects and then writing reports on such conversations. Articles have been published in the first half of this year to reveal that some of the much-known cultural celebrities once acted as informers. In the late imperial period, elite activism was seen at its zenith. Chinese intellectuals/elite activists were seen to raise their voice, express their views independently against the imperialism, feudalism and all the wrongdoings seen in the society. Many of the activists were exiled abroad to Japan, Southwest Asia and the United States where independent media existed. In the last few decades of imperialism in China and during the Guomindang (GMD) rule, Chinese intellectual activities had reached the climax. It was seen that the primary role of most of the intellectuals of that period was to fight against feudalism and imperialism and save the integrity and sovereignty of the Chinese nation to free it from all those factors which affect the development of Chinese state and Chinese society as whole. During the period in the early 20th century, Chinese society and China as a nation were threatened by imperialism both by Westerners and Japanese from outside and feudalism from inside. China as a nation had become very weak. Nominally, the state in a comparatively destabilized China was still able to exercise control over activism. Conservative viewed activism of these Intellectuals as threat to the state and often rejected their proposals. The pride of the superiority of middle kingdom prevented them to be updated with latest technologies.

The intellectuals felt that as China lacks the knowledge of new technologies and new techniques, it lags the world, especially the Western imperialists and the Japanese. Imperialists were winning China only because of this factor. They were thus clear that China had to keep itself updated with new trends in the world to handle such aggressions. Also, Chinese will have to make changes in its education and military system. If not, it will end up doing more and more unequal treaties. Such intentions by the intellectuals were expressed mostly through their writings. Many of such writings were regarded as 'revolutionary' writings and conservative state authorities took it as threat. In many cases, the conservative state authorities convinced the emperor/empress to suppress it. China banned many of such works and many of the intellectuals were criticized and prohibited to write. Meanwhile China as a state had become very weak. It was not able to control things in reality as it had to tackle with many problems simultaneously. Under such a situation, intellectuals/activists fled and pursued their activities from abroad. Quite a few of them took the risks of carrying on their work remaining in China. The sole aim and commitment of all of them was aimed at regaining the strength and vigor of old China and encourage the people to fight 'Three Common Enemies', which were 'Imperialism', 'Foreign Aggression' and 'Feudalism'. The period witnessed unique joint endeavors to achieve the above-mentioned sole aim with individual contribution of intellectual activists, artists, poets, philosophers and warlords.

Conclusion

Chinese intellectuals and scholar officials had always played a great role in functioning of Chinese state and society. They influenced the Chinese state in a big way. Many a times they had to go through a process of transition from a uniform stratum to a group with diverse elements. These intellectuals worked as a bridge between Chinese state and society and wherever needed they mediated between two.

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⁹ Ming dynasty had this tradition of secret police who were recruited to protect the emperor and track down and arrest the enemies. In Chinese they were called Jin Yi Wei. The Jin Yi Wei was founded by the Hongwu Emperor in 1368 to serve as his personal bodyguard and it developed into a military organization the following year.