

EDICT OF EMPEROR WEN ON THE PRIMACY OF AGRICULTURE

Introduction

Chinese emperors and their officials were keenly aware of the importance of the agricultural economy. A flourishing and well-managed agriculture meant a satisfied people and a large surplus, which the imperial government could use to support its rulers, bureaucrats, and armies and enable it to offer famine relief from stored grain supplies when necessary. A weak and poorly managed agricultural economy harmed not only the people, but also the emperor and his government.

The Han Emperor Wen (r. 180-157 BCE) was evidently concerned about the stability and productivity of Chinese agriculture. Accordingly, he called upon his officials to devise systems of economic management that would raise productivity and increase the government's ability to extract and store surplus grain from the rural economy. Emperor Wen issued the edict below in 163 BCE. In the edict, he describes a problem, ponders some possible causes of the problem, and asks his officials to suggest solutions.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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Edict of Emperor Wen on the Primacy of Agriculture

For the past several years there have been no good harvests, and our people have suffered the calamities of flood, drought, and pestilence. We are deeply grieved by this, but being ignorant and unenlightened, we have been unable to discover where the blame lies. We have considered whether our administration has been guilty of some error or our actions of some fault. Have we failed to follow the Way of Heaven or to obtain the benefits of Earth? Have we caused disharmony in human affairs or neglected the gods that they do not accept our offerings? What has brought on these things? Have the provisions for our officials been too lavish or have we indulged in too many unprofitable affairs? Why is the food of the people so scarce? When the fields are surveyed, they have not decreased, and when the people are counted they have not grown in number, so that the amount of land for each person is the same as before or even greater. And yet there is a drastic shortage of food. Where does the blame lie? Is it that too many people pursue secondary activities to the detriment of agriculture? Is it that too much grain is used to make wine or too many domestic animals are being raised?

Questions:

1. In this edict, the emperor suggests a number of possible explanations for the problem at hand: poor harvests, flood, drought, pestilence, and the resulting suffering of the common people. Analyze and categorize the various possible explanations that the emperor considers. Which explanations do you find most convincing? Why? Which do you find least convincing? Why?
2. In issuing this edict, what kind of an image of himself is the emperor conveying to the readers, his officials?
3. Given the problem posed by the emperor and the possible explanations for the problem that he suggests, what solutions would you propose to him if you were one of his officials?

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