

MEMORIAL ON THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF AGRICULTURE
By Chao Cuo

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. Chao Cuo, a high-ranking official, offered the suggestions below in 178 BCE. Emperor Wen approved of these suggestions and put them into practice, with remarkably successful results.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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The reason people never suffered from cold or famine under the rule of the sage kings was not that these kings were capable of plowing to provide food or spinning to make clothes for them. It was that they opened up for the people the way to wealth. Therefore although emperors Yao and Yu encountered nine years of flood and King Tang seven years of drought, there were no derelicts or starving within the kingdom, because provisions had been stored up in plenty and all precaution taken beforehand.

Questions:

1. To what does Chao Cuo attribute the peace and prosperity of the era of the "sage kings," even in times of flood and drought? How does this square with Confucian philosophy as you understand it?



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Poverty is bred of insufficiency that is caused by lack of agriculture. If men do not farm, they will not be tied to the land; and if they are not tied to the land, they will desert their villages, neglect their families, and become like birds and beasts. Then although there be high walls and deep moats, strict laws and severe punishments, they still cannot be held in check. When one is cold he does not demand the most comfortable and warmest garments; when one is starving he does not wait for the tastiest morsels. When a man is plagued by hunger and cold he has no regard for modesty or shame.

Questions:

2. How does Chao Cuo explain poverty?
3. Do you agree with him? Is this sort of explanation relevant to accounting for the existence of poverty today? Why or why not?
4. Any explanation of a problem implies a particular solution or set of solutions. What sort of solutions to poverty does Chao Cuo's explanation point toward? If you were to accept the way in which Chao Cuo explains poverty in the Han as a valid strategy for explaining poverty in the contemporary world, then what sort of solutions does that strategy imply today?



Among the traders and merchants, on the other hand, the larger ones hoard goods and exact 100 percent profit, while the smaller ones sit lined up in the markets selling their wares. Those who deal in luxury goods daily disport themselves in the cities and market towns; taking advantage of the ruler's wants, they are able to sell at double price. Thus though their men neither plow nor weed, though their women neither tend silkworms nor spin, yet their clothes are brightly patterned and colored, and they eat only choice grain and meat. They have none of the hardships of the farmer, yet their grain is ten to one hundredfold. With their wealth they may consort with nobles, and their power exceeds the authority of government officials. They use their profits to overthrow others. Over a thousand miles they wander at ease, their caps and cart covers filling the roads. They ride in fine carriages and drive fat horses, tread in silken shoes and trail white silk behind them. Thus it is that merchants encroach upon the farmers, and the farmers are driven from their homes and become vagrants. At present, although the laws degrade the merchants, the merchants have become wealthy and honored, and although they honor the farmers, the farmers have grown poor and lowly. Thus what common practice honors the ruler degrades, and what the officials scorn the law exalts. With ruler and ruled thus at variance and their desires in conflict, it is impossible to hope that the nation will become rich and the law be upheld.

Questions:

5. After describing the suffering and poverty of the farmers, Chao Cuo embarks upon this contrasting description of merchants. For what reasons does Chao Cuo criticize merchants? Are his criticisms justified?

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6. Why do you think the contrast between merchants and farmers has developed to the point that it has in Chao Cuo's description?
7. Do you agree that the situation described by Chao Cuo (i.e. the disparity in wealth between merchants and the farmers, who are the majority of the population) is a problem? If not, why not? If so, what would you suggest as a solution?



Under the present circumstances there is nothing more urgently needed than to make the people devote themselves to agriculture. To accomplish this one must enhance the value of grain. This may be done by making it possible for the people to use grain to obtain rewards and avoid punishments. If an order is sent out that all who send grain to the government shall obtain honorary rank or pardon from crimes, then wealthy men will acquire rank, the farmers will have money, and grain will circulate freely. If men can afford to present grain in exchange for ranks, they must have a surplus. If this surplus is acquired for the use of the ruler, then the poll tax on the poor can be reduced. This is what is known as reducing the surplus to supply the deficiency. ... Ranks are something that the ruler may dispense at will: he has only to speak and there is no end to them. Grain is something grown on the land by the people and its supply is continuous. All men greatly desire to obtain high ranks and avoid penalties. If all are allowed to present grain for supplying the frontiers and thereby obtain rank or commutation of penalties, then in no more than three years there will be plenty of grain for the border areas.

Questions:

8. Read Chao Cuo's recommendation carefully. What assumptions about human nature underlie his proposed solution to the problem (i.e. poverty caused by insufficient production of grain)? From which school of classical Chinese philosophy are these assumptions drawn?

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Now all within the seas are united. The plenitude of land and people is not inferior to that of Tang and Yu, and in addition we have not suffered from natural calamities of flood or drought for several years. Why then are the stores of supplies so inferior? Because the land has benefits that have been overlooked and the people have untapped energies. There is still land suitable for growing grain that has not been brought under cultivation, resources of hills and lakes that have not been exploited, and vagrants who have not yet returned to agricultural pursuits. When the people are in poverty, then crime and evil-doing are born. Poverty is bred of insufficiency that is caused by lack of agriculture. If men do not farm, they will not be tied to the land; and if they are not tied to the land, they will desert their villages, neglect their families, and become like birds and beasts. Then although there be high walls and deep moats, strict laws and severe punishments, they still cannot be held in check.

When one is cold he does not demand the most comfortable and warmest garments; when one is starving he does not wait for the tastiest morsels. When a man is plagued by hunger and cold he has no regard for modesty or shame. It is the nature of man that if he does not eat twice a day he will starve, and if in the course of a year he cuts himself no new clothes he will freeze. When the belly is famished and gets no food, when the skin is chilled and has no clothing to cover it, then even the most compassionate father cannot provide for his own child. How then can the ruler keep the allegiance of his people? An enlightened ruler, realizing this, will encourage his people in agriculture and sericulture, lighten the poll tax and other levies, increase his store of supplies and fill his granaries in preparation for flood and drought. Thereby he can keep and care for his people. The people may then be led by the ruler, for they will follow after profit in any direction like water flowing downward.

Now pearls, jewels, gold, and silver can neither allay hunger nor keep out the cold, and yet the people all hold them dear because these are things used by the ruler. They are light and easy to store, and one who holds them in his grasp may roam the world and never fear hunger or cold. They cause ministers lightly to turn their backs upon their lords and the people easily to leave their villages; they provide an incentive for thieves and a light form of wealth for fugitives.

Grains and fibers, on the other hand, are produced from the land, nurtured through the seasons, and harvested with labor; they cannot be gotten in a day. Several measures of grain or cloth are too heavy for an average man to carry and so provide no reward for crime or evil. Yet if people go without them for one day they will face hunger and cold. Therefore an enlightened ruler esteems the five grains and despises gold and jewels.

At present in a farming family of five not fewer than two are required to perform labor service [for the state], while those who are left to work the farm are given no more than one hundred *mu* of land, the yield of which is not over one hundred *piculs*. ... No matter how diligently they

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work nor what hardships they suffer, they still must face the calamities of flood and drought, emergency government measures, inordinate tax levies, and taxes collected out of season. Orders issued in the morning are changed before nightfall. Faced with such levies, the people must sell what they have at half price in order to pay, and those who have nothing must take money offered at 100 percent interest. Thus they are forced to sell their fields and houses, vend their children and grandchildren, to pay their debts.

Among the traders and merchants, on the other hand, the larger ones hoard goods and exact 100 percent profit, while the smaller ones sit lined up in the markets selling their wares. Those who deal in luxury goods daily disport themselves in the cities and market towns; taking advantage of the ruler's wants, they are able to sell at double price. Thus though their men neither plow nor weed, though their women neither tend silkworms nor spin, yet their clothes are brightly patterned and colored, and they eat only choice grain and meat. They have none of the hardships of the farmer, yet their grain is ten to one hundredfold. With their wealth they may consort with nobles, and their power exceeds the authority of government officials. They use their profits to overthrow others. Over a thousand miles they wander at ease, their caps and cart covers filling the roads. They ride in fine carriages and drive fat horses, tread in silken shoes and trail white silk behind them. Thus it is that merchants encroach upon the farmers, and the farmers are driven from their homes and become vagrants.

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