

Tentative Discussion on the Tibet-governing Policy with the “Control of Tibet with Tea”

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Abstract. The “Control of Tibet with Tea” is an important content of the Tibet-governing policy in Ming dynasty. It is thought in this paper that the conditions for the Ming dynasty’s ruler to make the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” were not satisfied so the objective effect of implementation was also not ideal. Meanwhile, more importantly, the guiding thought of “control of Tibet with tea” was established on the basis of ethnic discrimination, so the Tibet-governing policy of “control of Tibet with tea” should be denied on the whole.

Introduction

The so-called policy of “control of Tibet with tea” refers to a conciliatory governing policy that the Ming dynasty’s ruler used with tea mainly for the Tibetan people in northwest and southwest regions in order to strengthen the governance over such regions. Scholars generally speak highly of such a conciliatory policy with tea as the weapon; for instance, “the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” strengthened the political and economic ties between the inland and the northwest border areas and had the function of consolidating and stabilizing the centralized governance of the unified multi-ethnic feudal country, so the strategy of the policy was basically successful.”^[1] “The ‘reasonable governance over Tibet’ was largely embodied in the policy of ‘control of Tibet with tea’”. Such comments factiously raise the function of the policy of “control of Tibet with tea”, don’t disclose the negative inclination in the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” and don’t factually conclude the experience and lessons in the nationality relationship history of China. The author thinks that the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” of Ming dynasty should be disapproved on the whole. The reasons are listed below: firstly, the guiding thought of “control of Tibet with tea” was established on the basis of ethnic discrimination; secondly, the theoretical basis for the policy was not met; thirdly, the objective effect was not satisfactory.

The guiding thought of “control of Tibet with tea” was established on the basis of ethnic discrimination.

According to the investigation of the cultural and historical data of China, we can see that the emperor and courtiers of Ming dynasty repeatedly expressed their desired political purpose through the policy of “control of Tibet with tea”. For instance, in the 30th year of Hongwu period (1397), the imperial edict Zhu Yuanzhang gave to the mansion of right military chief said: “The ancient emperors always strictly followed the difference between the Han nationality and the barbarians when making governing policies, because the barbarous people like Di and Rong were as greedy as wolves. If we don’t govern them well, they will certainly invade us and then become a border trouble. Today, the people from Duogan, Wusizang and the western Qiang nationality in the west area of Yellow River exchanged tea with horses with the inland in the past, it can be said that they exchanged the needed goods. However, because some people sell tea to them privately, there are only a few of horses to be sold on the market, so their horses become more valuable while our tea become more cheap; as a result, they gradually have the intention to disrespect us.”^[3] Besides, Zhu Yuanzhang also said in the order given to the governor of Sichuan: “People always value those they lack. Tea is exactly what

they lack. This originated from Tang dynasty and got prosperous in Song Dynasty. In Song dynasty, the profits became less. The pervious dynasties didn't only gain profits from this because they made light of what they had and rose the price of those they lacked to govern Rong and Di."^[4] In Jiajing period, Yang Yiqing, the courtier rectifying the tea-horse market, said: "We exchanged their horses with tea. Their buying tea doesn't infringe our benefits while we can get benefits from buying their horses. This is a very wise strategy."^[5] Xie Zhaozhi, provincial administrative commissioner of Guangxi, once said: "The mutual trade of horses and tea with Xirong nationality was started in Song dynasty, because the Tibetan people love to eat cheese and meat, which can only be detoxified with tea. China can obtain horse by selling them tea. Our benefits can be maximized by exchanging horses with the leaves of grass and trees."^[6] There are so many similar expressions which cannot be mentioned here one by one. It is easy to see through the undisguised expression of the emperor and courtiers in Ming dynasty that the Zhu emperors who regarded them as God's favored ones discriminated and exploited the minorities. Exchanging valuable "good horses" with cheap "leaves of grass and trees" was beneficial to Ming dynasty; gaining benefits can show the decency and respect of the Ming dynasty. Besides, the ruler thought "the minorities should not be given tea if any of them betrayed the ancient China; with tea, they may fall ill to death".^[7] For this reason, they outrageously carried out the policy of "devaluing horses and adding values in tea" in order to "devalue what they have and add value to what they don't have". It's obvious that tea became a tool the ruler of Ming dynasty used to threaten the people in Tibetan area. The author couldn't help thinking that the ruler of Qing dynasty dealt with the western countries with the closed-door policy, because the Qing dynasty's ruler thought: China was a celestial empire with vast territory and abundant resources, so it didn't need to depend on foreign countries; however, the western countries couldn't separate themselves from China; it was even thought that the western people would fall ill without tea for a day and would die without tea for days so Qing dynasty adopted the closed-door policy in the hope of letting the western countries die. As a matter of fact, this is only an Ah Q's method to comfort and deceive themselves and typically showed the superficial arrogance of the feudal ruler at that time. As a result, the object effect could speak for itself. Therefore, that the ruler of Ming dynasty hoped to threaten the Tibetan people with the weapon of tea is generally the same with that the ruler of Qing dynasty took the closed-door policy to control the western countries, so their results were largely identical but with minor differences.

The Ming dynasty's policy of "control of Tibet with tea" itself is correct and the ruler of Ming dynasty could completely strengthen the governance over Tibet by using tea as a carrier based on Tibetan people's diet characteristics of "treasuring tea as their life". However, with the guidance of the ethno-nationalism of the great Han "considering the inland people as its people while those out of this region to be barbarians", the ruler of Ming dynasty thought minorities "which are not our nationality so they must have purposes different from ours" and it was reasonable to "convert a major event into a minor one". For this reason, they made the policy of "devaluing horses and adding value in tea" to exploit and threaten the Tibetan people. Although they repeatedly declared that "both Han and minorities were a family", but they failed to equally treat Tibetan people when making policies let alone benefit the Tibetan people. As a result, the policy of "control of Tibet with tea" failed to realize its political purpose.

The theoretical basis for the policy was not met.

The theoretical basis for the Ming dynasty's policy of "control of Tibet with tea" was the so-called theory that "they couldn't live without tea" the ruler preached repeatedly. However, were the Tibetan people found of tea to the level of "no life without tea"? We can make a simple analysis below.

As we know, most of Tibetan people lived in the highly cold, anoxic and dry Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, whose coldness and desolation were beyond our imagination, so plants and vegetables couldn't survive here. The Tibetan people's diet was dominated by Zangba and yak meat but lacked

vegetable, so they were badly in need of vitamin in their diet. However, tea which is full of vitamin can exactly make up for the deficiency. Therefore, tea was extensively welcome and gradually became the necessity of life for the Tibetan people after tea was introduced to Tibet after Tang dynasty, so there is a saying that “only tea could dispel the grease of meat and the heat of highland barley”. The people in Song dynasty thought that “Tibetan people were so fond of tea that they couldn’t live without it for even one day”^[8] “The Tibetan people couldn’t live for even one day without tea”^[9]. In Ming dynasty, there were even sayings that “Tibetan people fell ill without tea because they ate cheese”^[10] and that “they would fall ill and die without tea for even a day”. According to the investigation of such cultural and historical data, we can see that the feudal rulers usually emphasized the inseparable relationship between tea and Tibetan people’s daily life. It is true that the special living environment and dietary structure led to Tibetan people’s unique tea-drinking custom, but it can never be the exaggerated condition as preached by the ruler of Ming dynasty.

Firstly, the ruler of Ming dynasty maximally exaggerated the Tibetan people’s dependence on tea for the sake of its political purpose. The ruler of Ming dynasty thought exchanging horses with tea with the Tibetan people could strengthen its military power, increase the fiscal revenue, more importantly, control the northwest minorities, isolate and strike the Mongolian power, so it was a good method to “gain benefits from the benefits”; for this reason, the ruler greatly exaggerated the importance of tea for the Tibetan people. Secondly, even though drinking tea was a dietary habit of Tibetan people, reasonably speaking, they would certainly not fall ill and even die without tea. As said in the *Policy of Mutual Trade of Tea and Horses in Ming Dynasty* written by Mr. Chen Yishi, “tea was not introduced to Tibet before Tang dynasty but the Tibetan people had been famous for their being strong, swift, fierce, valiant and skillful in battle long time ago”. This is enough to prove the absurdity of the theory that “people fall ill and even die without tea”. In addition, people’s life in Tibet also proves the incorrectness of this theory. Before liberation, Wu Kaifu described the living conditions of Tibetan people in the *Tibetan Commerce and Sino-India Transportation*: “tea is a very popular beverage but they don’t always add tea when they drink milk. ... without the two types of beverage, they can still self-sufficient for their daily life and articles and don’t consider the lack of the two as a major danger or a threat”.^[12] In the *Commerce of Labrang*^[13], Li Shijin gave a tabular statement: in the 28th year and 30th year of the Republic of China, the price of tea rose increasingly due to the traffic congestion after the war of resistance against Japanese; the high freight expenses led to the sharp decrease in the amount of tea transported to Tibet but the Tibetan people’s life was not greatly affected because of this. Finally, with a long-standing and well-established history of tea in China, Han and many minorities in the great family of China love, drink, treasure and get addicted to tea. Different nationalities have different tea cultures and tea plays an important role in the daily diet of many minorities. However, other minorities which are addicted to tea don’t die without tea, so there is no exception in Tibetan people.

Therefore, the ruling class of Ming dynasty’s unscrupulous rendering and exaggeration of the effect of tea in Tibetan people’s daily life and their exaggerated theories, such as the Tibetan people’s “falling ill and dying without tea for a day” and “surviving with tea and dying without tea”, they advocated, are ridiculous. Thus, it can be seen that the theory of “dying without tea” of Tibetan people the ruler of Ming dynasty exaggerated was only the ruler’s own wishful thinking and the theoretical basis for the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” was not met.

The objective effect was not satisfactory.

The Ming dynasty was an important historical period in the history of mutual trade of tea and horses between Han and Tibetan people. As the ruler of Ming dynasty governed Tibet with the policy of “control of Tibet with tea”, the mutual trade of tea and horses between Han and Tibetan people were exceptionally emphasized the emperors of all dynasties. Compared with Song dynasty, the tea and

horse system of Ming dynasty was most complete and the internal structure of tea law and system was also most rigorous. The *History of Ming Dynasty* recorded that “the policy of exchanging horses with tea has been adopted since Tang dynasty to govern Qiang and Rong and this policy was the most fully utilized in Ming dynasty”^[14]. Moreover, the tea and horse system continued in each generation till “the end of Ming dynasty”. With the importance attached by the imperial court and such complete systems, the scale of exchanging horses with tea between the government of Ming dynasty and Tibet should be the largest. However, it’s puzzling that the mutual trade of tea and horse in Ming dynasty was always trapped in the vicious cycle of “being popular but not prosperous” and the practical effect was also barely satisfactory. From the perspective of the scale of mutual trade, the highest quantity of horses traded was only ten thousand horses in Ming dynasty; the normal quantity of horses traded was only about five thousand horses. Such quantities were far less than the highest quantity of twenty thousand horses traded in Northern Song dynasty.

To sum up, we think the Tibet-governing policy of “control of Tibet with tea” of Ming dynasty should be disapproved, because the wrong guiding thought and the obvious mistake in the theoretical basis determined the failure of the policy. There’s also a comment on the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” in the *History of Ming Dynasty*: “In early Ming dynasty, smuggling tea was strictly prohibited. After a long time, many troubles appeared increasingly. In late Ming dynasty, businessmen spent more money to make tea to be sold privately apart from the official sales. Then, Tibetan people’s top-grade horses were all obtained by private businessmen while the tea office only obtained medium-grade and low-grade ones. After obtaining tea, the Tibetan people betrayed and freed themselves from Ming dynasty. Moreover, the officials took top-grade tea by mixing their private horses with Tibetan horses. As a result, the tea law, horse administration and border defense all got corrupted.”^[15] This is a very pertinent comment. However, the people in the Qing dynasty also made positive comments on the Tibet-governing policy of Ming dynasty in the sentence “keeping the peace in the western frontier and maintaining Ming dynasty’s out of the trouble of Tibetan roving bandits”^[16]. This is contradictory with the previous comment. We think Ming dynasty’s Tibet-governing policy consist of many aspects: setting up military force, administrative organization; conferring multiple titles and respecting Buddhists; paying tribute and granting rewards; mutual trade of tea and horse etc. They jointly formed the institutional system of Ming dynasty’s Tibet-governing policy. The consolatory policies of conferring multiple titles and consolidating governance with religion were the root for “ending Ming dynasty’s trouble of Tibetan roving bandits”. The positive comment here was made largely based on the consolatory policies of conferring multiple titles and consolidating governance with religion; the effect of “control of Tibet with tea” was rather limited.

Finally, we should also see the other side of the problem. Namely, the policy of “control of Tibet with tea” also played a positive role in the historical conditions at that time. For instance, it objective limited the inland businessmen’s speculation and blackmailing of Tibetan people. Besides, in the middle and late Ming dynasty, with the increasingly declining state-owned mutual trade between tea and horses, unofficial mutual trade between horses and tea had very positive effects on strengthening the national unity between Han and Tibetan people and stabilizing the western frontier. These were beyond the expectation of the ruler of Ming dynasty and also won’t affect our correct and objective understanding of the policy of “control of Tibet with tea”.

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