
Environmental issues are deeply rooted in how we navigate the relationship between humanity and nature. It underscores the imperative of judiciously balancing this relationship amidst our pursuit of economic growth and societal progress. Within the breadth of our interactions with nature's offerings, it is our connection to the land that stands out as unequivocally paramount. Karl Marx insightfully noted, "The soil in the virgin state in which it supplies man with necessities or the means of subsistence ready to hand, exists independently of him, and is the universal subject of human labor" (as cited in *Capital*, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling).

Throughout China's extensive history, with agricultural production as its foundation, the wise utilization of land resources and the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between humanity and the soil have remained pivotal and enduring themes. As far back as the Pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BCE), the Chinese had already grasped the crucial role that the effective management of land resources played in economic development. Li Kui (455–395 BCE), a distinguished hydraulic engineer, philosopher, and statesman in the Warring States period, observed that, "Diligent and meticulous farming could increase the yield by three *dou* [of grain] per *mu* (about 31 L for an area about 614 m²); lack of diligence leads to an equal loss." Mencius also championed this principle, stating, "This is the way of the common people. Those with constant means of support will have constant hearts, while those without constant means will not have constant hearts. Lacking constant hearts, they will go astray and get into excesses, stopping at nothing" (quoted from *Mencius*, translated by D. C. Lau).

For farmers, the most essential constant means were their "five *mu* of land" and "a hundred *mu* of land," which constituted the so-called land resources. *The Book of Lord Shang* also asserted, "if a minimum of 500 *mu* is sufficient to support one soldier, it is not making proper use of the land. But if a territory of 100 square *li* supports 10,000 soldiers for war as a minimum, then it shows that the cultivated land is sufficient to nourish its population, that cities, towns and highways are sufficient to accommodate their inhabitants, that mountains and forests, marshes and moors, valleys and dales, are sufficient to provide profit, and that marshes and moors, dykes and embankments are sufficient for grazing. Therefore, when the army marches out and grain is given them, there is still a surplus of riches; when the army is resting and the people at work, the cattle are always sufficient" (as translated by J. J. L. Duyvendak). Evidently, Shang

Yang (ca. 390–338 BCE), a renowned jurist, philosopher, and statesman, deemed the rational utilization of land resources as the foremost strategy for national prosperity and military strength.

Drawing from New Institutional Economics, it is recognized that in ancient China, land and labor were the twin pillars of means of production. The proportion between these resources dictated the fluctuations in the relative pricing of production factors. Generally, at the dawn of a new dynasty, as the turmoil and warfare of the preceding dynasty had caused a drastic decline in population, vast expanses of uncultivated land would lie untapped. During such periods, the rarity of labor in relation to the abundance of land would drive up labor costs. As a result, the economic value of land could not be entirely activated.

In light of this, the government would often resort to policies aimed at “recuperation and regeneration.” These measures involved lightening the burden of corvée and taxes, promoting land reclamation, and encouraging population growth to mitigate the potential economic drawbacks stemming from labor shortages. Over extended spans, land turned into a relatively scarce resource in comparison to labor, especially during the population boom in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The surplus labor force diminished the marginal productivity of labor in production to almost nil, markedly inflating the relative price of land. Consequently, devising effective land resource policies and harnessing potential profits through policy shifts emerged as prevalent concerns for the government.

In fact, rulers throughout history consistently accorded high importance to the exploitation and conservation of land resources. Notably, the land resource policies of past dynasties were all grounded in the “agricultural-first” principle, standing in stark contrast to the modern emphasis on ecological balance and sustainable development. With this foundation, land policies have exerted mixed impacts, benefiting or disadvantaging diverse types of land resources across various regions.

Ensuing the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 CE) in the Tang dynasty, China’s economic hub gradually moved southward. This transition not only fundamentally transformed the agricultural landscape of China, but also catalyzed major technological innovations in production methods. This revolution triggered a sequence of changes in

land resource polices. During the subsequent Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (960–1911 CE), land management and conservation policies were increasingly honed and enhanced.



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