Characteristics and Implications of the Decision-Making System and Think Tanks in Feudal China

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Keywords: Feudal china, Think tank, Characteristic, Implication.

Abstract. As a part of the political system, the consulting system for decision-making in feudal China is inevitably influenced by the political system prevailing in the dynasty concerned. The characteristics of the political systems in various dynasties are intrinsically connected with the evolution of the then-current think tanks. Think tanks originated in the Spring and Autumn Period, rose in Qin, Han, Sui and Tang Dynasties and were prosperous in Ming and Qing Dynasties. After analyzing the development process of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China, we find out that such system has the following characteristics: it has the dual attributes of dependence and independence; it is Feudal China’s inherent requirements to maintain long period of order and stability; the core force is the system of aides and staffs. Reflections on the implications of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China are of great significance in judging the development trend of China’s think tanks in the future. Thought is one of the weapons for a country to be properous. American scholar Paul Pierson said, In the process of institutional change, it is easy to form a self-strengthening path dependence, Once a system model is on track, The possibility of continued development along the same path will increase. Therefore, to reflect on the development process of the decision-making systems and think tanks in Feudal China is helpful for us to understand the status quo of think tanks in our country and judge the development trend of thinks tanks in the future. [1]

Characteristics of Think Tanks’ Consultations for Decision-Making in Feudal China

Dual Attributes of the Consulting System for Decision-Making in Feudal China: Dependence and Independence

The consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China has the dual attributes of dependence and independence. The system of prime minister was the initial offspring of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China. Prior to Sui and Tang Dynasties, the prime minister had been holding an important position and his power used to be able to contend with the imperial power. However, since Sui and Tang Dynasties, along with the consolidation of the imperial power, the power of a prime minister began to be weakened gradually. As a result, the consulting system for decision-making became monotonic and low-efficient. Under the official system in Feudal China, the decision-making mechanism and other mechanisms were not only independent of each other but also constrained each other, but could not solve the internal contradictions of the ruling class. The system of the office of the commanding officer was an important supplement to the official system in feudal China. All that the aides and staffs owned was their own cultural knowledge, so from the perspectives of both their economic status and functions, the consulting system for decision-making in feudal China could only be attached to the ruling class. The power of a master was the foundation to ensure that the aides and staffs worked for the master. Once the master lost power, the aides and staffs would find another master. In addition, the ruling class also underestimated the value of the aides and staffs. After all, under the rule of feudal power, only a few rulers would accept negative, critical opinions. They were more willing to hear some opinions consistent with or in support of their own views. This further strengthens the dependence characteristics of the aides and staffs. [2]

The independence of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China is reflected in two aspects, i.e. knowledge and system. The talents and knowledge of the aides and staffs were independent of any stratum or anything. That’s why they were appreciated by their masters. The
various states competed with each other fiercely and only those states which gathered more and better aides and staffs would win; therefore, the aides and staffs were able to bargain with the high officials to whom they proposed to aid. This is an important characteristic of independence of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China. However, the aides and staffs were dedicated to seek high position and great wealth or render meritorious service and make a distinguished career. To do so, they had no choice but to aid to a high official. They believed it justifiable that “a fine fowl perches only on a fine tree”. This is the practical characteristic of independence of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China. The system-related independence means that aides and staffs were recognized by the ruling class, relatively independent and supplementary to the formal decision-making system. The system of aides and staffs once played great role in advancing the development of the human society. Especially, at the crucial moments of the dynasty alternation and war, the aides and staffs used to set forth advices and even participate in decision-making, even playing more important role than formal officials. It was not uncommon for some aides and staffs to make great contributions, win appreciations from the master, and replace or weaken the formal officials. On the other hand, because of various limitations, the aides and staffs were often difficult to bring into play their abilities and their intellects and talents were buried. So the consulting system for decision-making in feudal China had always been hovering between dependence and independence. The system of the office of the commanding officer in feudal China was not isolated, and the foundation of feudal China was enough to support the survival and development of this system. The centralization of imperial power was the dominant character of feudal China. Under this framework, the rule by men was dominant, and the power was concentrated on a few rulers. To fulfill their dreams, the children of poor families had no choice but to enter the office of the commanding officer. This was just the social foundation that the system of the office of the commanding officer was widespread, long-lasting in feudal China. Therefore, the consulting system for decision-making had always been constrained by the centralization. Both the constraints of the imperial power on the power of the prime minister and the control of the master over his aides and staffs reflected the suppression and hindrance of the imperial power on the consulting system for decision-making in feudal China. The theory of democratic politics and the history of human development tell us that the dictatorship of the imperial power hindered the social development process because of the fact that the centralized political system had no checks and balances. If without the office of the commanding officer, the dictatorship of the imperial power would have been more unscrupulous. Therefore, the system of the office of the commanding officer in feudal China not only assumed the function of assisting the regime, but also constrained the imperial power to certain extent. If without the system of the office of the commanding officer, the evil of human nature would have been vividly manifested in the centralization, the entire bureaucracy would have been totally devastated, and the feudal system would quickly go to perish. In this sense, the system of the office of the commanding officer was the inner demand of the feudal society to maintain long period of order and stability.

The Core Force Driving the Development of the Consulting System for Decision-Making in Feudal China: The System of Aides and Staffs

After analyzing the development process of the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China, we find out that whenever the aides and staffs were put in a very important position, the people would be quite liberal-minded and the economy be thriving. Some ambitious politicians cherished and made good use of talents so that they could fully display their strategies and intelligence. Some of them even affected the process of the history, and left a good name forever. For example, Li Si played an important role for the Qin Dynasty in the process of establishing a unified dynasty; Zhang Liang repeatedly provided wonderful advices to Liu Bang and assisted Liu Bang in winning the Chu-Han war; during the Tang Dynasty, Wei Zheng and Zhangsun Wuji
assisted the wise emperor Li Shiming in fulfilling “Golden Years of Zhengguan; during the Ming Dynasty, Liu Bowen assisted Zhu Yuanzhang in completing the emperor's achievements and maintaining the stability of the country. The system of the office of the commanding officer in Feudal China had cultivated and created a large number of counselors. From hanger-ons during the Spring and Autumn Period to private assistants during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, they used their own intelligence and strategies to influence the process of China’s history time and time again. They made huge contributions to Chinese civilization and became the most dazzling stars in Chinese culture. They are not only talked about by the people at their leisure but also appraised by the people of all ages.

Implications of the Consulting System for Decision-Making in Feudal China

The consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China is an excellent cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. As a part of the political culture and administrative system under the feudal monarchy, the consulting system for decision-making plays a decisive influence on the reunification and development of the imperial dynasty and the consolidation of the imperial power, which is worthy of reference and thinking today.

Above all, the establishment of the consulting system for decision-making reduced the blind decision of the monarch. In the feudal autocratic society, the emperor was the ultimate decision maker of all government affairs. The decision-making system, under which the emperor was the core and the aides and staffs were assistants, could reduce the monarch or executive's blind decision-making, because it was a fairly complete system covering information collection—information processing—planning—decision-making. At the same time, the daily affairs were first deliberated by the aides and staffs so that the decision-makers could focus on strategies without tracing the specific trivial work. This is the base point why the the consulting system for decision-making could exist thousands of years along with the development and changes of Chinese society. The decision-making advisory mechanism of modern government should also emphasize the importance of decision-making consultation and respect for talents so as to improve the quality of decision-making, and reduce the blindness and randomness in decision making.

Secondly, the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China had clear division, in line with the trend of social division of labor and professional refinement. With the development of the society, the industrial structure is becoming more and more complex, and the division of labor more and more fine. In the office of the commanding officer, there were often a variety of professional aides and staffs. The system of the office of the commanding officer adapted to the trend of the social division of labor and professional development trend and was conducive for professionals to bring into bring their expertise. In today's society, a variety of professional issues and cross-disciplinary problems continue to emerge, so a large number of highly professional, high-quality personnel are needed to join the decision-making team.

Thirdly, the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China is conducive to find and use talents. The consulting for decision-making can be inside or outside the system, and can play a role according to an appointment arrangement or any other agreement, for the aides and staffs can observe problems from their own perspectives to avoid decision-making blind spot. “The sages occupy the highest position; the wise assist the sages as their aides; the able persons take medium positions; the hardworking persons are in the lower positions”, which is the ideal traditional government model, should be said to be a reasonable model of talent structure. During the Spring and Autumn Period, as long as you had certain skills, you might be employed as hanger-on or sustained scholar; during the Qin, Han, Eastern Jin and Western Jin Dynasties, “heroes are defined according to abilities and military merits, under which as military officers, Han Xin and Chen Ping became famous aides; during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the system of aides and staffs made up the deficiency of the system of imperial examinations, providing another path for scholars and supplementing the traditional administrative and military systems. These are the advantages of the system of aides and staffs, providing reference for the modern think tank talent management system.
Finally, the consulting system for decision-making in Feudal China is democratic centralism, reflecting democracy. Before making a major decision, the master often gave full play to the subjective initiative of the aides and staffs, who in turn would make every effort to please the master. Every major decision-making process is like today's “brainstorming” meeting. With talents and system, the accuracy and breadth of information was greatly improved. Moreover, the democratic nature of decision-making was improved. The democratic centralism was fully reflected in the offices of the commanding officers, especially those which are independent of the official system. With their rich experiences, knowledge and wisdom, the aides and staffs assisted their masters in decision-making, making immortal feats for the historical development. We can see from historical experiences that vigorously developing the folk think tank plays an irreplaceable role in the healthy development of the modern decision-making consultation system. The diversified development of think tanks is a prerequisite for building a fair institutional environment. To innovate the modern the consulting system for decision-making, we should waste no time to support the civil think tanks to participate in the competition, invite semi-official think tanks to participate in government decision-making, and reduce the administrative and bureaucratic elements of official think tanks.

References


