

Research on the Social and Economic Activities of Women in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: For a long time, women had always been a slightly overlooked part in history. However, their impact goes beyond our imagination. In order to explore the role of women in the Tang Dynasty, different methods were implied. This paper mainly studies the changes in marriage views and property rights, the social and economic activities of women in the Tang Dynasty. It finds that the social and economic status of Tang Dynasty women has improved compared to previous dynasties. Tang Dynasty women were able to freely choose marriage and have legally effective property rights. Additionally, women in the Tang dynasty also had an indelible influence on political and cultural exchanges. By studying the socio-economic life of women in the Tang Dynasty, it is more convenient for us to understand Tang society, complete the discourse power of women in historical research, and further enrich the study of women's history and women's economy.

Keywords: Women's Economy, Ancient Chinese History, Socioeconomics

1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty was the most prosperous and open era in ancient Chinese history. With the development of economy, the social status of women in the Tang Dynasty also underwent certain changes. Research on the status of women in the Tang Dynasty is a vital part on Chinese women's history. However, most contemporary studies to some extent overlook the contributions made by women in social and economic development. In the contrast, women are not useless, they play a crucial role on social development. This study mainly uses research methods, such as literature review, comparative research, and historical analysis to explore the social and economic activities of women in the Tang Dynasty. By studying the marriage, political participation, cultural communication and property rights of women in the Tang Dynasty, people can understand their role positioning and behavior rules in life, which precisely reflects the social and cultural characteristics of the Tang Dynasty.

2. The Background of Women in Tang Dynasty

2.1. The Development of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty was a glorious era in Chinese history. At that time, the Tang Dynasty was at the forefront of the world with highly developed productive forces, advanced agriculture, handicrafts,

and thriving science and technologies [1]. The reason why the economy of the Tang Dynasty was able to achieve both qualitative and quantitative development was precisely because the Tang Dynasty's emphasis on the development of technology, agriculture, and handicrafts promoted institutional reforms. According to Marx's economic theory of "productivity determines production relations", he pointed out that changes in productivity centered on technological changes and changes in production relations centered on institutional changes are the foundation of economic development. It was incisively because of the systematic development of practical schools in the Tang Dynasty that science began to become an important resource for the country and an important institution for society. This is a great legacy left by the Tang Dynasty to future generations, and even today, traces of the Tang Dynasty's scientific and technological system can still be seen in China's higher education system [2]. In the Tang Dynasty, the improvement of paper and printing technology promoted cultural reform and development, as well as the popularization of education; The relative maturity of iron forging technology in agriculture has brought China's three major agricultural belts into a prosperous period; The Grand Canal, which continued from the Sui Dynasty, and the Silk Road, which has been passed down from the Han Dynasty to the present day, as well as the enlightened foreign policy of the Tang Dynasty, also led to the rapid development of commerce and further promoted the socio-economic development of the Tang Dynasty.

2.2. The Status of Women in Tang Dynasty

At the same time, the status of women in the Tang Dynasty has improved compared to previous generations, especially in terms of marital autonomy, property rights, and social participation. In the past, women did not have freedom to divorce or have a clearly property rights, as the feudal patriarchal system in ancient China made women dependent on men, which made it difficult for them to have their own economic sources and freedom of marriages. Most of their property sources were passive inheritance or gift giving, and the lack of economic sources also meant a lack of their voice. However, due to the development of the social economy, women were awakening, with more and more women engaged in politics, they furthermore pushed the change of laws, women's property rights were clearer compared to the past. In the Tang Dynasty, not only did upper-class women begin to enjoy free marriage, property, and political participation rights, but the power of lower-class women was also constantly expanding.

In the family, women in the Tang Dynasty had a certain degree of economic management power, especially in small and medium-sized households, women are the main force in household silk production, according to the "New Book of Tang", during the Tianbao period, the taxes (a part of them contained production) collected from families by government amounted to "7.4 million pieces of silk, over 1.8 million tons of cotton, and over 1.35 million ends of cloth"[3]. These data indirectly indicate that women have also become an important labor force for taxation in Tang families [4]. Legally, the Tang Code granted women equal rights in inheritance and a similar status to male brothers [5]. The protection of women rights by Tang Dynasty laws and the open atmosphere in society allowed women to operate businesses, develop handicrafts, participate in entertainment, political and cultural activities more freely. Some women are known for their poetry and literary creations, such as the famous female poet Xue Tao, whose works are highly acclaimed in the literary world [6]. The Tang Dynasty was also the dynasty with the highest number of female officials and most of them belonged to the upper-class women as members of the royal family or powerful officials. According to statistics, during the peak 140 years of the Tang Dynasty, women participated in politics and held power in the court for nearly one-third of the time [7]. It can be observed that in the Tang Dynasty, women had significant development in politics.

2.2.1. The Marriage Concept of Tang Dynasty Women

In the laws of the Tang Dynasty, there was a provision that read: If a child establishes a marriage relationship without the consent of their parents, it is recognized by law. Only those who are unmarried and do not respect their elders are considered illegal, violators shall be punished with a hundred lashes [8]. This law granted unmarried men and women the right to choose their spouses independently. In the Tang Dynasty, both upper-class and lower-class women had the freedom to choose marriage. There are many examples of upper-class women in the Tang Dynasty choosing their own husbands, such as Dou, the mother of Emperor Taizong of Tang, who chose her spouse by competition for marriage, and the daughter of Prime Minister Li Linfu who also chose her spouse independently. In the Tang Dynasty, there were also many behaviors of upper-class women remarrying. Wu Zetian once married Emperor Taizong and Emperor Gaozong as concubines; Yang Yuhuan also married Prince Shou first, and then became the concubine of Emperor Xuanzong.

Although lower-class women in the Tang Dynasty were still bound by feudal rituals and laws, at that time, "the orders of parents and the words of matchmakers" still dominated, but most women dared to boldly pursue love and marriage. In terms of the dissolution of marital relationships, lower-class women in the Tang Dynasty also had more freedom than in previous generations, often being able to leave on their own and remarry others. The law in Tang Dynasty appropriately protects women, and gave women more freedom. Although most divorces in the Tang Dynasty were initiated by men, there were also many cases of "abandoning the husband" initiated by the wife. Although in the late Tang Dynasty, the imperial power of rulers was weakened and women's marriage rights were weakened in order to maintain the authoritarian hierarchical system, this situation was compared to the early Tang Dynasty, not previous dynasties [9]. Overall, women's marriage rights in the Tang Dynasty were freer than in the previous dynasty. To explain the reasons, an essay suggests that the marriage atmosphere in the Tang Dynasty was relatively open, mainly manifested in four aspects: (1) men and women had relative freedom in choosing a spouse and were brave enough to pursue a happy marriage; (2) The concept of chastity is weak; (3) The marital relationship tends towards equality or even inversion; (4) Ethnic intermarriage is frequent [10].

2.3. Women in Cultural Communication

The Tang Dynasty had a flourishing cultural exchange with foreign countries, and women were an important driving force behind it. Hu dance and music from Central Asia and the Western Regions were introduced to the Central Plains through female artists in the court, and further spread to East Asia, enriching the cultural landscape of the Tang Dynasty [11]. At the same time, the music and dance of Chinese women also spread to other regions through the Silk Road, becoming an important part of local culture and art [12], promoting the integration of multi-ethnic cultures.

Apart from the dissemination of dance and music, the spread and development of the silk industry are closely related to women. Women are not only the main labor force in silk production, but also bring the silk making skills of China to neighboring countries, even as far as Central Asia and Europe, through marriage and gift giving [13]. One of the most important examples is the marriage alliance between Princess Wencheng and Songtsen Gampo in Tibet, which not only established a long-lasting peaceful relationship between Tang and Tubo, but also introduced the culture, religion, and agricultural technology of China to Tubo region.

3. Economic activities of women in Tang Dynasty

3.1. The Property Rights of Women in the Tang Dynasty

Compared to previous dynasties, the property rights of women in the Tang Dynasty were more guaranteed. Tang Dynasty laws clearly granted women various forms of property rights and protected their rights through practice. In the Tang Dynasty, the sources of women's property were diverse, mainly including dowries, land distribution, gifts, and testamentary inheritance. The dowry is not only the private property of married women, but also explicitly defined by law as a dowry that cannot be used for other purposes. Widows and female households (i.e. women who become heads of household without male inheritance) have certain rights in land distribution and can inherit part of the land and property of their husband's or father's family [9]. Due to social development and economic progress, women's rights are constantly expanding. In the Tang Code, women have the right to inheritance, control, and the right not to participate in the division of family property through dowry. In addition, women can obtain different forms of property rights based on their actual status at different stages of life, including unmarried, married, and widowed. For instance, a widowed mother can serve as the head of the household to manage family property, and even inherit it on behalf of her husband.

The property rights of women in the Tang Dynasty not only guarantees the status of women in the family, but also enables them to play a greater role in socio-economic activities. However, due to the constraints of traditional etiquette, women's property rights are still restricted, especially the protection of the rights of grassroots women is relatively weak. However, the Tang Dynasty granted women property rights through clear legal norms, which not only inherited and improved the laws of previous generations, but also provided legislative and judicial references for future generations.

3.2. Women in Handicraft Industry

3.2.1. The Importance of Women in Textile, Embroidery, and Handicraft Production

The flourishing development of handicrafts in the Tang Dynasty was inseparable from the participation of women. Especially in traditional industries such as textiles and embroidery, female craftsmen are the backbone of this field [14]. The silk of the Tang Dynasty was renowned for its exquisite craftsmanship. Embroidery works were not only used in the domestic market, but also became an important trade commodity on the Silk Road, sought after by aristocrats in Central and West Asia.

Moreover, women actively participate in the production of handicrafts such as pottery and jewelry. These exquisite handicrafts both reflect the advanced manufacturing technology of the Tang Dynasty and showcase the talent of women in innovative design. The international trade of this handicraft product greatly enhances the economic value of female labor.

3.2.2. Economic Value Assessment of Female Labor Force

Female labor played an important role in the handicraft industry of the Tang Dynasty, and its economic value was not only reflected in the output of products, but also in the improvement of product quality and added value [15]. A beautiful embroidery piece often comes at a high price, and its production process takes months or even years. This "technology intensive" labor directly enhances the status of women in economic activities.

3.3. Women in Agriculture and Family Economy

The family economy model was an important economic form in rural areas during the Tang Dynasty, where women actively participated in the circulation of goods along the Silk Road through handicraft production and the exchange of agricultural residues. Women use the silk they weave at home to exchange exotic goods such as spices and medicinal herbs through markets or caravans. This "family market" economic model can increase household income, what's more, it allows women to play a bridging role in the Silk Road trade.

4. The Impact of Changes in Women's Social and Economic Power during the Tang Dynasty on Future Generations

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) marked a period of significant change in women's social and economic power, leaving a lasting impact on future generations. Women in this era, particularly those from aristocratic families or urban centers, enjoyed greater freedom and agency than in earlier periods. They could engage in public life, pursue education, and manage estates. This shift in status set a precedent for recognizing women's abilities beyond domestic roles. Empress Wu Zetian, the only woman to rule China as an emperor, exemplified this transformation, challenging patriarchal norms and demonstrating the potential for women to wield political authority.

Meanwhile, women gained a rather clearer explanation in economy. Women had legal rights to own, inherit, and manage property, granting them financial independence and a voice in family wealth. Widows, in particular, often became key decision-makers in managing estates. Some women also participated in trade and operated businesses, paving the way for future contributions to economic systems. These roles showcased women's capacity to influence economic structures, though their freedoms fluctuated in subsequent dynasties.

Besides, Tang women were quite active in arts and literature. Female poets like Xue Tao and Yu Xuanji gained recognition, inspiring future generations to engage in literary pursuits. Additionally, Tang women enjoyed greater freedom in self-expression, including fashion, contributing to a dynamic cultural landscape and challenging restrictive norms. The prominence of strong, independent women during this period provided enduring role models. While later dynasties imposed some restrictions, the legacy of Tang women influenced intellectual debates and cultural narratives about gender roles.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant transformations in women's social and economic roles during the Tang Dynasty, illustrating their profound influence on the period and subsequent generations. This research not only sheds light on the pivotal role women played during one of China's most dynamic periods but also emphasizes the importance of their contributions to socio-economic and cultural development. By understanding these historical patterns, we can better appreciate the enduring influence of Tang women and draw lessons for advancing gender equality in contemporary society.

Since historical records mostly focus on men, there are relatively few documents on the role of women in historical materials, and most of them are indirect records. This has led to a certain degree of limitation in the research content. The descriptions of female politicians and cultural exchanges in official history are often scattered, while local chronicles, epitaphs, and other materials can supplement some information, but lack systematicity and comprehensiveness. At the same time, there is a tendency in existing historical materials to lean towards the elite class, leading to the neglect of the role of ordinary women. During the research process, quantitative analysis is limited by the incompleteness and accuracy of data sources. Specific data on women's participation in economic activities mostly rely on archaeological discoveries and scattered literature, which are difficult to

comprehensively cover the entire Tang Dynasty. At the same time, the influence of women in cross-cultural communication is often qualitatively described, and there is a lack of quantitative research methods to measure their actual contributions. Despite various issues that arose during the research process, the socio-economic situation of women in the Tang Dynasty is still worth studying. The changes in women's laws and social status in the Tang Dynasty had a profound impact on later generations. A thorough understanding of the socio-economic situation of women in the Tang Dynasty not only can help us gain a deeper understanding of the society and economy at that time, but also can further supplement the history of Chinese women and socio-economic history.

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