

# An Examination of Social Relief in Ancient China

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**Abstract:** Social assistance and relief to the impoverished and vulnerable groups is a time-honored tradition that has been continued throughout Chinese history. Although social and economic development varied from one historical period to another, poverty, being a social phenomenon, can be found in any historical society. Under no circumstances could the ruling class ignore the very existence of such special groups. To meet the needs of social development and political ruling, the imperial governments of all dynasties in Chinese history invariably offered social assistance and relief to the vulnerable groups to highlight their consideration and care of them at the state level.

**Keywords:** ancient China, social relief, social security

Poverty elimination, improvement of people's livelihood and pursuit of common prosperity are in line with the essential requirements of socialism. Currently, China still has a population of 70,710,000 living below the poverty line. Given that, how to narrow the huge gaps between urban and rural China and between regions remains a major challenge. The Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee in 2015 adopted *The Recommendations of the CPC Central Committee for the 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development*. According to the communique of the Fifth Plenary Session, China will "eliminate rural and regional poverty and rehabilitate all poor counties" by 2020, which means the following five years (i.e. 2016-2020) is a sprint phase for China's poverty alleviation cause.

Social assistance and relief to the impoverished and vulnerable groups

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is a time-honored tradition that has been continued throughout Chinese history. Although social and economic development varied from one historical period to another, poverty, being a social phenomenon, can be found in any historical society. Under no circumstances could the ruling class ignore the very existence of such special groups. To meet the needs of social development and political ruling, the imperial governments of all dynasties in Chinese history invariably offered social assistance and relief to those vulnerable groups to highlight their consideration and care of them at the state level.

Social relief, or social assistance, refers to a variety of material and psychological aids offered by government authorities and other social entities to citizens who lack basic necessities due to natural disasters, loss of labor capacity or low wages to ensure their basic living and help maintain their minimum subsistence (Yao, 2012, p. 12). In ancient Chinese society, social relief was a primary means of ensuring the basic living of those at the bottom of the social ladder. A sound, complete and reasonable system of social security and assistance was crucial to the reduction of social unrest, the maintaining of social stability, the consolidation of imperial power, and the sustaining of imperial rule. In ancient times, China developed many social relief thoughts and measures. In terms of the subject of relief, social relief in ancient China falls into two categories, governmental and non-governmental relief (monastery relief in particular). Since the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC-771 BC), governmental relief continued to develop and improve in terms of relief institutions, objects and measures before reaching an institutional peak in the Song Dynasty (960 AD-1279 AD), setting a poverty alleviation example for later dynasties. By contrast, non-governmental relief did not witness a boom until the late Ming Dynasty (1368 AD-1644 AD), during which non-governmental charities transformed from individual and sporadic cases to organized regional activities. Major nationwide charity organizations then included Yizhuang (patriarchal clan-run charitable estates) and Shanhui/Shantang (charity societies). Due to space constraints, this paper mainly focuses on examining the imperial authorities' relief thoughts, institutions, systems, objects and measures in ancient China and drawing on historical experience and lessons. By taking history as a mirror, this paper aims to provoke reflective thoughts and offer some suggestions for the building and improvement of the social security system in current China.

## **A Brief Review of Social Relief Thoughts in Ancient China**

### **The Confucian Policy of Benevolence**

An ideal world was depicted in the chapter of Great Unity, "The Conveyance of Rites" in *Book of Rites (Liji)* as follows, "People not only love their own parents and children, but love the parents and children of others, as well. The elderly live their last years in happiness; able-bodied adults are usefully employed; children are reared properly. The widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family and the

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① In his book *Twiterville: How Business Can Thrive in the New Global Neighborhoods* (China Renmin University Press, 2010), American scholar Shel Israel proposes the concept of "braided journalism," which is a new form of news generated when traditional media is integrated with new media.

disabled unable to work are all well cared for.” This depiction reveals ancient Chinese thinkers’ earliest view of relieving the vulnerable groups.

The “Royal Regulations” in *Book of Rites* mentioned relief measures targeting the disabled such as the deaf and the mute in the parts on social systems of the Xia (C. 2070 BC-1600 BC), Shang (C. 1600 BC-1046 BC) and Zhou (1046 BC-256 BC) dynasties. “(The society) offered food relief to the disabled based on their respective conditions.” In other words, society should at least provide some food to the disabled, who, born with regrets and unable to pour out their misery, deserved necessary help from society.

Mencius once advocated, “Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; Treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated.” He considered respecting and caring for the elderly to be part of universal moral realm. Regarding social relief to the elderly, Mencius raised quite a high standard. He said, “A family with a five-*mu* private garden should plant some mulberries so that family member(s) in their fifties can wear silk garments, and carefully raise some poultry and livestock such as chickens, pigs and dogs so that family member(s) in their seventies can have meat.” In other words, the elderly, having worked hard for most of their life, deserve a better and more comfortable life with clothes to wear, meat to eat and a house to dwell in during their declining years. When explaining the well-field system, Mencius praised, “Each unit of the well-field system was divided among (eight) peasant families.<sup>①</sup> The peasant families worked together in the field, helped one another in defense against enemies and supported each other in adversity, developing a friendly and harmonious neighborhood.” This is an early period concept of a “positive neighborhood watch” which concerns rural charity in ancient China.

According to Xun Kuang, “Those who have one of the Five Defects should be raised up and gathered in so that they can be cared for. They should be given official duties commensurate with their abilities and employment adequate to feed and clothe themselves so that all are included and not even one of them is overlooked... This may be described as ‘Heaven’s Power’ — such is the government of True King.” Judging from the above words, Xun Kuang highlighted the importance of social relief from a perspective of regime legitimacy and considered social relief to be one of the criteria for the ruler’s good governance.

### The Mohist Policy of Universal Love

The Mohist school advocated universal love, which challenged then established patriarchal relation-based differentiation of lowliness and nobleness. According to Mozi, man in principle should care for all people equally, regardless of their political status and kinship. Transcending the patriarchal

<sup>①</sup> The well-field system was a Chinese land redistribution method existing between the ninth century BC (late Western Zhou dynasty) to around the end of the Warring States period. Its name comes from Chinese character 井 (jǐng), which means ‘well’ and looks like the # symbol; this character represents the theoretical appearance of land division: a square area of land was divided into nine identically-sized sections; the eight outer sections (私田; sī tián) were privately cultivated by serfs and the center section (公田; gōng tián) was communally cultivated on behalf of the landowning aristocrat.

relation-based Confucian ethics, Mohism tried to extend love from the kinship level to all social levels and tackle all social problems with love among people. Mohism encouraged people to care for others around them and help those in difficulty as much as possible. It is fair to say that the Mohist philosophy of universal love reflects the then social standard and concerns mutual acts. Such a philosophy and the corresponding social relationships profoundly influenced the concrete behaviors and practice of ancient Chinese people and guided the establishment and practice of specific non-governmental social security undertakings, such as civil self-help and mutual aid.

Mohism advocated the interests of common people. According to Mozi, “There are three things that the people worry about, namely, that the hungry cannot be fed, that the cold cannot be clothed, and that the tired cannot get rest. These three are the great worries of the people.” He also held that a ruler’s primary task should be “doing all that benefit people and removing all that harm people” so that “those who are hungry will have food; those who are cold will have clothing and those who are weary will have a rest.” Such words reflect a call for guaranteeing the “baseline equality.”

### **Guan Zhong’s Policy of Matchmaking for the Widowed**

Guan Zhong was among the earliest politicians and philosophers to have realized the importance of husband-wife companionship in people’s later life. He thus introduced the policy of matchmaking for the widowed. According to the policy, “Each state should have officials specializing in matchmaking. A widow is a woman whose husband has died, and a widower is a man whose wife has died. And the official matchmakers should try to bring a widow and a widower together and help them start a family by granting certain land and a house to them, who would serve the government for three years in return. This is what is known as matchmaking for the widowed.” Approaching their later years, people are more likely to suffer poverty and adversity and accordingly the importance of husband-wife companionship is highlighted. Thus, Guan Zhong thought the government was obliged to help make matches for the widowed. Apart from that, Guan Zhong also held that the state, or rather the government had the obligation of caring for the elderly who were sick. “Each state should have officials specializing in dealing with the elderly who are sick. The responsible officials should visit the sick gentry and send their well wishes under the monarch’s order. More specifically, for the sick gentry over 90 years old, the officials should follow their conditions and send their well wishes on a daily basis; for the sick gentry over 80 years old, they should do so once every other day; for the sick gentry over 70 years old, they should do so once every three days. For the elderly at grass-roots level who are sick, the officials should do so once every five days. For the sick whose conditions are getting worse, the officials should report to the monarch, who will pay a visit to the sick in person.” According to Guan Zhong, “The hungry should be given food; the cold should be offered clothing; the dead should be buried; the down and out should be aided. Only by doing so can a monarch win the hearts of all. This is what is known as uniting people across the state.”

## Major Social Relief Services in Ancient China

### Bingfang

Bingfang (patients' house) was originally a temple-run social relief service for the sick. Ever since Buddhism was introduced to China, it continued to integrate with local culture and grew. In the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420 AD-589 AD), the Buddhist concept of "Futian" (field of merit) was gradually accepted by the then ruling class. Under the influence of the Futian concept, in the period of Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern dynasties, Liu Ji Guan (medical clinic specializing in treating six diseases), a social relief service similar to Bingfang emerged and became popular. As recorded in "Chapter 21. *Biography of the Crown Prince Wenhui*" in *Book of Southern Qi*, "The Crown Prince and Jingling Prince (Ziliang) believed in Buddhism and they set up Liu Ji Guan to provide medical treatment for the poor." It can thus be inferred from the record that Liu Ji Guan was a government-backed medical service established under the inspiration of Buddhist doctrine in the Northern and Southern Dynasties to install the vulnerable groups (the impoverished, the weak, the sick, the orphaned, etc.). In the second year of Putong era (521 AD), Emperor Wu of Liang, personal name Xiao Yan, issued an imperial edict as follows, "For the elderly with no family and the orphaned who cannot make a living, competent authorities at prefecture and county levels should support them by providing them sufficient food, clothing and dwelling and ensuring their basic living permanently. A welfare house should be set up in the capital city to provide orphans a home and satisfy the needs of the elderly with no family. When the elderly pass away, they should be properly buried. Households in extreme poverty can be exempted from land rent and per household tax" (Yao, 1973, p. 64). The welfare house set up by Emperor Wu of Liang set a precedent for government-run social relief services and it was inherited and carried forward by later generations.

In the mid Tang Dynasty (618 AD-907 AD), Bingfang situated in temples saw a steady increase in both number and influence. Against such a backdrop, the imperial government of Tang decided to include Bingfang into the national relief system. As recorded in "Bingfang", *Institutional History of Tang* (Vol. 49), "In the fifth year of the Kaiyuan era (717 AD), Prime Minister Song Jing wrote in a memorial to Emperor Xuanzong of Tang: Since the Chang'an era (701 AD-704 AD), influenced by Buddhist concept of Beitian (field of compassion), there have been designated officials specializing in running welfare shelters. Those welfare shelters are supposed to support and take care of the orphaned, the impoverished, the elderly and the sick, and are under the protection and jurisdiction of the designated officials. Now, however, there are many disqualified idlers taking advantage of welfare shelters, which may be degraded to a hiding place for fugitives and may ultimately foment unrest. When Zilu (a disciple of Confucius) was at the State of Wei, he once paid out of his own pocket and bought porridge for the poor. Disapproved by Confucius, he had to stop this generous move. Charity in one's own name was not acceptable, let alone that in the state's name, which is not part of good governance. I hereby ask for the abolition of designated Beitian officials and order the local governments of the capital city and

He'nan prefecture to repatriate those already in the welfare shelters.” Under the reign of Empress Wu Zetian, Bingfang, a social relief service for the sick was officially set up and “Beitian officials” were designated for supervision and regulation work. The specific management of Bingfang, however, was still in the charge of temple abbots. Thus, the Bingfang system, which was managed by a temple and supervised by designated officials, came into being. In the 22nd year of the Kaiyuan era (734 AD), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang issued an imperial edict requiring, “all beggars in Chang'an, the capital city, to be housed by Bingfang, with relevant expenses covered by the government budget” (Sima et al., 1084). Duan Chengshi, a natural historian in the Tang Dynasty, recorded the following story in his *Youyang Miscellany*, “There was a beggar named Yan Qishi in Chengdu. Too lowly, ugly, vulgar, dirty and stinky to be approachable, he lived in a Beitian Bingfang in the west market of the city” (Duan, 1981, p. 225). It can be concluded from the above historical records that in the mid Tang Dynasty Bingfang already worked as a shelter for beggars and that its major revenue source was the interests earned from funds allocated by the imperial government of Tang. To prevent possible misappropriation and embezzlement of Bingfang assets, persons in charge of Bingfang were required to always keep their bills detailing income and expenditure for government audits. In addition to financial help, the imperial government also supplied certain amounts of food and sundries to Bingfang. As recorded in *The New Book of Tang*, “The abandoned used tents and carpets were sent to Bingfang” (Ouyang & Song, 1975a). Also, as Emperor Yizong of Tang (Li Cui) depicted in his essay “Ji Yu Tui En Chi” (“Decree to Expand Favors After Recovery from Illness”), “Successively grant 10 *dan* (500 kg), 7 *dan* (350 kg) and 5 *dan* (250 kg) of rice” to Bingfang services at prefecture and county level. In addition, a significant amount of relief supplies to Bingfang were donated by Buddhist believers. Since the mid Tang Dynasty, Bingfang service, no longer restricted to the capital city, was popularized nationwide, becoming an established charity institution for social relief, production and security purposes.

### Juyang Service

Juyang service was a government-backed standing shelter for refugees and beggars. During the Song Dynasty (960 AD-1279 AD), Juyang service was well developed and mainly fell into two categories, i.e. Futian house (“field of merit” house) and Juyang house. In the early Song Dynasty, the imperial government of Song set up “two Futian houses respectively in the east and west of the then capital to offer food to the elderly, the sick, the orphaned, the impoverished and beggars (Tuo, 1977, p. 4338). Emperor Yingzong of Song “expanded the existing relief system by increasing two more Futian houses respectively in the north and south of the capital and enlarging the existing two Futian houses in the east and west of the capital so as to offer food relief to 300 needy people on a daily basis. The operation of the relief system relied on a fund of 5 million coins (copper cash coins) allocated by the imperial government from the annual budget. Later with its primary funds source changed to donations from Sizhou, the fund was increased to 8 million coins per year” (Xu, 1957a, p. 5866). It can thus be concluded that Futian house, initiated in Song capital, was funded by the imperial government and operated by specially assigned persons to ensure social relief to the targeted victims



of natural calamities and war refugees. Yet, the four Futian houses in the north, south, east and west of the capital city could only held a small number of people, with the majority of refugees in the rest of the state waiting to be settled. Given that, the imperial government of Song decided to promote this relief model nationwide to admit a larger population of the vulnerable. On October 8 (Chinese lunar calendar, similarly hereinafter), the first year of the Yuanfu era (1078 AD) Emperor Zhezong of Song issued an imperial edict to implement the law of Juyang service nationwide. “For the vulnerable groups without self-reliance, local competent authorities at all levels should take them in and offer medical treatment to the sick after having their cases verified. Inspectors were sent to investigate and verify the vulnerable’s conditions. Qualified persons were admitted to government-backed empty houses left by childless families, or the imperial government’s properties when such empty houses were not available. Also, they were funded with assets from childless families without time limit and were offered the same amount of rice and beans as that to beggars. Possible overspending was covered by the interest on money from Changping barn. Those who were in Juyang house but were able to live independently would be dismissed” (Xu, 1957a, p. 5866). Thus, the Futian house model was popularized across the state and local governments at all levels followed the central government’s step to develop a series of institutionalized management methods tailored to local situations. The target of this shelter service was expanded from refugees to the vulnerable (the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family).

Juyang house was initiated in the Chongning era under the reign of Emperor Huizong of Song. It was recorded that “in the fifth year of the Chongning era (1106 AD), the name ‘Juyang’ was given by the Emperor.” (Xu, 1957a, p. 5865). Benefiting from the imperial government’s efforts and investments, Juyang houses grew and prospered both in the capital and other regions. Emperor Huizong of Song introduced detailed provisions on the operation of Juyang houses, formed a comprehensive system concerning their fund raising, management and supervision, and promoted the Juyang house model to prefectures, counties and even towns nationwide. “In the early years of the Chongning era, Cai Jing, then Prime Minister, ordered the establishment of the Juyang house and Anji house, which enjoyed rice supply from Changping barn multiple times more than before. Official servants were also assigned there for cooking and catering. Robes and cotton-padded quilts were prepared for those living there” (Tuo, 1977, p. 4339). From the era under the reign of Huizong until the end of the Southern Song Dynasty, Juyang house remained in operation as a key relief service, contributing significantly to the maintenance of social stability.

In the second year of the Zhongtong era of the Yuan Dynasty (1261 AD) Gulao house was set up for the elderly with no family; in the eighth year of the Zhongtong era (1271 AD) Zhongji house was set up; in the 19th year of the Zhongtong era (1282 AD) Yangji house was set up and later witnessed continuous development throughout the Yuan Dynasty. Later Emperors of Yuan kept enriching and improving the Yangji house system in accordance with actual conditions. For example, in the second year of the Dade era (1299 AD), Emperor Chengzong of Yuan issued an imperial edict as follows: The vulnerable groups (the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family, the impoverished, the weak) should be admitted to local relief services. In addition to the usual amounts of clothing and

food supplies, the imperial government's secretariat could offer more materials based on their actual needs. In this way, the imperial government of Yuan step by step shaped a relief system targeting the impoverished, the elderly with no family and the disabled incapable of self-reliance.

Yangji house, also known as Gulao house is a government-backed charity institution typically found in the Ming Dynasty (1368 AD-1644 AD) and the Qing Dynasty (1636 AD-1912 AD). It specialized in housing the vulnerable groups. The Qing Dynasty had a strict unified system of Yangji house management. In the sixth year under the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1741 AD), the imperial government of Qing required all prefectures and counties to set up Yangji houses and establish a top-down inspection system to allow local officials to conduct a census of the vulnerable supported by local Yangji houses. "Anyone who was found to have abused the power, or faked or misrepresented the figure would be punished by law." The imperial government of Qing had unified regulations concerning the vulnerable's grain rations, housing, daily management and expenditures. It required local government authorities at county and prefecture levels to "regulate and estimate the building of Yangji houses under their jurisdiction, report it to provincial governors, and allocate building funds from the public treasury." Local government authorities should also "from time to time carry out site surveys and make up deficiencies (if any). Any promotion or transfer of personnel should be recorded in a hand-over manual with a seal of authority, which should be submitted to a competent government authority" (Liu, 2000). At the central government level, Ministry of Finance and Population was responsible for Yangji house services; while corresponding local government officials at all levels were responsible for inspecting and regulating the operation of Yangji houses under their jurisdiction.

### **Medical Relief Service**

In the Song Dynasty, a new government funded relief service, i.e. medical relief service was initiated to target the victims of natural disasters. Such a service was offered in the forms of Anji house, Yangji house, Bingfang and pharmacy, which were all in the charge of officials assigned by the imperial government of Song.

Anji house was initially set up to prevent cross-infection and offer special treatment to victims of natural disasters who were severely ill in quarantine. Wu Juhou, then acting governor of Kaifeng prefecture was the first one to advise Emperor Huizong of Song to set up the service of Anji house. "Anji house should be built to put patients in different rooms according to the infectivity of their diseases to prevent cross-infection. Each Anji house should be equipped with a kitchen for medical decoction of herbs and meal cooking. Each Anji house should comprise 10 sickrooms, which can be planned and built by the Ministry of Transport and Construction soon" (Xu, 1957a, p. 5866). On August 23, the first year of the Chongning era under the reign of Emperor Huizong of Song (1102 AD), the service of Anji house was officially introduced, along with a series of regulations on its management, supervision and regulation. A specialized priestly class were entrusted with the specific management work. "Anji house, under the management of eminent monks, offered medical services to over 1,000 people in three years. Such a performance won those monks purple robes from the Emperor and a tax and



service-exemption certificate from the Ministry of Sacrifice” (Tuo, 1977, p. 4339). The introduction of Anji house indicated the Song imperial government’s effort to mobilize civil power to participate in the management of medical relief service.

Yangji house, which was transformed from Juyang house, was different from Juyang house because it featured not just a standing shelter function but also a medical relief function. Its operation and management were similar to that of Anji house; while its financial and merit policies were different. For example, in the first year of the Shaoxing era (1131 AD), Emperor Gaozong of Song accepted the following advice from Zhu Pu, a Tongpan (an official position administering lawsuit, grain transportation and water conservancy) of Shaoxing prefecture, “The supervisory monks should identify and gather the homeless, refugees and the sick in the five areas of Kaifeng and send them to a nearby Yangji house, where there should be two medical officials for medical treatment and two junior monks for medical herbs decocting, meal cooking and nursing. For a Yangji house serving more than 1,000 persons, a mortality rate below 20% by March 1 next year will gain it one copy of monk certificate. For a Yangji house serving more than 500 persons, a mortality rate below 20% will gain it 50 strings of coins. For a Yangji house serving more than 200 patients, a mortality rate below 20% will gain it 20 strings of coins. The junior monks will be responsible for money distribution. All medical officials will be rewarded based on the number of patients they successfully cured. A medical official with a treatment record of 1,000 patients and a mortality rate below 10% will receive an honorary title from the Emperor” (Xu, 1957, p. 5868). Yangji house stipulated a performance appraisal system (similar to the current KPI system), awarding or punishing medical staff based on the mortality of disaster victims whom they treated.

In addition to medical relief services offered by the imperial government, there were also local auxiliary medical relief services with funds which were either raised by local government officials or allocated from public revenue. Such auxiliary services also fell into the category of government-backed medical relief. In the Song Dynasty, well-known medical relief services included Yuezhou-based Bingfang, Hangzhou-based Anlefang, Jiangdong-based pharmacy and Longxing-based Yangji house.

### **Child Relief Service**

Child relief service in the Song Dynasty is the earliest relief service specializing in infant and child rearing in the history of China. Due to famine and other natural disasters, many minors were left unattended and infanticide was for a time rampant in the society of Song. Against such a backdrop, the imperial government of Song made various attempts to adopt and resettle those orphans in the post-disaster stage. During the Northern Song Dynasty (960 AD-1127 AD) the adoption and resettlement of orphans and abandoned infants was mainly shouldered by Juyang service, which in its heyday could even afford their education. In the Southern Song Dynasty (1127 AD-1279 AD), however, the function of adopting and resettling orphans and abandoned infants was gradually shifted from Juyang service to child relief services such as child relief bureau, child relief house and children’s home.

In November of the fifth year of the Dade era (1301 AD), Emperor Chengzong of Yuan issued

an imperial edict, requiring “sell rice at a lower price to relieve the impoverished in the capital, set up 36 relief stores and provide basic necessities for the vulnerable groups without self-reliance for five months” (Song et al., 1976a). The imperial government of Yuan placed orphans into the category of the vulnerable without self-reliance and offered them significant relief by means of a rationed food supply and permanent shelter. Official services such as Yangji house and child relief bureau were set up to support orphans and abandoned infants. Child relief bureau of Yuan mainly targeted orphans and abandoned infants. It is true that the Yuan Dynasty could not compare with the Song Dynasty in the number and scale of child relief services (such as child relief house and child relief bureau). The imperial government of Yuan sent many of the orphaned, along with other vulnerable groups to Yangji house. Nevertheless, what truly matters is the fact that child relief bureau did exist in the Yuan Dynasty.

The imperial government of Qing also worked hard on child relief, considering child relief equally important to elderly care. “Supporting the young and the orphaned was recorded in *Proceedings of Government in the Different Months* as the same good deed as assisting the weak and the elderly” (Sirin Gioro & Zhang, 1985). As far back as the era under the reign of Emperor Kangxi, there were already baby-care centers in Beijing. Infants who were abandoned for being sick or disabled could be adopted by those baby-care centers after registration and be under the care of wet nurses. Alternatively, “the abandoned infants could also be adopted after registration by well-intentioned families whose applications for adoption (containing their addresses and names of family members) were reviewed and approved. If an applicant was some infant’s clansman, detailed information specifying the infant’s original household registration should be shown and verified before the infant was returned to the clan” (Liu, 1936). In the 21st year under the reign of Emperor Jiaqing (1816 AD), Zhang Bailing submitted a memorial to the throne, requesting banning the evil practice of female infanticide and suggesting local officials “sponsor baby-care centers and adopt abandoned infants.” In the fifth year under the reign of Emperor Tongzhi (1866 AD), imperial censor Lin Shigong submitted a memorial to the throne, requesting prohibiting female infanticide in society. In response to Lin’s request, the imperial government of Qing accordingly required the civil and military governor of Zhili to supervise local government officials to enforce the ban, and asked “wealthy gentry in all counties and prefectures to set up baby-care centers to settle abandoned infants (Liu, 1936). The imperial government of Qing attached great importance to the rearing of abandoned infants and strove to improve the operation of baby-care centers by facilitating collaboration between local governments and local gentry. In the Qing Dynasty, baby-care centers were popular not just in its capital (Beijing), but also in almost all provinces across the nation.

### **Relief Objects**

The “vulnerable social groups” are special groups of people considered to be at risk of poverty, life necessities shortages or social exclusion (Chen, 1999). Possessing very few public resources, the vulnerable social groups are in severe shortage of such capabilities as self-reliance and independent development. Without much economic support, they are marginalized in society. Both in ancient and

modern times they have been a primary object of social relief. The vulnerable groups in ancient China mainly included the disabled (retired and disabled soldiers in particular), the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family and the oldest old.

### The Disabled

Since ancient times, the disabled have been a major group receiving social relief from the ruling class. According to “Royal Regulations” in *Commentary: Book of Rites*, “For a family with disabled or sick seniors to support, one member of their younger generation can be exempted from corvée” (Zheng, 2000, p. 498). In other words, the exemption of one person from corvée was an incentive to encourage the supporting of the disabled. “The disabled (the humpbacked, the deaf, the crippled, the limbless, the dwarf) should have food supplies based on their respective capabilities” (Zheng, 2000, p. 502). This means the disabled could be self-reliant by means of serving in official workshops. Such ideas of supporting the disabled laid a theoretical basis for the disabled-targeted relief.

Poverty alleviation and disability assistance have been important traditions of the Chinese civilization. As recorded in *Office of Autumn, Rites of Zhou*, those who were born mentally handicapped were among “three groups of people exempted from possible punishment.” This indicates that back to the Pre-Qin period there were special laws targeting the disabled. For example, Kuanji (treating the disabled with leniency) policy was introduced in the Zhou Dynasty to support the disabled, while Yangji (supporting the disabled) policy was implemented in the Qi Kingdom during the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC-476 BC) and the Warring States period (475 BC-221 BC). The imperial governments of later dynasties all implemented special policies in favor of the disabled. These are among the earliest specially formulated regulations on protecting the rights and interests of the disabled.

During the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, there were many imperial edicts issued on the relief of the disabled. In the sixth year of the Yuanshou era (117 BC), Emperor Wu of Han issued an imperial edict to grant rewards to the disabled, requiring “six scholar-officials to go on an inspection tour across the nation to visit the widowed and the disabled and offer financial help to those of them without self-reliance” (Ban, 1983a, p. 180). It is recorded that the imperial government of Han granted rewards to the disabled multiple times. There was also a Fuchu policy exempting the disabled from taxes and corvée. Xu Tianlin argued, “The Fuchu policy of the Han Dynasty was similar to the charity policy recorded in the *Rites of Zhou*. Both of the policies were about taxes and corvée exemption.” According to Ma Duanlin, however, “The Fuchu policy mentioned in the *Rites of Zhou* and *Book of Rites* was only about corvée exemption. It was not until the Han Dynasty that taxes were also included in the scope of the exemption.” That is to say, the disabled-oriented Fuchu policy in the Han Dynasty included tax exemption, as well as corvée exemption. The penal code of Han also gave certain special considerations to the disabled to showcase “imperial benevolence.” For example, in the third year of the Houyuan era (141 BC), Emperor Jing of Han issued an imperial edict, according to which, “The elderly should be respected by juniors. The widowed in poor health should be sympathized. Criminals who are over eighty or below eight, who are in pregnancy, or who are dwarf are allowed to serve their

sentence without wearing any instrument of torture” (Ban, 1983e, p. 1106). This was an imperial preferential treatment offered to vulnerable criminals (the convicted seniors, juniors, pregnant women, dwarfs). Under the reign of Emperor Wen of Han, corporal punishment was for a time abolished, for the Emperor realized that “corporal punishments such as limb amputation, face tattooing and castration can cause lasting agony and are inhumane” (Ban, 1983e, p. 1098). The abolishment of corporal punishment marked a milestone in the history of criminal law and was a critical move to reduce the disabled population.

In the Tang Dynasty, the disabled were divided into three levels, i.e. “the moderately disabled, the disabled unable to work and the severely disabled” (Li et al., 1992, p. 753). By degree of disability from low to high, the first level goes to the moderately disabled, followed by the disabled unable to work and then the severely disabled. Accordingly, the imperial government of Tang provided the disabled with certain material relief, special offers of land distributions, tax and corvée exemptions, as well as in-shelter relief. In historical documents such as *The Old Book of Tang*, *The New Book of Tang* and *Quan Tang Wen (Collected Works of Tang)*, there were substantial depictions of material support to the disabled. In general, material support to the disabled mainly included millet and silk, which were also distributed to the elderly, the widowed and the orphaned. In addition to material relief, the disabled unable to work and the severely disabled could also be taken care of by certain designated attendants. Such support from the imperial government of Tang to some extent met their basic needs of life, alleviated their life burden and helped maintain social stability. In terms of corvée, the disabled at all three levels also enjoyed preferential treatment. The taxes and corvée act of Tang exempted the disabled from male adults-applicable forced labor service. The exemption was clearly documented in “Criminals Who Should Be Recruited for Corvée but Are the Only Able-bodied Man in Family—General Principles” in *Tang Code with Comments*, which stipulated that “The disabled should be exempted from adults-applicable forced labor service regardless of whether they were the only able-bodied man in family” (Zhangsun et al., 1983a, p. 72). Although the imperial government of Tang exempted the disabled from forced labor service, local governments still provided some less arduous jobs such as gate guard (of county seat and prefecture capital) and warehouse keeper for the moderately disabled to enable them to make a living. And this can be exemplified by the notes made by honorary officials to “Langzhong Officers in the Ministry of Defense” in *The Six Statutes of the Tang Dynasty* as follows: “Shangzhou (prefecture at upper level) and its governor’s office can keep 60 persons each; zhongzhou (prefecture at middle level) can keep 45 persons and xiazhou (prefecture at lower level) 35 persons. Those persons should be assigned to the posts of city gate guard and warehouse keeper. Their job assignment should be flexible based on the population of local male adults available. For prefectures with a small population, local male seniors at the age group of 50-59, along with the moderately disabled male adults should also be recruited. They should work in five shifts, each of which lasts one month.” As aforementioned, the purpose of the imperial government’s job offers to the moderately disabled was to alleviate their life stress and boost their self-reliance. Moreover, the imperial government of Tang did give consideration to the disabled (mainly the moderately disabled) in service.

In this regard, the Song Dynasty continued to implement the policy of the Tang Dynasty, dividing the disabled into three levels, i.e. the moderately disabled, the disabled unable to work and the severely disabled. The imperial government of Northern Song allowed “the disabled to be exempted from poll tax” while the imperial government of Southern Song exempted “the disabled at the three levels from male adults-applicable forced labor service” in addition to “poll tax.” Criminals with disabilities received preferential treatment, too. According to the relevant law of Song, criminal suspects with disabilities were not applicable to interrogation with torture and should only be convicted based on the testimonies of three people or more. The law of Song also stipulated that “the severely disabled who have committed a capital crime for ‘Zafan’ (‘crimes of less importance’, i.e. unintentional crimes) should not be imposed any sentence; the severely disabled who have committed a crime of blood or crime of theft can be redeemed from punishment by paying a certain amount of ransom; the severely disabled who have committed a minor crime should not be held accountable; the disabled unable to work who have committed a crime not severe enough for exile can be redeemed from punishment by paying a certain amount of ransom, or can be discharged if they are too poor to afford the ransom; the disabled unable to work who have committed a capital crime should only be imprisoned without wearing any instruments of torture.” During the Ming and Qing dynasties, institutionalized measures were taken to better protect the disabled. According to the *Household Labor Service, Household Law of The Great Ming Code*, “Local competent authorities should support or house the following locals: the elderly with no family, the orphaned and the disabled unable to work who are in poverty, do not have any relatives to rely on and cannot make a living. Local competent authorities failing to do so will receive a punishment of 60 canings per person.” The imperial government of Qing also introduced a “ten-point program for people’s recuperation.” These were all legal measures taken by the imperial governments to protect the disabled.

### **The Widowed, the Orphaned and the Elderly with No Family**

The widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family were vulnerable groups in ancient Chinese society. “A widower here refers to a man over 60 without a wife; a widow refers to a woman over 50 without a husband; the elderly with no family refers to the elderly without any children; the orphaned refers to fatherless children” (Fan, 1973, p. 47). The widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family were at an unfavorable position in the struggle for life and social competition, for which they particularly needed more care from the imperial government. The *Xi Han Hui Yao (Western Han Government Manuscript Compendium)* revealed that the imperial government of Western Han altogether launched over 30 relief campaigns targeting the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family. The material relief was mainly given in the form of cotton wadding and silk. In the first year under the reign of Emperor Wen of Han (180 BC), “Officials of relevant competent authority advised local governments at county and prefecture level to grant one *dan* (50 kg) of rice, 20 *jin* (10 kg) of meat and five *dou* (50 L) of liquor to the elderly over 80, and an extra supply of two bolts of silk and three *jin* (1.5 kg) of cotton wadding to the elderly over 90” (Ban, 1983b, p. 113). In the first year of the Yuanshou era



(122 BC) under the reign of Emperor Wu of Han, “Special envoys went on an inspection tour to visit the elderly and offer material help, granting county-level Sanlao officials (Sanlao: a post held by a well-respected man over 50 responsible for indoctrination) and dutiful sons five bolts of silk each; granting village-level Sanlao officials, dutiful brothers and diligent farmers three bolts of silk each; granting the elderly over 90, the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family two bolts of silk and three *jin* (1.5 kg) of cotton wadding each” (Ban, 1983a, p. 175). In addition to liquor, meat, cotton wadding and silk, the imperial government of Western Han also granted the venerably aged an “imperial crosier.” Its holder enjoyed a variety of privileges, such as corvée exemption. “Imposing corvée on imperial crosier holders shall be regarded as treason and heresy” (Chen, 1960, pp. 29-30). When doing business, imperial crosier holders could also enjoy certain tax exemption. Besides, the imperial government also inflicted severe punishments on those who disrespected or even insulted imperial crosier holders.

In both the Western and Eastern Han dynasties there were many historical records on orphan relief. In the first year of the Qianyuan era (179 BC), Emperor Wen of Han appointed Dou Yifang as the Empress. To mark this event, he “ordered to grant certain amounts of cloth, silk, rice and meat to the widowed, the elderly with no family, the orphaned under nine, the impoverished and the elderly over 80” (Sima, 1959, p. 420). Emperor Wen of Han also attached great importance to the quality control of rice to be granted and prohibited use of “old rice” that had been kept for years. In June of the 13th year of the Qianyuan era (167 BC), Emperor Wen of Han issued an imperial edict to “exempt farmers from land tax and grant certain amounts of cloth, silk and cotton wadding to the orphaned and the widowed nationwide” (Ban, 1983b, p. 125). In April the second year of the Houyuan era (142 BC), Emperor Jing issued an imperial edict, according to which, “The strong should not violate the weak, the majority should not bully the minority; the elderly should be able to enjoy their old age in peace; and the orphaned should be able to grow up healthily” (Ban, 1983c, pp. 151-152). Thus, it can be seen that Emperor Jing of Han gave consideration to the life and development of the orphaned and ordered more care and protection for them. In the Eastern Han Dynasty the orphaned remained a vulnerable group enjoying special benefits such as millet, silk and rice from the imperial government. To protect their basic rights and interests, the emperors of the Eastern Han successively issued imperial edicts to urge competent authorities concerned to strictly perform their duties. Prefecture chiefs were required to “close a trial with caution, redress any injustice, sympathize with the orphaned in their afflictions, and observe their duties” (Fan, 1973b, p. 117). In January the third year of the Yuanhe era (86 AD), Emperor Zhang of the Eastern Han issued an imperial edict, requiring relevant authorities to “grant food to abandoned infants and orphans with no family, and infants and children in families without food supply in accordance with the law” (Fan, 1973c, p. 154). Such an imperial edict indicates that the Eastern Han Dynasty’s orphan relief was not a temporary campaign to echo one single edict, but a permanent initiative prescribed by law.

The imperial government of Tang offered social relief to the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family mainly by means of tax and corvée exemptions, disaster relief, legal protection, adoption and medical relief. On major occasions such as accession, change of a reign title, amnesty

and inspection tour, an emperor usually granted material rewards to the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family. On October 1, in the fourth year of Zhen'guan (630 AD), Emperor Taizong of Tang issued an imperial edict on his inspection tour via Xianyang, Shiping and Wugong. In this edict entitled *She Qi Long Er Zhou Zhao (Amnesty in the Prefectures of Qi and Long)* he said, "Convicted criminals with a term of imprisonment shall have their penalty reduced by one grade. Convicted criminals with a penalty lighter than caning should be pardoned and released. The elderly over 80, the widowed, the disabled unable to work and the commanders of the old army in Wugong county should all be granted material rewards." It is fair to say that the imperial government of Tang had a more comprehensive relief system for the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family than the imperial governments of previous dynasties. "The widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family, the impoverished and the sick without self-reliance should be supported by their close relatives. Those who do not have any close relative should be assisted by their village. Those who get ill or have some accidents in the trip and are unable to handle it on their own should be admitted to local village houses and provided with medical help. They should also tell local villagers where they are from, their native places and names of their family members and have such information recorded so that once their conditions get worse, they will be sent back home" (Noboru, 1989a, p. 165). Local officials of Tang were obliged to offer medical help and material support to the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family. When they passed away, their burial should be sponsored by the imperial government and their underage offspring should be adopted. Tax exemption applicable to the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family was also prescribed in the law of Tang. Regarding orphans not old enough to make a living by themselves, the imperial government of Tang would encourage and try to persuade their close relatives and clansmen to adopt them, whose living costs would also be shared by the government by means of a rationed food supply.

In the Song Dynasty, with support from the imperial government, the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family saw certain improvement in their living conditions. The imperial government of Song offered social relief to the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family mainly in the forms of "sheltering" and "supporting", i.e. providing them with necessities of life. In May of the second year of the Zhenghe era (1112 AD), Emperor Huizong of Song issued an imperial edict, according to which, "the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family should be sent to a welfare house; those who are ill should be sent to Anji house; those who pass away should be properly buried". Of all vulnerable groups, the law of Song attached particular importance to the legal protection of children, stipulating that "in the event of abandoned infants who are not yet weaned, the charity house taking care of them should report to a competent authority, which will hire wet nurses for them in accordance with the law coming into force in the first year of the Chongning era (1102 AD)." Each underage orphan over seven could be granted a monthly subsidy which was half of the adult's (Xu, 1957b).

In the first year of the Zhongtong era (1260 AD) of the Yuan Dynasty, Emperor Shizu (also known as Kublai Khan) introduced a relief loan system to help the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family. In the imperial edict on the relief loan system, he ordered, "The widowed, the orphaned,

the elderly with no family and the disabled (unable to work) who have no relative to rely on should be supported by competent authorities with food supply” (Song et al., 1976b). In the “Accession to the Throne” edict, Chengzong of Yuan proposed, “Relevant government authorities should visit and care about the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family without self-reliance, offer them clothing and food on a regular basis, provide medical help for those who are ill, and ensure them a shelter” (Baizhu, 1998). The imperial government of Yuan established welfare services such as Gulao yuan (old folks’ home) and Jizhong yuan (social relief house) to house the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family. Their relief means included money, food, clothing, firewood, medicine and coffins.

### The Elderly

Early in the Pre-Qin period, respecting and supporting the elderly was accepted and advocated as a good tradition. According to “Royal Regulations” in *Book of Rites*, “The elderly over 50 are invited to attend banquets for the elderly held in local schools; those aged over 60 are invited to attend banquets for the elderly held in Xiaoxue (a type of school inside the palace); those aged over 70 are invited to attend banquets for the elderly held in Daxue (imperial college). This rule also applies to all vassal states. Due to decay of vitality, the elderly over 80 are allowed to only kowtow twice when receiving an imperial edict; the elderly over 90 are allowed to have someone else perform this ritual on their behalf.” In short, elderly care was already on the agenda of regular relief services in the Pre-Qin period.

It is recorded that the imperial government of Western Han granted material rewards to the elderly with no family for as many as 37 times. According to *The Law of Corvée Labor, the Second Year Laws and Regulations*, “The following people should be granted one *dan* (50 kg) of rice per month; Dafu-level officials over 90, Bugeng-level officials over 91, Zanniao-level officials over 92, Shangzao-level officials over 93, Gongshi-level officials over 94, as well as Gongzu and Shijiu-level officials over 95” (Working Group, 2006, p. 57). In March of the first year of the Qianyuan era (179 BC), Emperor Wen of Han issued an imperial edict, in which he said, “It is reported that some officials distributed old rice to the elderly” (Ban, 1983b, p. 113). Emperor Wen of Han granted the elderly one *hu* (ancient measuring vessel; fifty liters; dry measure for grain equal to five dou) of rice to help them make ends meet.

As recorded in *Xi Han Hui Yao (The Western Han Government Manuscript Compendium)*, the imperial government of Han offered certain material relief to the elderly without self-reliance according to their actual situations, and certain land and market tax deduction or exemption to the elderly unable to do farm work. Under the reign of Emperor Cheng of Han, the widowed over 60 without a son enjoyed market tax exemption when doing business; a remarried couple who were previously a widow and a widower and neither of whom had a son were exempted from land and market tax. In the early years of the Western Han Dynasty, the elderly over 56 were exempted from corvée and poll taxes; the elderly over 80 could have two adult sons exempted from tax levies on adults; in addition to the aforementioned exemption, the elderly over 90 could also have one son exempted from corvée. The purpose of granting certain exemptions to the elderly’s offspring was to allow their offspring to better take care of the elderly.

Emperors of Han issued multiple imperial edicts to grant elderly criminals mitigated punishment or exempt them from punishment. Upon ascending the throne, Emperor Hui of Han issued an imperial edict as follows, “People over 70 or under 10 who have been convicted of a crime and sentenced to a certain corporal punishment can receive Wan punishment instead (a light punishment of only shaving off a criminal’s beard)” (Ban, 1983d, p. 85, p. 88). In the third year of the Houyuan era (141 BC), Emperor Jing of Han mentioned in an edict, “The elderly should be respected by juniors. The widowed in poor health should be sympathized. Criminals who are over eighty...are allowed to serve their sentence without wearing any instrument of torture” (Ban, 1983e, p. 1106). Preferential treatment was granted by the ruling class to the elderly who had violated the criminal law in an attempt to advocate filial piety, as well as benevolent rule. As far as the rulers were concerned, “The advocacy of filial piety is the key to social order and stability.” After all, those who adhered to the principle of filial piety would not defy their superiors and start a rebellion.

In the Tang Dynasty, the emperors’ benevolent rule was mainly reflected in society’s respect and assistance for the elderly. *The Tang Code*, an epitome of feudal laws in ancient China, contained many articles on protecting the rights and interests of the elderly. For example, “Those who report their grandparents’ or parents’ wrong doing to local authority shall be sentenced to the gallows” (Zhangsun et al., 1983b, p. 432); “those who insult or curse their grandparents or parents can be sentenced to the gallows; those who beat their grandparents or parents can be beheaded; those who commit manslaughter shall be exiled somewhere 3,000 *li* (1,500 km) away; those who commit a crime of blood shall be sentenced to three years in jail” (Zhangsun et al., 1983b, p.414). According to *The Tang Code*, behaviors of reporting, cursing and beating parents and grandparents were illegal and would bring severe legal consequences (even the death penalty) to those who committed so. “Those who act against the will of their parents or grandparents or fail to take good care of their parents or grandparents shall be sentenced to two years in jail” (Zhangsun et al., 1983c, p. 472). *The Tang Code* also made it mandatory to support parents (and grandparents) and encouraged grown-up children to live with their parents to better take care of their elderly parents.

On the occasions of grand ceremonies and festival celebrations, such as Fengchan (imperial mountain-top worship of Heaven and Earth) and conferring a Crown Prince title, the imperial government would grant the elderly corresponding titles or material rewards (millet, silk, grain, liquor). Nominal titles could also be conferred on the oldest as an honor. The imperial government of Tang stipulated an attendant-designating system to designate attendants to take care of the oldest and satisfy their basic needs. According to “General Principles” in *Tang Code with Comments*, “Those whose elders in family (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents) are over 80 or are severely disabled can apply to the imperial government for attendant service” (Zhangsun et al., 1983d, p. 69). The imperial government of Tang also exempted those designated attendants from corvée so they could focus on their duties. In the 25th year of the Kaiyuan era (737 AD), a law on household registration was passed, stipulating that “each of the elderly over 80 and the severely disabled should be tended by one designated attendant; each of the elderly over 90 should be tended by two designated

attendants; each of the elderly over 100 by three designated attendants.” Evidently, the number of attendants designated from the imperial government of Tang was in proportion to the age of the elderly, which means the older the elderly got, the more attendants they were tended by.

In addition, the elderly in the Tang Dynasty also enjoyed certain corvée and tax reductions and exemptions, as well as punishment mitigation and exemptions. As is recorded in “*Treatises 47: Finance and Economics I*” in *The New Book of Tang*, “People falling into the following categories were exempted from poll taxes and corvée: the elderly, the disabled unable to work (male), the severely disabled, widows, servants, maids, house slaves and officials at grade nine or above” (Ouyang & Song, 1975b, p. 1343). According to the *Tang Code*, “Those aged 70-90 who have committed a crime punishable by exile can be redeemed from punishment by paying a certain amount of ransom; those aged 80-89 who have committed a crime of treason or premeditated murder and face the death penalty should wait for the final judgment of the emperor; those aged 80-89 who have committed a crime other than the aforementioned two should be pardoned; those aged over 90 should be pardoned for whatever crime they have committed” (Zhangsun et al., 1983e, p. 80).

“A patriarchal clan without the elderly’s supervision would corrupt its womanhood; a village without the respected elderly’s guidance would ruin its social conduct; a regime without old ministers’ wisdom would not be able to consolidate its feudal rule” (Su, 2014). The imperial government of Yuan promoted filial piety, a key idea of Confucianism, highlighting the importance of elderly care in law, policy and life. Advocating filial piety-based governance, the imperial government of Yuan required that male adults should live with their parents (when still alive), that people should perform the ritual of mourning for their parents’ death, that abuse of the elderly should be prohibited, and that families with seniors to support should enjoy tax and corvée reductions or exemptions. Emperors of Yuan granted certain material rewards and subsidies to the oldest from time to time and built a Yangji-house system to house the elderly with no family. The imperial government of Yuan also granted the elderly preferential treatment when it came to criminal penalties. As recorded in “Atoning for Crime, Punishment and Law 1, *Treatises 55*” in *The History of Yuan*, “Those aged over 70 or under 15 who have committed a crime not severe enough for caning can be redeemed from punishment by paying a certain amount of ransom” (Song et al., 1976c). “For convicted criminals who are aged over 70 or under 15 or who are disabled (the moderately disabled, the disabled unable to work, the severely disabled) and are allowed to atone for their crime with money, each caning is worth one piece of Zhongtong Yuanbao Yiguan Jiaochao (a currency note in “a string of 1,000 copper coins” denomination) (Song et al., 1976d).

### **The Injured and Disabled Servicemen**

To maintain and consolidate the feudal rule, emperors of all dynasties in Chinese history, without exception, granted preferential treatment to the injured and disabled servicemen and their families in varied degrees to manifest the imperial favor and sustain their loyalty. In general, the imperial governments’ preferential treatment to the injured and disabled servicemen included material rewards, corvée exemptions and family-oriented relief. Back to the Pre-Qin era, there were already preferential



treatments granted by vassal states to their soldiers who were injured or died on the battlefield. The policy of Jie Jue (dealing with funeral affairs), which was mentioned in *Guanzi*, was about how to handle servicemen killed in action. More specially, according to this policy, the vassal states should allocate a certain amount of money from state funds and give the money to the late servicemen's close friends and relatives, who would spend the money on the burial and sacrifices. Since then, the policy of preferential treatment for servicemen underwent continuous improvement in the dynasties that followed.

In the mid Tang Dynasty, the destruction of the equal-field system caused a significant population decline, crashing the foundation of the Fubing system (a militia system consisting of farmer-soldiers). Against such a backdrop, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang began to implement an enlistment system with state funds. "Those who came to enlist in the army all looked lean, haggard and shabby. Most of the odds and ends carried on their back had fallen down and scattered on their way" (Li, 1983a, p. 333). The imperial government of Tang provided necessary social relief to soldiers and their families to ensure that those soldiers would dutifully defend the state and garrison the frontiers. The field law of Tang stipulated, "Regarding soldiers who have been killed in the battlefield for the state, the land allocated to them as soldiers should not be taken back by the government even if none of their male offspring reach adulthood." This was a preferential policy of land assignment specially designed for servicemen killed in action. Servicemen-oriented tax reductions and exemptions were another major measure applied by the imperial government of Tang to servicemen. Again, take the Fubing system (a militia system consisting of farmer-soldiers) as an example, which was implemented in the early years of the Tang Dynasty. The system involved a network of militia who were assigned tracts of land. These "farmer-soldiers" were exempted from all land taxes, corvées and other levies when in service. Even after they were released from military service at the age of 60, they could still enjoy the above exemptions, which were also applicable to the elderly over 60. Moreover, the imperial government of Tang also allowed servicemen's family members to enjoy tax and corvée exemptions. In May of the 21st year of the Kaiyuan era (733 AD), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang issued an imperial edict commissioning "prefecture governors and county magistrates to check and verify the families of enlisted soldiers, the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family were exempted them from taxes and corvée, and offer them jobs" (Zhang, 1983, p. 2876). Families of servicemen killed on the battlefield also enjoyed tax exemptions and job offers. Regarding the burial of servicemen killed in action, there were also specific provisions in the *Tang Code*. For example, according to "Miscellaneous Articles" in *Tang Code with Comments*, "For servicemen who have died on the way to their mission, their remains should be sent back to their hometown by relevant persons in charge. Failure to do so shall lead to the punishment of 100 canings" (Zhangsun et al., 1983f, p. 490). "Their personal belongings such as money and other items, along with their remains, should be returned to their families upon arrival" (Zhangsun et al., 1983g, p. 490). In addition, as stipulated by the *Tang Code*, the imperial government of Tang should also grant a certain amount of subsidy to their families for burial purposes.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial governments also granted servicemen killed in action certain posthumous titles and sacrifices which symbolized high political honors. In particular,

the imperial government of Qing offered food to soldiers fighting a war, and also granted a pension to the families of soldiers killed on the battlefield. In accordance with their military rank, such a pension ranged from tens of *liang* (50 g) to thousands of *liang* of silver crumbs. Moreover, other aid was also given by the imperial government to the deceased's family.

Such aids (in addition to the abovementioned pension) were mainly reflected in the following aspects. First, within a certain period, the family members of deceased soldiers were exempted from military service; the offspring of high-ranking officers killed in action could inherit their titles of nobility. Family members (of deceased soldiers) unable to make a living could be supported by the government. As stipulated by *The Ming Code*, "Relevant government authorities should provide sufficient food and traveling expenses for the family members of servicemen (either killed in action or by disease) to support them back home. Regarding the delivery of such material relief, one-day delay shall result in a punishment of 20 whippings; every three-day delay shall result in an increase in whippings, with 50 whippings being the maximum." As stipulated by *The Qing Code*, for sonless and un-remarried wives of servicemen who belonged to the Eight Banners and who were killed in action, relevant authorities of their Banner should check and verify their situation before regularly granting them a sum of pension half of their late husbands' salary; for those wives with sons, "relevant authorities of their Banner should regularly grant them a sum of pension half of their late husbands' salary until their sons grow up and can earn no less than that amount of money; for parents of servicemen who belonged to the Eight Banners and were killed in action, relevant authorities of their Banner should regularly grant them such a sum of pension on condition that they have no other family members to depend on" (Guo, 2003, pp. 159-161).

## Relief Measures

### Grain Relief

Natural disasters frequently struck China in ancient times. Such disasters could not be withstood solely by individual efforts. Every time when a natural disaster occurred, a large number of people were forced to leave home and became refugees. If their basic living could not be guaranteed, those refugees could damage social stability. In all dynasties in Chinese history, providing grain relief for the victims in disaster areas and ensuring their basic living was always the most direct and most common relief measure.

In the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wen of Han started to build a warehouse system to increase grain reserves. Almost every emperor of Western Han issued imperial edicts on storing grains against a lean year. In the mid-Western Han Dynasty, a sound and complete warehouse system which consisted of central barns and vassal state-level barns was officially established. Central barns included Ao barn, Chang'an barn and Jingshi barn, which played a critical role in relieving people in disaster areas. By contrast, there were more vassal state-level barns, of which at least 20 were well known nationwide. The imperial government practiced unified scheduling of vassal state-level barns, with corresponding

transportation, utilization and storage under institutionalized control. For disaster relief purposes, the imperial government of Han also launched a special barn called Changping barn, an outcome of the Junshu-Pingzhun policy, a market regulating policy introduced by Emperor Wu of Han. The Junshu-Pingzhun policy was about “introducing flexible measures to adjust the supply and demand of materials and goods, and stabilizing market prices. During a good harvest year, the imperial government should collect and store up grains against future shortage; during a lean year, it should issue coins and goods to regulate demand” (Wang, 1992, p. 27). In modern economic terms, the Changping barn system was to protect farmers from the suffer of low-priced grains. When grain prices were declining, the imperial government of Han purchased grains at a price higher than market price to ensure grain price stability. When grain prices were rising, the imperial government sold stored grains at a price lower than market price. This practice helped to protect the interests of famine victims during a lean year.

In the event of a natural disaster, food becomes the most urgent item for disaster victims. “... Perhaps what is now truly worrisome is not about commodity, but about starvation... Perhaps man can live without commodity for 100 years, but cannot withstand starvation for one day. After all, eating is the top priority for man.” Thus, when a natural disaster occurred, the first thing an imperial government should do was to open barns and distribute relief grains to disaster victims to protect them from starvation. Relevant statistics show that there were seven times of direct grain relief in the Western Han Dynasty and 25 in the Eastern Han Dynasty. The largest grain relief was offered to victims of floods in the 31st year of the Jianwu era (55 AD) of the Eastern Han Dynasty. “On May 25, all male adults were granted a grade-II honorary title; the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family, the severely disabled and the impoverished without self-reliance were granted six *hu* of millet per person.” In the Han Dynasty, *hu* was a unit of measurement almost equivalent to *dan*. On average, every working adult needed three *dan* of grain ration per month. Given that, six *hu* of grain ration was sufficient to support a man for two months.

In the Tang Dynasty, the imperial government, based on the sources of grain supply, built a series of grain barns at state and local levels, developing a sound and complete warehouse system. State-level barns were called Tai barns, which were supplemented by a number of prefecture and county government-controlled grain barns. At the local level there were also Yi barns, Changping barns, military barns and transport barns supervised by the central government. Tai barns were built in Chang'an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty. Following the warehouse system of Western and Eastern Han, the Tai barns of Tang were the largest grain barns in the nation. With top grains gathered from across the nation, Tai barns were mainly responsible for the grain supply to the emperor and other officials in the capital. In a lean year, however, Tai barns also offered grain relief to famine victims and refugees in the suburbs of Chang'an. Zhang Gong pointed out in *A Preliminary Study on the Grain Storage System in the Tang Dynasty* that Tai barns performed 18 times grain relief efforts over a period of 200 years from the Wude era under the reign of Emperor Gaozu of Tang to the Taihe era under the reign of Emperor Wenzong of Tang” (Zhang, 1986, p. 68).

Zheng barns were a general term referring to local barns, namely, county-level barns and

prefecture-level barns. The Zheng barns of Tang had two main grain sources, namely, land rents and land taxes, which were also the primary tax revenue sources of the feudal state. In addition, Zheng barns also gathered grains from the following sources; rent for land distributed to officials outside the imperial court, rent for land distributed to local governments and rent for land owned by fugitives. The grains collected by Zheng barns were mainly sold to cover the imperial manpower costs such as officials' salary and soldiers' pay. Nevertheless, during a lean year Zheng barns also offered grains to relieve disaster victims. In the early years of the Tang Dynasty "in a year of flood or draught, Zheng barns would offer grains to local victims. For regions without any local Zheng barns, grains from other prefectures were offered to local victims" (Liu et al., 1975, p. 2523). During the Tianbao era, "Government-controlled barns in over forty prefectures in Guan-Fu, Shuofang and He-Long and over thirty prefectures in Hebei were required to use their large grain reserves to pay for administrative staff's salary. Some barns even offered up to a million *dan* of millet" (Du, 1984, p. 911). Thus, Zheng barns played an important role in relieving local disaster victims.

Following the warehouse system of Sui, the Yi barn of Tang was built by servicemen and civilians at their own will. In nature it was a barn for self-help purposes. Yi barn (meaning public-welfare barn), as its name implies, involved no compulsory grain collection. In April of the second year of Zhenguan under the reign of Emperor Taizong of Tang, Vice Prime Minister Dai Zhou submitted a memorial to the throne as follows, "No ancient sages and men of virtue managed to stop natural disasters such as flood and drought... Yi barns (public-welfare barns) should be built at the local level to collect local grains so that grains can be offered to relieve starving people in a local county or prefecture in a lean year" (Y. Liu et al., 1975, p. 2122). Following this, Han Zhongliang, Minister of Finance and Population, also submitted a memorial to the throne as follows, "All citizens below the ranks of prince and duke should pay land taxes. Each mu (0.1647369 acre) of cultivated land incurred two *sheng* (about 400ml) of grain as land tax. Which type(s) of grains (millet, wheat, round-grained rice) to be paid should be determined by local soil conditions. The collected grains should be stored in Yi barns at the local county or prefecture level for relief purposes in future lean years" (Liu, et al., 1975, p. 2123). The Yi barns of Tang were designed to ensure a certain amount of local grain reserves in different regions so that local grains could be offered to relieve possible disaster victims. According to relevant statistics, from the founding of the Tang Dynasty in 618 AD to 840 AD, there were a total of 365 recorded natural disasters, because of which the imperial government of Tang performed 136 grain relief missions (106 times from Yi barns and 30 times from other barns). Yi barns were the Tang regime's strongest tool against famine and played a crucial role in disaster relief in the Tang Dynasty.

In addition to these three major grain barns, there were also Changping barns, military barns and transport barns. Changping barns were built to stabilize grain prices; military barns ensured grain supplies to soldiers garrisoning on the frontiers; transport barns enabled trans-regional grain shipments. Large grain barns both at central and local levels were key to disaster relief in a lean year. In terms of institutional settings, the warehouse affairs were under the unified management of the Ministry of Finance and Population and were accordingly under the support of the Ministry of Statistics and

Dispatch, Ministry of Warehouse and Ministry of Agriculture, Imperial sensors also enjoyed the right to audit and monitor warehouse affairs. It is fair to say that the sound and complete warehouse system of the Tang significantly helped the ruling class maintain social stability.

In the Yuan Dynasty, the imperial Mongolian government actively promoted Han Chinese-style governance, attaching great importance to disaster relief. Emperor Shizu of Yuan (also known as Kublai Khan) once said, “What is the significance of grain reserves if not for famine relief?” (Song et al., 1976e) According to relevant statistics, during the 88 years from Kublai Khan’s accession to the throne in 1260 AD to the eighth year of the Zhizheng era under the reign of Emperor Shun of Yuan (1348 AD), the imperial government of Yuan performed 808 material relief missions, which means 9.2 times per year. The frequent material relief was primarily due to the frequent occurrences of natural disasters during the Yuan Dynasty. Such grain relief was enormous in volume (often in hundreds of thousands of *dan*) and covered a large area of the imperial territory stretching from north to south and reaching minorities-inhabited frontiers. Grain barns of Yuan fell into two categories, i.e. official barns and Changping barns. Specializing in stabilizing grain prices, Changping barns stored grains purchased by the imperial government of Yuan and distributed grain reserves during a lean year. As for grain relief from official barns, there were strict rules, according to which grains were allowed to be distributed to local victims only after the Ministry of Finance and Population in the central government approved a relief application from a local government.

The Qing Dynasty, while following the established warehouse system and grain relief measures of previous dynasties, the imperial government of Qing also launched a number of “porridge factories” to relieve famine victims. By sponsors, these porridge factories could be divided into government-run and rural gentry-run factories. By comparison, government-run factories played a more important role in disaster relief. Take Beijing as an example. There were “ten porridge factories in five towns of Beijing.” And the “supervisory bureau of the five towns” was responsible for site selection, planning and daily management of the factories. Two porridge factories were planned for each of the five towns in Beijing. Their start-up costs and daily expenses were covered by the imperial government budget. To be exact, the imperial government allocated a special fund, namely, “two *dan* of rice and one *liang* of silver per town per day” to this cause (Aisin Gioro & Li, 1899, p. 384). The imperial government of Qing also developed a sound and complete mechanism to supervise and inspect the porridge factories. In 1690 AD Emperor Kangxi of Qing issued an imperial edict, assigning “two grade-II officials (one Han Chinese and one Manchurian) to administer the porridge factories in the five towns of Beijing” (Wu et al., 1998, p. 44, p. 48). In 1730 AD, Emperor Yongzheng of Qing assigned the task of supervising and inspecting the porridge factories in the five towns to their corresponding censors, who were also responsible for inspecting the porridge factories in the charge of the government of Shuntian prefecture. Moreover, in a lean year, to handle the famine victims coming to Beijing from elsewhere and relieve victims far away from Beijing, the imperial government of Qing often set up temporary porridge factories in towns near Beijing. Such temporary porridge factories were usually built in disaster victims-inhabited areas or along arteries to Beijing. Given their temporary and incomplete nature, they



were not necessarily launched every year.

### Medical Relief and Burial Assistance

The frequent outbreaks of plagues and diseases often resulted in a drastic increase in the death toll. Consequently, medical treatment, medication and burial of the dead became increasingly important in disaster and famine relief in the Han Dynasty. According to *The Law of Reward, the Second Year Laws and Regulations*, “A family with two juniors died and parents still alive should be granted one coffin by the county magistrate; a family with three juniors died and parents still alive should be granted coffins.” Also, as recorded in *Biographies of Cao Bao, Book of the Later Han*, in the fourth year of Yongyuan under the reign of Emperor He of Eastern Han (92 AD), Cao Bao was promoted as “commander guarding the city gates of the capital and general director of imperial civil construction. In times of epidemic disease prevalence, Cao Bao made an inspection tour to visit patients, collecting medicine and preparing porridge for them. His efforts saved many people.”

There were regulations on medical relief for the widowed, the orphaned and the elderly with no family in the *Tang Code*. For example, according to the “Household Code 9” in *The Tang Statutes Recollected*, “(Article 37) the decree issued in the 25th year of the Kaiyuan era (737 AD) stipulates that the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family, the impoverished and the sick without self-reliance should be supported by their close relatives. Those who do not have any close relatives should be assisted by the village. Those who get ill or have accidents during a trip and are unable to handle it on their own should be admitted to local village houses and provided with medical help. They should also tell local villagers where they are from, their native place and names of their family members and have such information recorded so that once their conditions get worse, they will be sent back home” (Noboru, 1989b, pp. 165-166). It can be concluded that the *Tang Code* gave comprehensive consideration to the relief and support of the vulnerable.

Furthermore, the imperial government of Tang also offered medical relief and burial assistance to the abovementioned vulnerable. In October of the 24th year of the Kaiyuan era (736 AD) Emperor Xuanzong of Tang issued “Zi Dongdu Huanzhi Shanzhou Tuien Chi” (Decree to Extend Imperial Benevolence upon Returning to Shanzhou from Luoyang), which says, “Government officials at the county and prefecture levels should visit the widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family and servicemen’s families under their jurisdiction, care about their life and offer medical help to those who are sick. The vulnerable both in cities and surrounding areas should be supported.” (L. Li, 1983b, p. 390). In the first year of the Tianfu era (901 AD), Emperor Zhaozong of Tang issued “Gai Yuan Tianfu She Wen” (Decree to Pardon Offenders to Celebrate the Change of the Reign Title into Tianfu), which says, “Government officials at the county and prefecture levels should visit the widowed over 80 under their jurisdiction and care about their life; relevant officials should also offer burial assistance when they pass away and help support their offspring (if any)” (Y. Li, 1983, p. 963).

The Song Dynasty witnessed frequent outbreaks of epidemic diseases and plagues, of which 42 were critical (Liang, 1995, p. 92). In ancient Chinese society, where infectious disease outbreaks were

common, there was little the general public could do to curb the spread of these diseases. To control disease outbreaks and maintain their rulership, the imperial government of Song had to take measures such as on-site clinics and medical relief in densely populated areas. Medicine sales at below market prices, the dispatch of medical officers, distribution of medicine, and issuance of medical prescriptions were medical relief commonly practiced in the Northern and Southern Song dynasties. Such measures contributed significantly to the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, the control of disease outbreaks and the alleviation of the impoverished patients' pain, thus helping maintain social stability and feudal rulership. By comparison, the imperial government of Southern Song worked harder on medical relief than that of Northern Song. In the sixth year of the Shaoxing era (1136 AD) the imperial government of Southern Song had already set up medical relief services such as the Huimin and Heji pharmacies. As recorded in *Gu Jin Shiwen Lei Ju Xin Ji (New Collection of Ancient and Current Argumentative Essays)*, "In the sixth year of the Shaoxing era (1136 AD), official pharmacies were founded in the temporary capital (Lin'an), including four imperial medical bureau-administered pharmacies (specializing in the sales of processed herbal medicine) respectively in the north, south, east and west of Lin'an, along with one Heji pharmacy (specializing in on-site medicine preparation) at the request of Wang Yu, then Vice Minister of Finance and Population. In the 18th year of the Shaoxing era (1148 AD) in accordance with the imperial decree, two posts (one official and one officer) were set up to administer the Heji pharmacy and were filled by one high-ranking imperial civil official and one high ranking military officer. Later, the capital city-based pharmacies (specializing in the sales of processed herbal medicine) were renamed Taiding Huimin pharmacies. In the Yuan Dynasty, the Huimin bureau, an equivalent of the Huimin pharmacy was set up and administered by two lower-ranking posts (i.e. Ling and Zhichang)" (Fu, 1983, p. 608). Later, other medical relief services such as a medical application bureau were launched to relieve impoverished patients. The issuance of medical prescriptions was another key measure of medical relief taken by the imperial government of Southern Song. On May 16th of the third year of the Jiatai era (1203 AD) an imperial minister reported to the imperial court, "I learnt that Emperor Renzhong of Song for multiple times issued medical prescriptions in the Tiansheng era (1023 AD- 1032 AD) and the Huangyou era (1049 AD-1054 AD). Now, the harsh conditions of remote and desolate areas form a breeding ground for diseases. However, medicine and doctors cannot be accessed there. As a result, people can suddenly get ill and die young, which is miserable. I hereby propose your Majesty to order the imperial medical bureau to collect traditional popular prescriptions which are already proved to be effective and use them to compile a prescription manual. Copies of the prescription manual should be granted to local inspection officials, who should pass them to relevant officials at county and prefecture levels, who should in turn select the most relevant parts to write notices and post them onto the walls of busy markets and places" (Xu, 1987a, p. 5833).

In terms of burial assistance, the imperial government of Song set up a special service called Lou Ze Yuan, allowing those who died of epidemic diseases to be promptly buried to prevent disease spread. In the eighth year of the Xining era (1068 AD) "a severe drought struck Wu-Yue region (current Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai). The next year, a major plague swept across the region. Each Bingfang

(patients' house) service recruited two monks to take care of the plague-caused homeless. Their main duties were to provide medicine, catering and a shelter to the homeless patients. Once a patient died, the remains would immediately be buried locally." In addition, for families who could not afford the burial costs, "magistrates of counties near the capital should allocate a piece of wasteland covering an area of 3-5 *qing* (99,999 m<sup>2</sup>-166,665 m<sup>2</sup>) for the burial purposes. The funeral should be hosted by monks. "A temple that handled 3,000 burials and more could be granted one more monk quota. If a temple oversaw this undertaking for three consecutive years, its abbot could be granted a purple robe or an honorary title if the abbot already had a purple robe. The abbot would continue to take charge of the burial affairs for three more years. The term could be further extended at his or her will."

The medical management system of the Yuan Dynasty was primarily based on that of the Song Dynasty and it consisted of an imperial academy of medicine (governmental organization) and a non-imperial academy of medicine (non-governmental organization). Having gone on numerous expeditions, rulers of the Mongol Empire had firsthand experience of diseases and natural disasters. In order to improve the medical relief of the Yuan Dynasty, the ruling class sent imperial officials to seek doctors and encourage local officials and ordinary people to recommend well-known doctors to fill importance positions. In the 12th year under the reign of Taizong of Yuan (1240 AD), the imperial academy of medicine was officially founded. Under the reign of Renzong of Yuan, a sound and complete medical management system came into being. The imperial government of Yuan carried out fundamental institutional reforms in the imperial academy of medicine, making it the highest medical administration. This meant the imperial academy of medicine also oversaw the emperor-oriented imperial physician system. Thus, it formed "a top-down management network and a medical officer institution unprecedentedly rigorous and sophisticated" (Wu, 2008). Medicine as a profession also enjoyed a high status in the Yuan Dynasty. Some doctors with excellent medical skills were offered key government positions and were trusted by the emperor. Without prejudice to any medical schools, the imperial government of Yuan also embraced other medical practices (such as Islamic medicine) outside the mainstream traditional Chinese medicine. The Yuan Dynasty witnessed considerable progress in medicine, with its medical research and management system much more advanced than those of the previous dynasties. Benefiting from an improved management system and a high social status, the governmental medical services of Yuan, with support from non-governmental medical services, made impressive achievements in charitable assistance. Government-backed medical relief services mainly included the Guanghui bureau and Huimin pharmacies, both of which were administered by the imperial academy of medicine. The Guanghui bureau was an emperor-oriented medical service which was officially launched in the Zhiyuan era (1264 AD-1294 AD). The Huimin pharmacies were a government-backed charitable pharmacy system which offered impoverished patients medicine for free or at low prices. Although the Huimin pharmacies were funded by the imperial government, its annual medical relief was rationed. Consequently, medical relief shortages could occur in the event of disease prevalence, a surge of impoverished patients or mismanagement. To tackle such a challenge, some local non-governmental agencies (such as the San Huang Miao societies in many counties and prefectures)

raised and donated money and materials to the Huimin pharmacies.

### Field Distribution and Tax Reduction

In the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, social relief to ordinary impoverished populations was commonly performed in two ways, i.e. Jia Min Gong Tian (public field rent) and Ci Min Gong Tian (public field grant).

Jia Min Gong Tian (public field rent) was implemented in the first year of the Dijie era under the reign of Emperor Xuan of Western Han (69 BC). “The word ‘jia’ in Jia Min Gong Tian means ‘rent’” (Fan, 1973d, p. 1653). Jia Min Gong Tian refers to government’s practice of renting public fields to impoverished people who had no field or an insufficient field and collecting rents in return. In this way, the impoverished people became tenant farmers of the imperial government. Public field rent was often practiced in combination with seeds and grains lending to form a stimulus package to settle the impoverished populations. Under the reigns of Emperor He and Emperor An of Eastern Han, public field rent to needy people also became popular. In the 15th year of the Yongyuan era (103 AD) Emperor He of Eastern Han issued an imperial edict, stipulating that “the widowed who were engaged in fishing and collecting in ponds should be exempted from rental tax for two years” (Fan, 1973d, p.191). In February the first year of the Yongchu era (107 AD), Emperor An of Eastern Han issued an imperial edict, requiring “rent the Guangcheng hunting grounds and the public fields in disaster-stricken prefectures and principalities to local impoverished people” (Fan, 1973e, p. 206).

In the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC-8 AD) Ci Min Gong Tian (public field grant) was not yet a common practice, whereas in the Eastern Han Dynasty (25 AD-220 AD) it was done on a massive scale. In the early Eastern Han Dynasty, there was a drastic population decline, resulting in vast stretches of unclaimed wasteland, which thus became disposable “public fields.” Many of these public fields were awarded to the aristocracy and meritorious statesmen, with the rest used to resettle refugees and the poor, a practice known as Ci Ming Gong Tian (public field grant). In the 16th year of the Jianwu era (40 AD), Emperor Guangwu of Eastern Han sent envoys to “prefectures and principalities to make local bandits report against each other” and “relocate bandit heads to other prefectures where they were given cultivated land and grains to ensure a stable life” (Fan, 1973a, p. 67). Under the reigns of Emperor Ming and Emperor Zhang of Eastern Han, there were more frequent grants of public fields to the poor. Relevant statistics show that from the 9th year of the Yongping era under the reign of Emperor Ming of Eastern Han (66 AD) to the third year of the Yongchu era under the reign of Emperor An of Eastern Han (109 AD), over 20 imperial edicts on Jia Min Gong Tian (public field rent) and Ci Min Gong Tian (public field grant) were issued. Twelve of the over 20 imperial edicts were about Ci Min Gong Tian (public field grant).

Whether it was field rent or field grant, there were two field sources. One was government-owned land in all prefectures and principalities. The other was wilderness (enclosure of livestock and poultry, mountain forest, swamp). These public fields were not necessarily barren land. In fact, some were quite fertile. The imperial government’s distribution of these fields to the poor able to work could increase

state revenues, resettle refugees, relieve the poor, raise the number of tenant farmers and help alleviate class contradictions.

According to the land system of the Tang Dynasty, “In terms of the distribution of tenure fields, a male adult (man over 18) could receive the full entitlements of one *qing* of fields (i.e. 100 *mu*), of which 80 *mu* was a personal-share field (not inheritable) and 20 *mu* was a permanent tenure field; the elderly, the severely disabled and the disabled unable to work could receive the full entitlement of 40 *mu* per person; a widow could receive 30 *mu*. There was also an extra 20 *mu* for an elderly person, disabled person or widow or widower if he or she was the head of a household” (Ouyang & Song, 1975b, p. 1342). The elderly who were not heads of households could receive 40 *mu* and those who were household heads could receive 60 *mu*. While the elderly could receive the full entitlements of tenure fields, they were allowed to be exempted from all poll taxes, levies and corvées by the imperial government of Tang. This can be exemplified by what was recorded in “Treatises 47: Finance and Economics 1” in *The New Book of Tang*, “People falling into the following categories were exempted from poll tax and corvée: the elderly, the disabled unable to work (male), the severely disabled, widow, servant, maid, house slave and official at grade nine or above” (Ouyang & Song, 1975, p.1343).

The Enmian system (imperial exemption system) of the Yuan Dynasty was a form of the Yuan emperors’ favor to exempt taxes in certain regions. The imperial government of Yuan could implement the Enmian system at varied degrees under the following circumstances; change of a reign title, widespread poverty, occurrence of a natural disaster, increase in refugees, turmoil caused by warfare, as well as extreme hardship of ordinary people caused by excessive war supply. Tax exemptions under all the above mentioned circumstances (except change of a reign title) can be deemed indirect relief to the general public. In the first year of the Zhishun era under the reign of Emperor Ningzong of Yuan (1332 AD) “people in different regions were exempted from certain taxes at varied degrees to mark the change of the reign title. . .” In the second year of the Tianli era under the reign of Emperor Mingzong of Yuan (1329 AD) “the impoverished in Dada army farm and other regions were exempted from certain taxes at varied degrees. . .” In the first year of the Youyuan era under the reign of Emperor Renzong of Yuan (1314 AD) “people in Dadu and Shangdu were exempted from taxes for two years; the people elsewhere who were victims of natural disasters were exempted from taxes for one year. . .” In the 10th year of the Dade era under the reign of Emperor Chengzong of Yuan (1306 AD) “refugees who returned to their hometown and resumed their business were exempted from taxes for three years” (Song et al., 1976b).

## Conclusion

Based on the above examination of social relief in ancient China, this paper concludes the following three features:

### Early Government Intervention

Traditional Chinese philosophy advocated a “shared structure of clan and state.” In all the dynasties



in Chinese history, emperors were known as “Son of Heaven,” local officials as “parent-officials” and common people as “child-civilians.” Such a context impelled the ruling class to pay attention to the well-being of the general public, particularly those living at the bottom of society. Thus, helping those in danger and relieving those in need became the responsibility of officials at all levels. The earliest mentioning of helping the disabled can be found in the historical records of the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties. For example, “(The society) offered food to the disabled based on their respective capabilities;” “The widowed, the orphaned, the elderly with no family, the sick and the disabled were well cared for.” During the Pre-Qin period, major vassal states began to offer relief and assistance to the elderly and the weak (the vulnerable), paving the way for the development of social relief throughout the history of China. All these ideas of social relief, which were advocated by various Pre-Qin philosophical schools, were by no means their individual inventions, but were the outcomes of the lasting practice of social relief since the Shang Dynasty. And later dynasties without exception offered assistance and relief to the vulnerable to meet their basic needs. For most of Chinese history, the Confucian policy of benevolence and people-oriented governance were the ruling idea of the imperial dynasties. Featuring strong ethical and moral connotations, such an idea could help guide the practice of social relief.

### **Social Relief at a Preliminary Stage**

Social relief was practiced in ancient China primarily for the purpose of ensuring the survival of the vulnerable groups (victims of natural calamities, the elderly, the orphaned, the disabled) and meeting their basic needs. More importance was attached to material relief which usually covered food aid and basic medical relief, and was seldom extended to the areas of education, health and employment. Without proper guidance and a rational mechanism, the vulnerable groups in ancient China were unable to develop into a self-reliant labor force.

### **Poor Relief Persistence**

An examination of social relief throughout China’s imperial history reveals that the practice of social relief was neither stable nor persistent enough. In major dynasties characterized by “great feudal unity” (such as the Han, Tang, Song, Ming and Qing dynasties) social relief and security measures were better developed and implemented. In some short-lived dynasties and dynasties fragmented by rebellions, however, there was barely any organized system of social relief. Also, the effect of social relief measures had a lot to do with a monarch’s governing style. Under the reign of a wise and able monarch, social morality could be improved, and the basic needs of the vulnerable groups could be met to the maximum. Under the reign of a fatuous monarch, however, many officials at all levels cared nothing about the hardships of ordinary people and were busy embezzling public funds and even relief funds, resulting in rampant poverty and starvation. Besides, the social security system in most dynasties was subject to imperial decrees and therefore lacked continuity. For some objective and temporary reasons, the promulgation and exercise of social relief-related decrees and articles tended to be inconsistent, making it difficult to fulfill their original intentions.

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