

The Connection Between Chen Sheng's Spirit of Rebellion and Modern Concepts of Equality

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Abstract:

The concept of "equality" originates from the West. This study focuses on exploring the connection between the rebellious spirit embodied in the ancient Chinese Chen Sheng uprising and modern notions of equality. This holds significant importance for uncovering the concept of equality embedded in ancient Chinese culture and for examining the transformation of equality concepts in history China's modern and contemporary. This paper primarily develops its discussion from four aspects: the historical context and content of the uprising, the conceptual origins of modern equality, and the commonalities and cross-generational connections between the two. The study employed comparative research and literature analysis to locate and examine relevant materials and texts. Findings confirm the structural similarity between the Chen Sheng Uprising and modern equality concepts demonstrating continuity in their value systems. The integration of ancient Chinese and Western concepts of equality shaped modern Chinese notions of equality. This study demonstrates that the Chen Sheng Uprising profoundly influenced both the egalitarian consciousness of later generations in constructing society and modern concepts of equality.

Keywords: ideology of the Chen Sheng uprising; spirit of resistance; modern concept of equality; transcending generations; modern transformation.

1. Introduction

Chen Sheng was the leader of the first peasant uprising in Chinese history, the Daze Township Uprising. This uprising dealt a heavy blow to the rule of the Qin Dynasty, and although the uprising failed, it

inspired the spirit of resistance in later generations. This incident contained the people's demand for equality and the sense of resistance to the upper class, which had a profound impact on historical and ideological change. The concept of modern equality gradually improved during the European Enlighten-

ment and became an important value in modern society. This study mainly discusses the relationship between Chen Sheng's spirit of resistance and the modern concept of equality from the following four aspects, namely, the historical background and content of the uprising, the origin of the concept of equality in modern times, and the commonality and cross-era connection between the two, analyze how the Daze Township Uprising reflects the people's pursuit of equality in early Chinese history and the similarity and extension of the modern concept of equality, and compare it with the modern concept of equality. This paper uses the method of comparative research and historical analysis to explore the similarities, differences, and connections between the above two through the analysis of historical materials related to the Daze Township Uprising and the relevant materials of the modern concept of equality. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for better analysis of the connectivity between the two in different eras. This study is of great significance for exploring the concept of equality contained in ancient Chinese culture. The ultimate goal of this study is not only to provide the above research, but also to provide a new theoretical framework for understanding the ancient Chinese concept of equality, and understand the evolution of the concept of equality in Chinese history.

2. Chen Sheng's Spirit of Resistance and Its Historical Context

2.1 The Oppressive Context of the Late Qin Dynasty and the Rebellion of the Common People

Chen Sheng, courtesy name She, was known as a native of Yangcheng during the Qin Dynasty, the leader of the peasant uprising at the end of the Qin Dynasty, and the first leader of the peasant uprising in Chinese history. He was conscripted to Yuyang in July of the first year of Qin II, and was later beheaded according to the law due to the delay of the rainy period, so he led the guards to revolt. After the death of Qin Shi Huang, after Qin II succeeded to the throne, he continued to be extravagant, severely punished, and carried out large-scale construction, causing the people's livelihood to be resentful [1].

In such a social context, ordinary people not only have to bear heavy corvée labor, but also a wide variety of taxes, and it is difficult to achieve even the most basic food and clothing. Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were just soldiers, and they were delayed due to rain on the way to Yuyang as the garrison chief, and they should all be executed. According to Qin law, and even if they arrived at the place on time, they would die seven or eight because of corvée

labor. This reflects the harshness and ruthlessness of Qin law. In a desperate situation, they chose to revolt, indicating that the people at the bottom had awakened their sense of resistance under the extremely oppressive existential crisis.

This uprising lasted approximately two years. Although it failed, it dealt a heavy blow to the Qin Dynasty's rule and ignited popular resistance against the oppression of the ruling class. Following it, the rebel armies led by Liu Bang and Xiang Yu overthrew the Qin Dynasty, and their slogan, „Are kings and nobles born with a special destiny?“ provided a theoretical basis for later rebel armies. Chen Sheng's early years as a hired laborer, when he lamented, „If I become rich and powerful, let us not forget each other,“ and „How can a sparrow have the ambition of a swan?“ not only reflected his personal discontent with his current situation but also implicitly contained reflections on the injustice of the social system and a desire for equality. This shift from the individual to the collective laid the theoretical foundation for later uprisings [2].

2.2 Primary Manifestations of Chen Sheng's Spirit of Resistance

Chen Sheng's spirit of resistance is manifested on multiple levels, specifically in his struggle against the injustice of fate, his challenge to the powerful and wealthy, and his pursuit of the ideal of equality.

The phrase „If I become rich and powerful, let us not forget each other,“ uttered by a commoner during his days as a hired laborer, was not only a promise to his companions and an expectation and yearning for a better life, but also reflected his contemplation of the predestination of wealth and power. He realized that wealth and power were not predetermined, but rather a result of resource monopolies and unequal distribution of social resources under a hierarchical system. This shift from conforming to imperial power to resisting the entire ruling class represented an awakening of egalitarian ideals among the common people. It embodies a social form of awakening consciousness and has positive social significance.

Among Chen Sheng's many pronouncements, „Are kings and nobles born with a special destiny?“ is his most representative and widely circulated statement. This statement directly negates the feudal dynasty's essence of „divine mandate“ and „the inherent hierarchy of human beings.“ This rhetorical question not only challenged the feudal hierarchy but also represented a great revolution against social constraints on thought. This statement holds revolutionary significance in the history of Chinese thought, marking the entry of the peasant class onto the historical stage. Although imperfect, it can still be seen as the bud-

ding of early Chinese “equality,” exerting a profound influence.

Chen Sheng’s care for his soldiers during his military service earned him a great reputation within the army, and the soldiers supported and obeyed his commands, which enabled the uprising to succeed. This demonstrates that the uprising was essentially a mass movement, rooted in the masses, spreading his personal ideas to the people and reflecting their aspirations for establishing a new order and achieving social justice and equality. It expressed the basic demands of the common people for fairness and justice and their yearning for a better future. Although his regime was short-lived, ultimately perishing due to internal discord and the combined forces of the Qin Dynasty, this pursuit of justice resonates strongly with modern concepts of equality.

Chen Sheng’s concept of equality, embodied in his rebellion, permeated the entire uprising. Social status should not be the decisive factor in determining a person’s worth; everyone has the right to pursue a better life. This consciousness broke through the shackles of feudal ideology, becoming a crucial enlightenment in the “people-centered” thought of Chinese society and the budding of egalitarian consciousness. The uprising was a mass movement, demonstrating a shift from the individual to the collective, reflecting the popularization of collective consciousness and providing a case model for later large-scale mass movements. This uprising also reflected the awakening of the people’s free will. Furthermore, the uprising symbolized a collective struggle against injustice, making it a just revolutionary movement [3].

3. The Concept and Evolution of Modern Equality

3.1 Concept and Origins of Modern Equality

“Equality” is an important political and moral concept in human society, and its meaning varies at different historical stages. In ancient societies, equality emphasized equality of religious belief; however, in modern times, it has placed greater emphasis on democratic politics. Equality in individual rights primarily emphasizes that “everyone has an equal status in terms of power, personality, dignity, and opportunity.”

The modern concept of equality is not only an important political idea, but also a basic social morality. John Rawls proposed the idea of “fairness is justice” in his book *Theory of Justice*, emphasizing that everyone in society should enjoy the same equal rights of freedom and fair opportunities, and the principle of equality of opportunity and

difference, to ensure that unequal social and economic arrangements must benefit the least disadvantaged [4]. This idea will advance from form to substance and become one of the core elements of modern democratic systems.

Equality in the modern sense is a traditional Western concept, originating from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. In his work *Politics*, he proposed that there are two forms of equality: quantitative equality and proportional equality. Quantitative equality is absolute egalitarianism, while proportional equality is the distribution of things in proportion to an individual’s historical value. “Proportional equality” acknowledges equality based on social differences, implying that status varies and that equality is built upon a foundation of equal status. The statement that “man is by nature a political animal” implies that everyone has the potential to participate in politics. However, equality is confined to the premise of equal status as “citizens.” [5].

3.2 Evolution of Modern Equality Concepts

After the concept of equality entered the Middle Ages, Christianity in European society proposed that “all beings are equal before God,” giving this concept a religious foundation. Martin Luther, during the Reformation, emphasized that God’s grace was unconditionally bestowed upon believers through the sacrifice of Christ, and that individuals only needed sincere faith to achieve salvation. This clarified the direct relationship between religious believers and God, negated the privileges of the Pope, and on this basis challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

With the rise of rationalism and humanism during the Renaissance, equality gradually shifted from religious theology to the rationalization of human dignity. Descartes, starting from a rational perspective, proposed that “human beings, as subjects of thought, are essentially equal.” This period of thought laid a crucial foundation for the intellectual development of the later Enlightenment.

During the Enlightenment, the concept of equality gained government support. Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, proposed that “man is born free and everywhere in chains,” advocating social contract theory and popular sovereignty, emphasizing equality and the common will of the people, and criticizing private property. This concept also influenced the American Revolutionary War, as evidenced by the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which stated, “All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” It also influenced the French Revolution. This concept propelled the outbreak of bourgeois revolutions in Europe and the emergence of the concept of equality, extending to the bourgeois political sphere and laying the foundation

for modern democratic theory.

Entering the 19th century, with the advancement of the Industrial Revolution, the distribution of social resources became unequal, and wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few. Against this social backdrop, equality gradually extended from “political” equality to “economic and social status” equality. In *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx and Engels argued that true equality should be based on the public ownership of the means of production, and that private ownership should be abolished in order to establish genuine social equality. Based on this, they developed the theory of socialism, and ultimately, *The Communist Manifesto* [6].

The concept of equality during this period shifted from “legal equality” to “equality of socioeconomic status.” Equality is not merely a political right, but a value concept concerning the overall liberation of humanity.

Until the contemporary era, through the anti-fascist war and the wave of decolonization, humanity has reached a consensus on international equality: “All men are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This has propelled the concept of equality from within nations to a shared norm of the entire international community, continuously expanding the meaning of equality [7].

3.3 Ancient Chinese Concepts of Equality and Their Transformation in Modern Times

Unlike the West, the development of the concept of equality in ancient China was more tortuous and complex. Confucianism emphasized equality in “human nature,” believing that everyone possesses the potential to become a sage, and that everyone is equal in terms of moral potential and value. It focused on judging people by their virtue, not by their bloodline, a significant breakthrough in feudal aristocratic society.

Unlike Confucianism, Mohism’s core principles are “universal love, non-aggression, and valuing the virtuous.” Universal love means equal love, where everyone should enjoy the same care. Valuing the virtuous means selecting talent based on virtue and ability, not lineage or noble status. Anyone with ability should be given important responsibilities, reflecting equality in political opportunity. Non-aggression is reflected in equality among the feudal states, advocating that each state should be equal and that a stronger state should not attack a weaker one. This resonates with the modern international concept of equality. This ideology shares a logical isomorphism with the spirit of Chen Sheng.

Ancient peasant uprisings often embodied the pursuit of equality and resistance against oppression. The Chen Sheng uprising revealed that social status was not prede-

termined. The Yellow Turban Rebellion at the end of the Western Han Dynasty, the Huang Chao Rebellion at the end of the Tang Dynasty, the Red Turban Army at the end of the Yuan Dynasty, Li Zicheng’s uprising at the end of the Ming Dynasty, and the Taiping Rebellion at the end of the Qing Dynasty—a series of subsequent uprisings—all carried the idea of “equal land distribution and tax exemption,” promoting the spread of egalitarian ideals among the lower-class peasant population and making it a political demand of the people.

After entering the modern era, Western concepts of equality were introduced to China, and the late Qing government went through a process of learning from technology to learning from thought. During the Hundred Days’ Reform at the end of the 19th century, Kang Youwei advocated constitutional monarchy, Liang Qichao advocated civil rights and equality, and the reformers advocated integrating Western ideas of equality into the Confucian framework.

The period from the Xinhai Revolution to the May Fourth Movement marked a turning point in the development of China’s concept of equality. The Three Principles of the People were the first in Chinese history to elevate equality to a core value of the national consciousness. It not only inherited Western egalitarianism but also absorbed the progressive aspects of ancient peasant uprisings. During the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement, figures like Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao advocated “democracy and science,” imbuing “equality” with cultural significance through cultural and intellectual enlightenment and liberation.

With the spread of Marxism in Chinese society, equality transformed from an ideological concept into a practical goal. In the new China, through land reform and women’s liberation, the principle of equality was gradually implemented from socio-economic perspectives to individual gender roles. From opposing privilege to institutional construction and social significance, this reflects the Chinese concept of equality.

4. Commonalities Between Chen Sheng’s Spirit of Resistance and Modern Concepts of Equality

4.1 Shared Foundations of Equality

The core of Chen Sheng’s uprising theory was the rejection of the hierarchical social system ruled by royalty and nobility based on bloodline. At the end of the Qin Dynasty, feudal society constructed a strict hierarchical system based on blood ties, patriarchal traditions, and the divine

mandate of heaven for the emperor. The common people suffered severe economic exploitation under this system. Chen Sheng's question, "Are kings and nobles born with a special destiny?" fundamentally challenged and negated the legitimacy of the feudal system's power structure and order, rejecting the logic that birth determines destiny and proposing the concept of equality for all. This statement has profound historical significance; it is the budding of the idea of equality [8].

The modern concept of equality originated from the Western idea of "natural rights," emphasizing the universal equality of human value and rights. This viewpoint was also key to the American Revolutionary Movement. The Declaration of Independence's statement that "all men are created equal" is a concentrated expression of this idea. Therefore, it can be concluded that the modern concept that "birth does not determine rights" shares a similar underlying logic with Chen Sheng's denial of the hierarchical system.

Although Chen Sheng did not propose a complete theory of equality, his rebellious thought emphasized that people should not be limited by their birth, and that everyone should have equal value. This resonates with modern ideas about equality and forms an important foundation for the traditional Chinese view of equality.

4.2 The Critical Alignment of Hierarchy Critique with Modern Equality

The hierarchical system of feudal society at the end of the Qin Dynasty was not only reflected in political inequality, but also in economic life and social status. The vast majority of ordinary people without military merit were long excluded, enduring heavy corvée labor and taxes. Against this backdrop, Chen Sheng's rebellion was not merely a counterattack against tyranny and the hierarchical system, but also a bold attempt to break down the existing social system and power structure.

Modern views of equality take political equality as their core content, emphasizing that citizens should enjoy equal political rights, including the right to oversee the government and protest against unjust systems. In the minds of Western thinkers, political equality is a fundamental condition and important foundation for the construction of government and society.

This shows that although Chen Sheng did not establish a formal, institutionalized political system, he still demonstrated a fundamental demand for political equality. The idea of including ordinary people within the scope of those who have the power to exercise political rights is highly consistent with modern ideals of egalitarian politics.

4.3 Connections Between Ancient Popular Uprisings and Modern Civic Consciousness

Modern concepts of equality emphasize individual subjectivity and autonomy as political individuals. Modern civic consciousness advocates that everyone should have the ability and right to participate in public affairs and to raise their demands through reasonable and legal channels; every individual is an important participant in national politics.

In ancient Chinese society, it was often difficult for ordinary people to effectively voice their grievances and complaints about injustices. The formation of independent political consciousness was also challenging. The significance of Chen Sheng's uprising lies in its organization and mobilization, which brought the entire lower class into the political sphere as active participants. Through slogans such as "Are we born with a special destiny?" and "May the Great Chu rise!", the lower classes were no longer mere bystanders or passive recipients of political action. On a spiritual level, they gained a clear understanding of themselves, recognizing themselves as participants and decision-makers in political activities, with the right to change the unjust status quo rather than simply passively accepting it [9].

Although Chen Sheng's violent resistance differed greatly from modern institutionalized and peaceful forms of citizen participation, his values reflected the idea that the people are not appendages of the regime, but rather the main body of society. The people have the right to protest against injustice and oppression and to seek solutions. Therefore, Chen Sheng's ideas can be seen as the nascent political concept of "citizen" in ancient society.

4.4 The Lessons of Peasant Rebellions for Modern China

The Chen Sheng Uprising, as the first large-scale collective movement in Chinese history with clear political demands, redefined the theory of the source of power, arguing that rule based on bloodline and divine authorization is illegitimate. This concept corresponds to the principle of "popular sovereignty" in modern philosophy, meaning that the legitimacy of political power derives from the people, not a privileged class. This played an indispensable role in the enlightenment of modern China's exploration of democracy and fairness.

Chen Sheng's rebellion as a conscripted soldier, advocating that everyone should strive for a higher status, broke with the feudal ideology that defined social standing based on birth. This resonates with modern China's efforts to promote social reform, narrow class gaps, guarantee civic education and employment opportunities, and institution-

alize the value of equal opportunity [10]. Therefore, the Chen Sheng Uprising is not only the beginning of peasant wars, but also an indispensable source of thought in the development of China's concepts of equality and civic consciousness. Its spirit of resistance demonstrates a profound intrinsic connection with contemporary social values.

5. Conclusion

Although Chen Sheng's Dazexiang Uprising occurred against the backdrop of a turbulent feudal society, the ideas it embodied transcended its own era. It has had a profound influence on the egalitarian consciousness of later feudal societies and on modern concepts of equality. This study's findings indicate that Chen Sheng's uprising marked the beginning of Chinese peasants' rise to the political stage and was also the nascent stage of egalitarian development. It has a deep intrinsic connection with modern concepts of equality. Therefore, this study concludes that this movement represents important evidence of the long-term and continuous pursuit of fairness, justice, and political independence in Chinese society. It has been continuously reinterpreted and given new meaning in the modern enlightenment of national thought, the construction of a modern state system, and the reform of social power. This research provides valuable reference for future research in this direction, primarily offering new interpretations and frameworks for understanding ancient Chinese concepts of equality, and providing historical reference for contemporary social equality ideals. Today, ancient peasant uprisings are largely viewed as tools propelling history forward, their underlying ideas considered

limited, and their intellectual value not fully explored. Modern views of equality are primarily seen as a product of the Western Renaissance and Enlightenment. Future research should focus more on exploring the connection between the dissemination and development of ancient Chinese views on equality and contemporary equality.

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