The Influence of the Gentry on Rural Political Construction

WANG Zhen
Communication University of China, Beijing, China

Based on some former studies of Chinese rural society, this paper summarizes the achievements and limitations of general Chinese rural studies and then proposes a social operation model in rural areas which is dominated by the squires. It uses some specific historical data and discoveries of field duty to further examine the profound influence of the squires on rural political construction in three different aspects: the model of clan and religion, the role as inter-mediator and the growth of basic armed forces. The study found that this special social group played a center role in Chinese rural political system from ancient to modern times, particularly, the research considers the decline of the squire society since the establishment of the new government in 1949. In the end, this paper points out the cultural guiding significance of this social model in the study to the rural construction in contemporary China by predicting the possibility of renaissance.

Keywords: squire society, rural political construction, clan, religion, mediator, basic armed forces, cultural survival

Introduction

In the field of China’s social and economic history, there has been a lot of research on the rural society of different stages, which have produced fruitful academic achievements. Many scholars refer in their papers and books to “rural elites” and their influence, that is, the squires and the role they play in the countryside. In particular, in the late QING Dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republic of China (1912-1949), the squires had their new characteristics, unique academic, and cultural significance. HUANG mentioned the role that the squires played in related fields respectively in his work of The Peasant Economy and Social Changes in North China (1986) and The Autonomous Government in the Republic of China (1984). In Religious Ethics and Merchant Spirit in Modern China, YU (1987) referred the change from merchants to squires when discussing the new look of the merchants in MING and QING Dynasties. In Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China 1900-1942, Duara (2004) discussed the role that the squires played in the change of powers on state and local level in modern China. There is also research focusing on the squires. Hymes (1986), for example, studied the origin and development of the social elites in Fuzhou during Northern and Southern SONG Dynasty, discussed the formation of the gentry, and made a systematic comparison with British “squires” (also referred to nobles) at the same period. However, the above-mentioned studies failed to take squires as their chief subject and inquire into their role in a certain macro field. It is probable that they were limited to some particular place in a particular period and failed to make a detailed classification of the development process in the whole China’s social and

WANG Zhen, undergraduate student, School of Cinema and Television, Communication University of China.
economic history. As a result, they could not reflect the relationship of operation and administration between the squires and the rural society through the perspective of the squires.

What this paper would like to do is to take the squires as the subject of the research and elaborate the change and development of the squires in a vertical and horizontal manner. The construction of China’s rural administration has been the foundation for the whole rural society, which decides its administration and operation. As far as the overall characteristics of China’s rural society is concerned, the more authoritative theory is “ethics standard” put forward by Mr. LIANG Shu-ming (1946). FEI Xiao-tong summed it up as “Cha Xu Ge Ju (Difference Pattern)” in his Earthbound China (2005). In operation mode and composition of rural society, there is the market theory known as “Skinner Model” by G. William Skinner (1964) and cultural power network theory by Duara (2004). In fact, whether it is market theory or cultural power network theory, the role of the squires cannot be ignored. These theories, however, cannot conclude that the squires play a dominant role in administration. Taking the squires as the subject of this research, this paper will summarize China’s rural society as the administrative mode in which the squires dominate with their core and irreplaceable status. The conventional political construction system in the squire society is the foundation for peasant economy and tenant farming, ethics building, and education and culture transmission. This paper focuses on this subject to generalize the historic significance of the squires on the one hand. On the other hand, this political ecology can lend experience to the practice of “strengthening and innovating administration and promoting the traditional culture” put forward by the Communist Party of China, improve the political civilization on a local level, and reduce the cost of administration and operation as a whole.

The Origin and Composition of the Squires

“The squires”, also referred to as “county sage”, are synonym of the elite class of grass-root society in China’s ancient and modern history. They were a unique group that played a leading role in traditional China’s rural development. Their origin and development are time-honored.

The origin of the squires was closely geared to the development of the stratum of “scholar”. As for the origin and development of scholars, Mr. YU Shi-ying (2003) made a detailed research and elaboration. Here, what this paper stresses is the relationship between “esquires” and China’s system of official selection and examination. It has been a long tradition that scholars in the countryside participate in local administration. The “Juxiaolian” system in HAN Dynasty (a system of selecting officials by which those who are filial and clean are recommended) is a case in point. However, the transition from esquires to squires relies on the establishment of the imperial examination system, and the intellectuals and China’s autocratic bureaucracy have been closely related ever since.

The esquires in the countryside were composed of two parts: the officials who are appointed after passing the examinations; and the scholars who fail the examinations but with scholarly honor. These people are well educated with Confucian culture as the center, so they enjoy certain learning and renown. GUAN Zhong (725 B.C.-645 B.C.) early proposed that “more plough by peasants will produce more grains and choosing officials from the peasants will produce more sages”. From this, we can see that in the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.-476 B.C.) and the Warring States Period (475 B.C.-221 B.C.), intellectuals had the reputation of “sage” in

---

1 Guan Zi, Chapter of Xiao Kuang (475 B.C.-221 B.C.).
the counties. Starting from the SONG Dynasty (960 A.D.-1279 A.D.), esquires became the elites in the counties, which was associated with a change in social background. Particularly, the upsurge of New-Confucianism with natural science as the representative promoted the education development and growth in intellectuals on the one hand. On the other hand, the Confucian ethics of “upholding justice and annihilating desires” went gradually into the people’s mind. This laid two foundations for esquires to participate in rural administration: necessary knowledge; and right of speech in moral ethics. According to Jimo County Annals (1989) in the QING Dynasty, a vast majority of celebrities are “scholars” or “county sages”, which demonstrates the relationship between the bureaucratic elites and the esquires.

On the other hand, with the upsurge of the business of the SONG Dynasty, the businessmen’s social and economic strength was enhanced. The system of “scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants” found it harder to restrict and judge the merchants. The burgeoning merchants needed political capital to guarantee their wealth, which was manifested through their contributions to building such public facilities as roads, bridges, water conservancy, and schools. These deeds helped them obtain the functions previously owned by the scholars and gradually acquired qualifications to participate in local administration. As a result, “merchant squires” grew into another powerful part of the gentry. When the author was doing investigation in the Southern area of Fujian Province, he found many old buildings such as clan halls, old-style private schools, temples housing the god of earth, and Pat Sin temples, most of which were built by some big families, scholars, or officials. In the MING and QING dynasties, quite a few favorable factors pushed the business squires to grow mature. Firstly, the burgeoning of new four-people concept and the enhancement of merchants’ economic strength brought a high status to merchants, which was only next to that of the scholars. In some commercially developed areas, such as Xiuning and Xin’an, merchants were even on an equal footing with the scholars. Secondly, lower successes in the imperial examinations made more and more squires take to business. Thirdly, the donation system starting from the MING Dynasty (1364 A.D.-1644 A.D.) provided a channel for merchants to enter bureaucratic system. The increasing social status of merchants resulted in a brand new phenomenon since the MING Dynasty in which scholars and merchants were closely related, promoting the upsurge of aristocratic families of “Confucian businessmen” or “official merchants”. And the most representatives were the merchants in Anhui and Shanxi provinces.

Squires and esquires made up the basic framework of elite class of China’s rural society of the eleventh and twentieth centuries. Therefore, this paper generalizes as “the squire society” the operation and administration mode of China’s rural society in which squires were dominant. It covers such aspects as politics, economics, culture, and public services. The development of the squires in the countryside and their influence on rural political construction involved in this paper will be discussed in detail in a later chapter “Political Construction in the squire society”.

**Political Construction in the Squire Society**

Since the QIN Dynasty (221 B.C.-206 B.C.), the most basic administrative authority in ancient China’s administrative division has been county-level. In most cases, villages and towns were autonomous or semi-autonomous. Therefore, the local governments carried out a loose control and management over villages with the usual responsibilities of measuring the land, population statistics, investigation of major legal cases, and
tax collection (in reality, the squires were entitled to interfering with assessment. Some were even appointed to be
the government’s representative in charge of tax collection in a certain village). As for specific administration,
the gentry were responsible for its implementation. For this reason, the actual power was in the hands of squires
with strength. Wealth, knowledge, moral right of speech, and the close-knitted relationship with bureaucratic
system, determined the political status of the squires. Usually, there were two ways for squires to demonstrate
their political status and strengthen their leadership: clan and religion.

The patriarchal clan system implemented since the ZHOU Dynasty (the 11th century-256 B.C.) was based
on blood relation and stressed pecking order within clan. Their original purpose was to deal with succeeding
issues of kinship, property, and manor. In late Spring and Autumn Period, especially in the Warring States
Period, the patriarchal clan enfeoffment system was severely destroyed, but the idea of patriarchal clan was
deep-rooted. Patriarchal clan concept emphasized the hierarchical order within the clan, for example, there was
a fundamental difference between legitimate and bastardy offspring in status and right. Externally, it required its
members to unite and fight against the aggression from outside, so as to safeguard the interest of the whole
family. Clan or family is an important element in political construction, whether it is imperial bureaucratic
system or the squire autonomous system in rural areas.

In rural areas of Southern China, clans had a vast and profound influence, while in the north, clans still
participated in the rural administration though they were inferior to their southern counterpart in strength.
Regarding selecting leaders, since the squires might be head of a certain clan, their huge family background
provided favorable conditions for their participation in rural administration. Sometimes, the head of a clan would
interfere with the production of head of another clan, hoping that this newly-selected clan head would be in favor
their interests. The clan forces penetrated any aspect in rural administration and it was more evident in some key
administrative organizations. For example, Baojia Organization (a kind of military system starting from the
SONG Dynasty) in modern China is a case in point. Though it was a channel for the government to strengthen its
control of the rural areas, the head of the organization was the clan leader other than a bureaucratic official. In this
case, it was still under control of the clan organization2, which was not different from traditional clan
representative system. Clan political mode is a typical expression of the features of rural “Cha Xu Ge Ju”, and it
is closely related to rural cultural and moral construction.

As clan representatives, contradictions would arise between the squires and other clans of different
surnames when they were fighting for their own interest. For example, in villages badly short of water in the
northern China area, contention for water source or water conservancy facilities was the main reason for clan
confliction or inter-village conflicts. Therefore, Zhahui Organization was born at the historic moment, and its
manipulator was still the squire who was himself the clan head3. In villages deeply influenced by clan, members
would live together, forming the unity of blood and geopolitical relation, which was guarantee for their interest in
case of clan confliction. The squires involved in the administration were closely linked with their clan interest.
Though education background and position were important prerequisite for the squire status, without the support
from a clan with vast strength, the squire would get the worst of it when dealing with rural affairs and the
contradictions with the squires from other huge clans.

2 Nanman Railway Company Investigation of China’s Rural Customs (1940-1942).
3 Nanman Railway Company Investigation of China’s Rural Customs (1940-1942).
The rural political system with clan and the patriarchal clan concept as its basis was actually a conventional management mode. The squires played their part in two aspects: internally, to unite the clan and deal with major affairs such as dividing up family property, land sale and marriage, and bereavement; externally, through their status as the clan representative, to participate in administration and win over corresponding interest for their own clan. The concept of the “same structure of the clan and country” specific to China is inseparable from the profound influence of the clan politics on rural society. China is far from a typical religious society. For Chinese, especially the vast majority of farmers, it is easier for the patriarchal clan concept to become the value standard in their life, which decides that the squires or clan members should put the clan’s interest above everything else. The family’s interest can even be regarded as the highest ideal of the traditional farmers while their individual life is usually ignored. The clan activities in rural areas are of vital significance. The clan’s public sacrifice on Tomb-Sweeping Day (the custom varies in different areas and in some places the sacrifice is during the Spring Festival) is the most important activity. The squires will lead and organize this activity, hosting the sacrifice, showing their pedigree, and treating the clan’s guests. All these have reflected that the squires express their political status and validity of their involvement in political management through clan channel.

In China’s countryside, unlike the clan concept, religious culture is hard to become the farmers’ pillar of faith. What’s more, there are differences between rural religious faith and general religious faith. The family background of the squires and their cultural influence made the traditional Confucianism deep-rooted. The farmers believe in Taoism and Buddhism out of some utilitarianism. They focus on a certain god rather than a complete set of religious and ethical system. You can find many religious places in the countryside such as temples housing the god of earth, temple of the dragon king, Guan Yu Temple, and Guanyin Temple. On traditional festivals, farmers would worship the kitchen god and god of wealth. Yet this cannot indicate that the farmers belong spiritually to the religion owned by these gods. For example, farmers worship the dragon king to pray for good weather for the crops. And this sacrificial ceremony is grandly held in years of great drought. The Tien Hou Temples widely built in the coastal areas of the southeast are closely bound up with the fishermen. Taking GUAN Yu worship for example, Mr. Duara (2004) discussed the relationship between modern rural religion and politics, which proves that the religious sacrificial activities with utility color are far from religion in a real sense. These activities cannot be simply positioned with “religion”. For example, the pray for rain is more like an important official business that connects the agricultural production of the whole village, and it is inseparable from the political and economic interest. Similarly, the coincidence of religious activities and official business provides a stage for the squires to display their leadership.

Most temples in the countryside were built by the squires. Influenced by Confucianism, the squires considered it as their bounden duty to participate and lead religious activities, which was not only related to the social responsibilities of Confucian thought, but to philosophical system of “human in nature” as well. The fundamental reason for the squires to host the sacrificial ceremonies and make donations to build religious places was that as social elites, their religious faith complied with the religion and the gods they worshiped in the imperialist ideology, which kept them consistent with the state will in cultural awareness and value, thus becoming an important channel for the squires to enter the secular political structure and big opportunity to

---

4 Nanman Railway Company Investigation of China’s Rural Customs (1940-1942).
demonstrate their leadership. In the QING Dynasty, most temples and ancestral halls were built by the county magistrates, most of whom were “county sages”. The sacrificial activities concerning temple housing the gods of earth, Guan Yu Temple and Chenghuang Temple were hosted by county magistrates or squires. So, local religious activities have always been connected with squire autonomy and bureaucratic politics. The squires went all out to maintain the status and image of the gods worshiped by the official side and naturally the squires became symbol in the countryside for empire, imperial power, and orthodox thought. With the decline of modern religious activities, the squires quickly withdrew from the religious field and took to new activities, including “new political businesses” such as running new learning and organizing military training, which showed that the main purpose of the squires’ crave for manipulating religious activities lay in their political nature under the guise of religion, while the new measures of modern time provided a brand new stage. It is to be observed that Christian was spread in the rural society to some extent, and it contended for schools, land, disciples, and students with traditional clan and religion, becoming one of the factors to disintegrate the squire society.

Whether it is clan-type village or religion-type village, the related activities differentiated the status of the county elites from that of common people. It was somewhat different from bureaucratic system. The clan circles and religious circles largely stipulated the business scope of villages, providing main places for the squires to exert their leadership. Clan politics and religious politics together made up the basic features of the power operation and management in the gentry society. The clan and religious strength was not entirely limited to one village with blood and geopolitical relations. They tended to expand their relation network through marriage and sacrifice for the same god by several villages, thus providing new human resources for the squires. Because of the conventionality of clan and religious political management, the implementation of Japan’s large township system and deepening of China’s land reform made the political bond based on blood and geopolitical relation easily cut, and the rural political power lost its legality in traditional social culture. As a result, the bridge to gap province-level, county-level administration, and the village affairs was broken, the government and the people missed their original “buffer zone”, and the rural political ecology underwent radical change accordingly. The next section will discuss the unique function of the squires in the network of the government and the people.

Guardian and Inter-mediator

There were two ways for the transmission and implementation of the central orders: One was through county-level officials and their subordinates; the other one was through appointed squires. Mr. Duara (2004) called them “bureaucratic agent” mode and “guardian-type” mode respectively. Obviously, villagers tended to be the latter. The squires tended to pay more attention to maintain the interest of the farmers and the whole village than those officials. On the contrary, the officials would use the opportunity to squeeze farmers to fill their pocket. Especially, in tax collection, officials would collect more and hand in less to the finances of higher levels to make up for their thin salary. As main land owners in the rural areas, the squires would try every means to cover up related information such as land quantity, land ownership, and soil fertility level, use nature and population so as to evade tax. Usually, the designated agents by the government for collecting taxes would be squires or rich farmers. Villagers trusted the squires to be their interest guardians and bridge between the government and the

5 Jimo County Annals (Tongzhi version) (1989).
6 Nanman Railway Company Investigation of China’s Rural Customs (1940-1942).
people. When farmers had suggestions or were dissatisfied with the government, they generally expressed it through the squires. Therefore, the squires could be regarded as inter-mediators to express public opinion.

The political position of the squires determined that they represented the interest of the villagers, reflected public opinions and maintained the interest of their village in terms of tax collection and land measurement on the one hand. On the other hand, the squires had a close relation with the bureaucratic system. China’s rural society has valued “human feelings” and the squires would do their utmost to get along well with the officials so as to create stronger political background and human resources. Likewise, local officials attached great importance to the gentry. Through buying off the squires with strength, officials could carry out their administrative orders with less obstruction. There were many ways for the squires and bureaucracy to enhance their relationship, for example, they would exchange gifts, connect through marriage, visit on festivals, and take part in weddings or funerals. Usually, a closer relationship with the officials of county level or even higher level would bring more say to the squires in rural administration. When villagers would turn to the officials, the squires could work as inter-mediators. When clan or inter-village contradictions evolved into lawsuit, the clans or villages that had close relationship with the county officials would be in a favorable state. Therefore, the relation network between the squires and bureaucracy occupied an important place in the gentry political system.

The squires could be compared to “buffer zone” between the government and the people, however, they were not complete appendage under the government of feudal bureaucracy. Mr. Duara (2004) once pointed out that when the national power went deep into the rural society, conflict would arise between the squires and villagers in the traditional autonomy, and prevent the political power from expanding. In the reform in the late QING Dynasty, before the new measures entered the rural society, the squires had already had control over a great part of land production and public facilities. They would not allow their influence in the rural society completely to be replaced by the government and the bureaucratic system, which drove them to manage to maintain their interest and influence in the change of political power. The villagers’ long trust and dependence on the squires made them more disgusted with some measures by the government, for example, apportioned charges and various kinds of taxes. The fight of the squires with the bureaucracy of the county level and even the province level would conform to the interest of the majority of farmers. As it were, the squires were important instrument for the ruling class to balance the relationship between the officials and the people, while the different mechanisms within the bureaucratic system (self-discipline of officials, achievement evaluation, and establishment of supervising positions) proved to be in a mess because of checks and balances among different schools and corruptions of officials within the bureaucracy. The pursuit of fame and wealth would bring about a vicious circle of “one corrupted, all follow suit” among the bureaucratic circle.

However, this does not indicate that the squire’s bond, buffer zone, and checks and balances were always positive. Firstly, as an elite class, the squires themselves would unavoidably make profit for themselves and their family, like bureaucrats, through embezzlement, corruption, and squeezing villagers. The negative effect caused by the squires doing bad deeds was even greater than that brought about by of bureaucrats. This was striking in modern China when “local tyrants and evil gentry” became key fighting objects of the farmers. Secondly, as a local operation mechanism outside the bureaucracy, the “gentry mode” was not restricted and bound on a legal level. It was rather a customary social operation mode. This implied that the government, people, and the squires were hard to grasp the “law” and “degree” within this mechanism. The over resistance of local political power by
the squires and farmers would become a factor to foster local riot and turmoil and hinder the management of local government. The “Broadsword Society” during the Republic of China was a case in point. Thirdly, the “gentry mode” was unable to completely break away from the feudal bureaucratic system. From the origin and composition of the squires, we can see that this mechanism was extension and spread of local political power rather than the end of it. The squire system was inseparable from the imperial autocratic and bureaucratic machine. In a time when the whole court system was loose and in a mess and the mainstream status of Confucian culture was shaken, this mechanism could hardly survive.

Interestingly, because of the loose management of the government over villages, when major changes or turmoil occurred, villages would become primary pillage object of the government or rebel forces. For example, in the late QING Dynasty, domestic trouble and foreign invasion quickened the pace of the QING government to plunder the villages so as to obtain money for war reparation. As the chief owner of production means, the squires would carry the brunt. When the squires’ economic benefit was damaged, the farmers would find it hard to be an exception. Therefore, the squires, as head of a clan and spokesperson, should enhance their armed forces so as to safeguard their own interest.

### Enhancement of Basic Armed Forces

Speaking of rural social security and armed forces, we have to mention the Baojia System. Until the Republic of China, the Baojia System had undergone quite a few changes, it, however, continued to shoulder and exploit its function of maintaining local social security. Baojia System was one method of the central government to control and manage the countryside as well as one branch of the bureaucratic system, we, however, could not see from Baojia System the role that the squires played in local armed forces. Though, we mentioned previously that Baojia System was influenced by the clan strength, it was bound by the bureaucratic politics after all. Particularly, the squires were often exploited and plundered by the landlords and bureaucrats. In a time of turmoil, the banditry became a mortal malady. All these factors drove the squires to achieve their goal through enhancing the armed forces of their clan and village.

Under non-bureaucratic system, there were various kinds of armed forces, most of which were directly governed by clan leaders and local elites, and this had a close relationship with clan and religious political road. Some families with vast strength would live in a grand courtyard or a group of relatively concentrated buildings. The head of the clan would hire people to keep watch and go on patrol, build such military facilities as watch tower, blind pass, and thick walls, purchase weapons, guns, and ammunition. The servants who kept watch were different from regular army. They were led by the clan head other than by the royal court. As a result, the rural local armed forces were strengthened. The strengthening of one clan’s armed forces would be a threat to other clans, villages, and bandits, thus guaranteeing the status and influence in a village, several villages, and even the whole county. In this regard, the most representatives were Jinshang grand courtyard in Shanxi Province, Kaiping watch tower in Guangdong Province, and Kakkas and their earthen building in Fujian and Guangdong provinces.

There were all kinds of local armed forces with religious organization as a bond, which were products of the Qing government, the warlord tyranny, and Japanese invasion of China. These organizations included Boxers and
the Red Spears, which developed into local self-defense organizations. The “Broadsword Society” had a slightly different organizational structure from that of the Red Spears. Their main participants were landlords, rich peasants, and the squires. Other similar organizations were Liuli Society and Zhenwu Society. These societies were organized spontaneously by villagers, hoping to defend themselves through the force of spirit and metal weapons. The elites still played a striking role in these organizations. Studies have shown that these religious organizations did play a certain role in safeguarding rural society. In the meantime, they were disturbing factors for local rebel and social turmoil. During the anti-Japanese war, these organizations were divided. Some cooperated with the army to fight against the Japanese invaders. And some broke away from the organizations out of their own interest and even became Japanese puppet army. In the liberation war, quite a few religious organizations controlled by the squires became obstructive factor for liberating the rural areas and pushing forward land reform.

In the modern society, with the deepening of the government power in the rural areas, the original traditional squire social mode was quietly disintegrated. Under the squeezing of the government and Japanese invasion, the operation of the squire society became harder and harder. The political status of the village leaders was no longer a channel to maintain the interest of the village and increase their own reputation. They were victims squeezed between the officials. The rural elites fled from the leadership and strengthened their clan forces in order to defend themselves. The transition of rural society caused reclusion of traditional squires. In the mean time, some “broker-type” elites subordinated to the government were active and became so-called “new squires”, including the so-called “local tyrants and evil gentry”. These “new squires” sped up exploitation of farmers in the name of the government on the one hand. On the other hand, they acted evilly in collusion with the government to make profit through taxes, apportionment, and land sale. This change became the important reason why the contradiction was intensified between the farmers and the squires in modern Chinese society.

Decline of the Squires and New Evolution

When he was doing investigations in Hunan Province during the land revolution period, Mao Zedong listed the squires (that are, local tyrants and evil gentry) as key object of attack. Through publicizing the policy of reducing rent and interest, and allotment of land, the peasants were encouraged to participate in revolution. In reality, there was not tense contradiction in rural society dominated by traditional squires. On the contrary, the contradictions were relieved. Traditional tenancy system and the gentry guardian system brought about a win-win relation between the peasants and the squires. As mentioned in the previous section, the deepening of the government power in villages promoted the transformation of the gentry. Together with the extended war, traditional squires found that the cost and difficulty for administering village affairs and social management went up. As a result, they had to “resign”. Through, a series of reforms including tax farming, cities, and the governments gradually get control of the rural society, and village leaders became authentic government brokers. These new squires were the mainstream of “local tyrants and evil gentry”. In contrast, the main social contradiction in the traditional squire society did not come from themselves other than government taxes and apportion.

In view of this, a large-scale land reform in the liberated zone and in new China began to uproot the
foundation for the social politics and management. The division of status turned those well-educated people to counterrevolutionary and lost all the political rights. The government made the squires lose control of production means through expropriating land property, wealth, and even temples, and then, the government distributing them to peasants and rich peasants, thus making the squires lose control of production means. We can say that the land reform fundamentally destroyed traditional squires and modern squires.

Though the conventional social mode of squires underwent devastating blow, as a cultural symbol and social feelings, the squires were kept in the countryside. They even exert far-reaching influence on majority of the peasants in thinking and action mode. Due to the long-term influence on clan and religious political system, the traditional concept of “home” was deep rooted in the countryside and would become the main vehicle for traditional cultural customs. Meanwhile, the social responsibilities owned by the squires would become key spiritual power for the new county elites. Since China’s reform and open to the outside world, a great many intellectual youths returned to their homes. Relying on the reform and open policy, many people became rich. Cherishing the good care from the peasants, many successful people threw themselves into the construction of rural economy, becoming “modern squires”. If the village head and the Party Secretary could bring benefit to the peasants, they could also be called “squires”. From these changes we can see that after the gentry were destroyed, the power of the squires mainly came from culture and spirit. In recent years, the state has paid more and more attention to issues of agriculture, farmers, and rural areas. Therefore, the able and experienced social elites are called on to make contribution to the construction of socialist modernization. This should become an important way to enhance and innovate social management and improve rural political and economic structure.

These changes since the new stage have urged the new elites to return to the countryside. In fact, with the quickening of unification of town and country, the trend of village urbanization has been increased. Traditional culture and thought falls apart. Whether or not these “modern squires” continue to exert the function of the traditional squires leaves much for further discussion. However, in terms of power construction, the elites are potential to constructing democratic and political civilization and promote the autonomy of county selection. In addition, the mechanism in which traditional squires and the bureaucrats check and balance, which should be a message for reducing money transaction in the current democratic selection in the countryside.

Conclusions and Implications

To conclude, in the process of the squires’ formation, development, mature and disintegration, as political and cultural elites in rural society, the squires play an important part in social formation and political construction in rural area. The penetration of state power and social transformation will likewise exert huge influence on the transition of the squires.

The Squires in the Transition of Ideology and Social System

From the origin of “scholars” to the destruction of the gentry, we can see that the development of the squires have been closely related with ideology and social system. The development of economy and upsurge of new Confucianism in the SONG Dynasty provided a favorable social environment and survival soil for the squires. In the MING and QING Dynasties, the systems of the previous dynasty were conditionally reformed, providing more favorable conditions for squires to lead in the rural society. The turmoil in the late QING Dynasty and the
Republic of China urged the government to enhance the control of the countryside and seize enough benefit. The disintegration of traditional squire social order weakened their status and role. Finally, the land reform by the new China fundamentally destroyed the special class and elite group that survived for one thousand years.

Meanwhile, the squire society takes clan and religion as their political structure, creating a far-reaching and lasting influence on China’s politics, economy, and culture. This political mechanism not only maintains and supplements the operation of the central and local bureaucratic system, but also restricts it to a certain degree. The squire mode and the state power structure do not contradict each other. They promote, restrict, and depend on each other, forming a foundation for traditional China’s political framework and social formation. To our relief, from the semi-autonomous mode of squire mode, we can more or less see some democracy.

Additionally, the squires played a certain role in maintaining social security and strengthening basic armed forces. This was striking in modern time. In reality, the squires made great contribution to agricultural production, maintenance of moral ethics, and continuation of traditional culture. Here we will not make a detailed discussion.

The Possibility of the Squire Culture’s Survival in Modern Time

The gentry and the squire culture were severely criticized before and after the new China was founded. The result was the destruction of traditional culture and fundamental integration of the squire social mode. Since the 1990s, issues concerning agriculture, countryside and farmers became urgent and serious. The social security and moral ethics went from worse to worse. Many old people and scholars began to think of the benign role of the traditional squires in rural society and face up to the harsh criticism and utterly refute the squires and squire culture. From current China’s political environment, social system, and ideology, we can see that the possibilities for the traditional squire mode to survive in China are very small. However, the reform of China’s political system is a general trend. One major trend is the county autonomy and quite a few scholars and experts had suggestions for this issue. As for county autonomy, traditional mode may provide many helpful experiences.

What is more, it is more reasonable to interpret the squires on the cultural level. This may be a good remedy for improving current rural cultural ecology and moral status, after all, the squire culture can find its traces in the countryside. It may flow in the blood vessels of the vast peasants as a kind of cultural gene. The “squire culture” has a broader sense than the “squire society”. We can advocate the elites from the countryside to exert part of the functions of traditional squires, for example, maintaining regional social security, mediating disputes between neighbors, defusing social contradictions, pushing forward moral reconstruction, craving for public interest affairs, conveying excellent culture, and actively reporting the sufferings of the peasants to the government. If we consider the squire culture as a kind of higher humanistic concern, its survival will be necessary.

References


