

Research on the Rise and Fall of Water Transport in the Middle Reaches of the Yangtze River and the Economy of Coastal Cities in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the middle reaches of the Yangtze River became the hub of the water transport network due to its unique hydrological advantages. The institutionalized development process of the water transport system from the “long-term transport law” in the Ming Dynasty to the “official collection and exchange” in the Qing Dynasty also enabled it to have the functions of political security and economic circulation. Coastal cities rely on the flow of people, logistics and capital brought by water transport to form a hierarchical economic system. Hankou, Shashi and other central cities have sprung up, forming commodity distribution centers, with rice, salt, tea and other industries as pillar industries; Commercial organizations and financial systems are becoming more and more perfect, and gangs and banks maintain market order; The urban form and population structure change with the development of water transport. Water transport not only promotes regional economic integration, but also provides historical enlightenment for urban development in the modern transformation.

Keywords: Ming and Qing Dynasties; The middle reaches of the Yangtze River; Water transport system; Coastal cities; Economic evolution

Introduction:

At present, the academic research on Hankou, Shashi and other core cities shows that water transport plays a key role, but from the perspective of water transport system as a whole, there are few studies on the systematic analysis of the laws of economic rise and fall of cities in the middle reaches. From the perspective of the interaction between water transport operation mechanism and urban economy, this paper restores the process of economic development of cities along the middle reaches of the Yangtze River in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

1. The construction and development characteristics of the water transport system in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

1.1 Inheritance and improvement of water transport system

After the capital was moved in the Ming Dynasty, the status of water transport in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River gradually increased with the transformation from “river and sea transport” to “special river transport”. The long-distance transport law implemented during the Chenghua period extended the exchange node between the government and the army to Huguang and Jiangxi, making the middle reaches of the Yangtze River directly included in the national water transport backbone network. The Qing Dynasty inherited the institutional framework of the Ming Dynasty, strengthened the management of water transport with the policy of official withdrawal and official exchange, stipulated the levels of positive exchange and conversion, and formed a transport pattern of paying equal attention to river and water transport. Thus, the water transport in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River is no longer just the transport of grain, but a comprehensive system with dual functions of political security and economic circulation.

1.2 Scale and function expansion of transportation network

The water transport ships are grouped into the help ship system, and the large-scale fleet is used to improve the transportation

efficiency, and the transportation network of the Yangtze River trunk line, Dongting Lake water system and Hanjiang River water system is formed. With the expansion of the scale of water transport, the transportation function gradually broke through the limitation of single grain transportation and began to develop in a diversified way. The policy of “attaching importance to local products” carried out by the Qing government became a good opportunity to expand its functions. From the initial permission to bring some local products, the restrictions were gradually relaxed, so that the straw boat became the carrier of local commodity circulation.

2. Economic prosperity of coastal cities driven by water transport

2.1 Rise and radiation of core commercial cities

Relying on the geographical condition of “the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Han River”, Hankou has achieved a leap forward development driven by water transport. It has developed from a regional Wharf in the Ming Dynasty to a national commercial center “thoroughfare of nine provinces”. Water transport brings a large number of ships to dock and materials to transit. Hankou has formed a large-scale commodity distribution system. Rice, salt and tea have become the three major industries in Hankou. Relying on the agricultural foundation of the two lakes plain, Hankou has become the largest rice and grain transfer center in China; As the hub of Huai salt from south to west, salt trade has formed a sales network covering central China; Tea is distributed here and sold at home and abroad, forming a professional export trade system.

In addition to Hankou, Shashi, Yichang and other cities also rely on water transport to achieve characteristic development. Taking advantage of the connectivity of the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake water system, Shashi has become an important node for commodity transit between Hunan and Hubei, and its commodity structure and trade mode have obvious transit characteristics; Relying on the advantages of the Sichuan River waterway, Yichang has become a gateway for the exchange of goods and materials between Sichuan and central China. Together with Hankou and Shashi, Yichang forms a commercial city echelon in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River.

2.2 Maturity of business organization and financial system

Water transport brought about a large number of commodity circulation, resulting in specialized commercial organizations. Since the reign of Emperor Qianlong, the number of commercial gangs in Hankou has been increasing, and by the reign of Tongzhi, they had covered all kinds of guilds. Guilds directly related to water transport, such as the boat gang and the salt gang, not only control the operation right of the wharf, but also establish a self-discipline market order by formulating industry norms and mediating trade disputes. Commercial organizations are not only the organizers of commodity circulation, but also the carrier of the culture of commercial groups. Huizhou merchants, Shanxi merchants and other important commercial groups set up halls here to form a cross regional commercial cooperation network.

The frequent occurrence of bulk trade promotes the continuous innovation of financial services. The “Hankou” issued by Hankou bank every day has become the benchmark for the price comparison of silver and money in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, providing a value measure for cross regional trade; The system of bill of exchange payable at sight, which appeared during the reign of Daoguang, solved the problem of capital turnover in water transport trade and reduced the risk of cash transport; The water insurance business aiming at the risk of material loss in water transport has gradually formed an industry standard to provide risk protection for commodity circulation. Financial innovation and commercial organizations together form the institutional basis for urban economic development.

2.3 Changes in urban form and population structure

The population aggregation driven by water transport has led to the continuous expansion of the scale of coastal cities. Taking Hankou as an example, during the period from Kangxi to Xianfeng, due to the influx of water transport workers, businessmen and related practitioners, the population increased significantly, and the riverbank line along the river in the urban built-up area continued to extend. Changdi street, Hanzheng Street and other commercial blocks are formed by relying on the wharf, with dense shops, showing a prosperous scene of “ten miles of sailboats and masts in accordance with the city”. The urban spatial layout is centered on the water transport function, and the dock area, storage area, commercial area and residential area are interconnected, reflecting the characteristics of urban development led by water transport.

The diversification of population structure has stimulated the vitality of urban economy. Water transport and shipping workers and dock workers belong to the urban grass-roots labor groups, which provide human support for transportation and trade. Local businessmen have brought different business concepts and business technologies, which has promoted the innovation of business model. The emergence of professional groups such as financial practitioners and handicraftsmen has made the urban industrial structure develop from a single trade to a diversified format.

3. Water transport reform and economic transformation and development of coastal cities

3.1 Economic adjustment under the transformation of water transport mode

The diversion of the Yellow River in the middle of the Qing Dynasty was like a sudden natural accident. The turbulent river was rushing down with sediment, and the canal was slowly silted up. In this dilemma, the Qing court had to gradually abandon the traditional river transportation and adopt sea transportation. This decision directly led to a sharp decline in the transport volume of river water in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, and the economic lifeline of the coastal cities fell into the danger of collapse.

But crises often involve a turnaround. The central city represented by Hankou shows strong resilience and adaptability. The civilian merchant ships that used to serve the water transport also changed their course. They no longer only did the water transport, but turned their attention to bulk commodities such as tea and porcelain. Merchant ships shuttled back and forth on the Yangtze River, sending the fragrance of tea in the south of the Yangtze River and the charm of porcelain in Jingdezhen to all directions. Urban trade has also achieved a magnificent turn, from the original policy based circulation relying on government orders to free circulation in line with market rules, glowing with new vitality.

3.2 Germination of modern industry and logistics system

The change of water transport system, like a strong wind, pushed commercial capital to the sea area of industry, and the germination of modern industry has a good land. During the period of Zhang Zhidong's supervision of Hubei, the Yangtze River played a prelude to modern industry. The chimneys of Hanyang Iron Plant are towering and the furnace is blazing, refining iron ore into steel; Wuchang cotton mill machine roar, cotton yarn change. Relying on the layout of the Yangtze River waterway, these modern enterprises made use of the convenient transportation of the original water transport wharf, and the efficient connection of raw materials and products through the waterway.

The development of these enterprises is not only the reshaping of the industrial structure dominated by commercial trade in coastal cities, but also the cultivation of a large number of workers and talents with advanced technology and modern management concepts. Like a spark, they pointed out the way forward for the development of modern industry.

3.3 Integration and continuation of regional economic pattern

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, water transport was like an economic artery, which not only nourished the coastal cities but also promoted the integration of the market system in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. Hankou is an important transportation hub, weaving a huge trade network with the water transport network. Hunan's rice flows down the Xiang River and the Yangtze River. Jiangxi's porcelain is transported from Poyang Lake to various places. Sichuan's medicinal materials are also gathered here through the Yangtze River waterway. These local specialties are distributed in Hankou, forming a trade circle covering seven provinces in Central China. With the exchange of commodities and frequent economic exchanges, the economic cohesion of the middle reaches of the Yangtze River has been continuously strengthened and has become an important pole in China's economic landscape.

4. Conclusion

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the development and changes of the water transport system in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River were deeply coupled with the economic development of coastal cities. Cities achieved transformation by developing private shipping and cultivating modern industry. The achievements of regional economic integration have continued to the present. The historical experience of water transport in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River provides an important reference for modern regional economic planning and urban transformation.

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