

Original Paper

An English Translation of the Prose of the Ritual of Plowing the Fields Written by Pan Yue and an Analysis of Its Historical Background

Jian Du¹

¹ Guizhou Communications Polytechnic, China

Received: December 6, 2023

Accepted: January 18, 2024

Online Published: February 2, 2024

doi:10.22158/sss.v5n1p53

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sss.v5n1p53>

Abstract

Agriculture has always been a significant aspect of China's history. For thousands of years, the agricultural model, which combines meticulous farming by farmers and family handicrafts, has been the foundation for China's continuous and prosperous history. The Ritual of Plowing the Fields serves two purposes, firstly as a preparatory ritual for the ancestral temple sacrifice and secondly as an initiative by the emperor to promote agriculture. The Rhyme-prose of the Ritual of Plowing the Fields Written by Pan Yue embodies significant ideological concepts, such as the importance of agriculture as the national foundation, keeping the agricultural timing, and valuing frugality. This prose reflects the ancient Chinese politician's contemplation on maintaining good governance, promoting social prosperity, and ensuring long-lasting well-being of the common people.

Keywords

ritual, agriculture, the Ritual of Plowing the Fields

1. Overview of The Ritual of Plowing the Fields

The Ritual of Plowing the Fields was an ancient Chinese rite in which the emperor, accompanied by his vassals and ministers, personally plowed the fields before the spring planting in the first month of the Chinese lunar-solar calendar. This act not only prays for a prosperous year, but also demonstrates the emperor's high regard for agricultural production in the country's prosperity.

2. The Significance of The Ritual of Plowing the Fields in Terms of Belief and Political Indoctrination

Agriculture, as the foundation of the country, is closely linked to national strength and social stability.

Over time, The Ritual of Plowing the Fields and the policy of emphasizing agriculture were gradually integrated. This led to a deep rooted belief that agriculture should be prioritized. The emperor acted as a leader, setting an example that was followed by others. This greatly promoted agricultural production and economic development, enabling the people to live in peace and work happily. The Ritual of Plowing the Fields flourishes in times of good governance and is abandoned in times of chaos.

2.1 Pay Tribute to Deities and Ancestors

In ancient societies, religious consciousness was often utilized in rituals that paid tribute to deities and ancestors. These rites were done to serve the heavens, earth, mountains, rivers, and ancestral temples. Similarly, the Ritual of Plowing the Fields was also meant to pay tribute to deities and ancestors, as the grains produced from the fields were specifically used as offerings in the worship of deities and ancestors.

2.2 The Principles of Confucianism for Promoting Agricultural Development and Achieving Social Well-being

Agriculture is the foundation of the people's livelihood and is crucial to the social prosperity, harmony and unity. It generates wealth and resources, and ensures the stability and solidity of the state. According to The Annotation of Rites of Zhou, it states that in ancient times the kings were considered the Son of Celestial Deities and possessed vast wealth. However, they would also allocate public land for encouraging people to till the land and grow grains. This is justified by three reasons. Firstly, it is a way to show filial piety by offering food to the ancestral temple. Secondly, it is a means to teach the common people the value of diligence, as hard work would prevent them from experiencing poverty. Finally, it serves as a reminder to future generations the hardships of farming and harvesting.

According to Chunqiu Fanlu written by Dong Zhongshu, it states that a wise leader who truly believes in these principles should respectfully and cautiously adhere to three fundamental practices. Firstly, they should worship the heavens and the earth, serve the ancestral temples with reverence, praise filial piety, and honor filial conduct in order to serve the 'heavenly principle'. Secondly, the emperor should personally engage in farming with agricultural tools, and the empress should personally cultivate mulberry trees and raise silkworms, weed and sow crops, and reclaim land to ensure an abundance of clothing and food in order to serve the 'earthly principle'. Thirdly, they should establish schools to cultivate filial piety, respect, and humility, aiming to enlighten people through education and inspire them through rituals and music in order to serve the 'humanism principle'.

3. An English Translation of the Prose of the Ritual of Plowing the Fields Written by Pan Yue

In the fourth year since the Jin Dynasty was founded, on the day of Dinghai in the first month, the emperor leads his vassals to the thousand-mu imperial field outside the capital city to plow the farmland. This is the Ritual of Plowing the Fields held in accordance with the Rite Codes. To ensure the success of the event, the emperor dispatches officials responsible for the fields to clean up the suburbs of the capital city. He also instructed officials in charge of the roads to clean up the route. The officials

responsible for guarding the imperial altar of land and grain constructed a walled palace for the emperor's residence during his travels, while the officials in charge of the royal procession set up roadblocks to prohibit pedestrian traffic. Oh, how that towering green altar resembled a majestic mountain, and the dark cloud-like pale curtain blanketed the earth. The altar base, which formed the majestic altar, featured broad steps that extend on all sides. The fields here were fertile, the land was flat, the Luo River was limpid, the Yellow River was turbulent, and the flowing water was drawn to irrigate the fields. The roads intersected and intertwined, connecting nearby and distant places, each one as straight as an arrow and a rope. The green-colored oxen drove the green-colored carts, and the green-colored shafts were affixed with the green-colored tools. The oxen prepared for plowing stood majestically on the left side of the field, waiting for the emperor's visit. Hundreds of officials had already lined up first, and their positions were differentiated according to their rank. The officials, from top to bottom, were all the emperor's ministers. The courtiers were wearing spring clothes in a vibrant shade of green, with carriages passing by and their unique sounds blending harmoniously. Delicate curtains hang in front of the carriages, creating a gentle breeze, while the red wheels kicked up fine dust. The courtiers held jade tablets and stood beneath the steps, looking solemnly and reverently at the emperor's carriage. They held the emperor in high esteem, like the heavy dew that saw the sunlight, and they upheld the emperor, like the stars that surrounded the North Polaris. The emperor's carriage was preceded by a magnificent military formation resembling a fish, and the subsequent carriages resembled a school of swimming fish. The gates of the capital city were wide open, and the carriages, each drawn by four horses, were racing in parallel on the three main thoroughfares. There were accompanying guards and high-ranking officials in the emperor's carriage, and the officials in charge of the palace's horses and carriages personally drove them. The consorts offered superior quality grains as tribute, while the officials in charge of finance and agriculture provided farming tools for sowing. The timekeeping officials kept track of time, and the officials responsible for maintaining palace discipline ensured stringent travel security measures. Therefore, the emperor rode in a luxurious jade carriage, accompanied by a splendid umbrella to shield him from the sun and the wind. His belt was embellished with tinkling jade, and his silk garments produced a gentle rustling sound. The emperor's carriage, a symbol of good fortune, glowed with a radiant golden light as the magnificent horses were galloping forward at a rapid pace. The red and black flags symbolized the south and north, the white flags represent the west, and the green flags represent the east. The central flag shined with a brilliant yellow hue, and all flags were resplendent in a variety of colors. The carriage itself was adorned with five types of gold-inlaid jade ornaments, and the resounding sound of bells accompanied its procession, and nine different styles of flags were fluttering in the sky. The weapons of the ritual guard resembled a dense forest, while the flags were fluttering in abundance. The flutes and pipes was playing in harmony, accompanied by the resounding beats of large and small drums. The bell tower stood tall, with its bells ringing out across the sky. The sound from the multitude of carriages and horses made it challenging to distinguish, and the dust was billowing up into the sky. The emperor himself visited the fields and

plowed them. The senior official donned a resplendent hat adorned with golden cicadas, and held a thick green jade tablet with great solemnity. He appeared as majestic as a pearl extracted from a diamond, or a dense pine tree leaning against a mountain range. Therefore, the Emperor of the Great Jin Dynasty descended from the altar and held the royal plow in his hand. He walked onto the field, led the ox, and pushed the plow for three times before coming to a stop. Subsequently, the farmers completed plowing these thousand mu of farmland. Officials, according to their ranks, either plowed the fields five times or plowed the fields nine times. At this moment, people of all ages, regardless of their residence in urban or rural areas, and regardless of their Chinese or non-Chinese ethnicity, gathered and mingled freely. Some were dressed in short coats made of coarse cloth, while others were neatly dressed. There were young men who had just tied their hair, and children with droopy yellow hair. The onlookers stood closely together, with their feet and shoulders touching, and their lapels and sleeves tightly pressed. They kicked up the yellow dust, which filled the air in all directions, obscuring the sun. The onlookers sang joyfully with beaming faces, applauding and dancing along the magnificent thoroughfare, extolling the virtues of this peaceful and prosperous era. The populace was filled with joy and eagerness to work, each individual striving to give their utmost in agriculture. They worked diligently without the need for supervision. The emperor set an example by personally engaging in work, and the people were eager to follow and assist. Is it truly necessary to resort to severe legislation and penalties to compel their compliance?

The elders from the rural and urban areas came forward to praise and say, it was common sense and natural to cultivate the fields according to the seasons, without causing any disruption to the farming schedule. Just as high is based on low, the people must rely on food for survival. Agriculture is the backbone, and commerce must be regulated. To encourage commerce, priority must be given to the agriculture as the foundation. If the country does not adapt its farming practices to the local conditions, and if scholars, farmers, industry professionals, and merchants do not specialize in their respective fields, the people will suffer from starvation, and the imperial court will not be able to provide salaries for officials. If the country does not have any food reserves to prepare for famines, and people are inevitably left hoping for a good harvest in vain. The downfall of the last three emperors, namely Emperor Jie of the Xia Dynasty, King Zhou of the Shang Dynasty, and King You of the Zhou Dynasty, can be attributed to their disregard for fundamental issues and preoccupation with superficial matters. The reigning emperor is consistently vigilant and never at ease, regardless of the time of day or night. He is concerned about food scarcity even in times of abundance, and takes precautions against deficiency during times of luxury. He consistently reminds himself to exercise caution, and the only matter that preoccupies him is the fluctuation of grain supply. The emperor spares no effort in fulfilling the agricultural duties during spring, summer, and autumn, ensuring that all grain warehouses are adequately stocked. This aligns with the governing principles of Emperor Yao of the Tang Dynasty and King Tang of the Shang Dynasty, and is also essential for providing comfort and assistance to the people. Regarding the matter of making sacrifices in ancestral temples, the priests and members of the

royal clan choose auspicious dates, and the millet and grains placed in the sacrificial vessels will be blessed and enriched as a result. The wormwood and reed grass used for making sacrificial wine are grown by hardworking people in the fields. We respectfully present the previous emperors with sweet-smelling millet and fragrant wine. This offering will undoubtedly bring peace to the people, a bountiful harvest, and various blessings from the deities. The ancient sages once said, 'Is there any virtue greater than filial piety?' Filial piety is an innate and unchanging aspect of human nature. It is only through the practice of filial piety that one can attain spiritual enlightenment. In ancient times, the world was ruled by saintly kings who exemplified filial piety, but unfortunately, this virtue was not often passed down to their successors. However, during the Jin Dynasty, filial piety is greatly esteemed and celebrated. The emperor has earned the trust of all nations and have remains filial and faithful to to our ancestors. Therefore, the emperor personally plows the fields and provides sacrificial grains to demonstrate his filial piety towards his ancestors. He also encourages farmers to cultivate to enhance the prosperity of the common people and strengthen the country's foundations. It is considered the greatest virtue and the most splendid accomplishment to not only consolidate the country's foundations, but also show filial piety to ancestors. How far-reaching and great significance it is to consolidate the foundation and achieve filial piety through The Ritual of Plowing the Fields. Please allow me to deliver a eulogy here!

The rural areas surrounding the capital city are of great delight, where people joyfully come together to harvest thatched grass and offer their tribute. The emperor himself has visited this field and instructed the peasants to plow the fields. He personally plows the fields three times, and people from all directions show great respect to him. The emperor has cleared his thousand-mu of imperial land of weeds, while the private fields of the common people are harvested with millet and grains. All vessels for the sacrificial feast have been filled, and the granaries are overflowing with grain like towering mountains. The emperor's thoughts and actions are wholly devoted to cultivating the farmland, and he never fails to fulfill his filial obligations. The financial and material resources of the population are usually well-maintained, and the priests and historians record their observations with honesty and impartiality. The deities of the celestial and terrestrial realms shall partake in the offerings, and tranquility and felicity shall forever reign. The virtuous deeds of an individual shall benefit all, and the actions of one shall bring honor to all.

References

- Dong, Z. S. (2011). *Chunqiu Fanlu*. Translated by Zhou Guidian. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Ji, T. F., & Pan, Y. (2007). *Translation and Annotation of Selected Works of Zhaoming* (Chen Hongtian, Zhao Fuhai, & Chen Fuxing, Eds.). Changchun: Jilin Literature and History Press.
- Wang, J. (2007). The Rituals of Praying for Agriculture and the Plowing the Fields in the Han Dynasty and Its Idea of Attaching Importance to Agriculture. *Agricultural History of China*, 2007, 2.