



A Study of Political Thought in Huang-Lao's Ideology during the Early Han Dynasty

Guanghai Wang*

School of Marxism, Aba Teachers College, 623000, Sichuan, China.

***Corresponding Author**
Guanghai Wang

School of Marxism, Aba Teachers College, 623000, Sichuan, China.

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Abstract: *As a significant aspect of ancient Chinese political thought, Huang-Lao ideology exerts a profound influence on political governance and social stability. The rulers of the early Han Dynasty utilized Huang-Lao's ideology as a political concept and guiding principle to regulate and direct the exercise of power, thereby ensuring political stability and social harmony. Research on the application of Huang-Lao's ideology in the governance practices of the early Han Dynasty reveals that it had multiple effects on the rulers' exercise of power. This further illustrates the impact of Huang-Lao's ideology on the political behavior of the early Han rulers and can offer valuable insights for contemporary political governance.*

Keywords: *Huang-Lao's ideology, morality, political thought.*

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1. Introduction

Huang-Lao thought, a significant strand within ancient Chinese intellectual history, integrates Daoist philosophy as its core while synthesizing elements from Confucianism, Legalism, and other schools. Its fundamental tenets include the concepts of "yin-yang" and reward-punishment, the techniques of administrative control and law.

Huang-Lao thought transformed Laozi's philosophy of emptiness and suppleness. It strategically incorporated the Legalist framework of "names and realities" for bureaucratic evaluation, distilling these into a governing "technique" characterized by "emptiness, stillness, and adaptability." This synthesis aimed to achieve rulership that was both dynamically effective and harmoniously temperate (Chen, 2016).

Huang-Lao thought evolved through continuous adaptation, integration, and innovation. In the early Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE), faced with a society and economy devastated by the turmoil following the Qin collapse, the ruling elite adopted Huang-Lao principles as state doctrine. They implemented governing through non-action, significantly reducing tax and labor burdens to allow the populace to recuperate. This policy fostered economic recovery and social stability, laying the foundation for the subsequent Han prosperity.

Although Huang-Lao thought receded from the mainstream political stage after Emperor Wu's adoption of the policy "revering only Confucianism", it continued to endure through transmission

within non-official spheres. By the Tang and Song dynasties, rulers once again drew upon its insights, integrating them into statecraft and cultural development.

2. The Influence and Acceptance of Huang-Lao's Ideology on Politics in the Early Han Dynasty

Huang-Lao's ideology had an important impact on the political rule of the Ruling class in the early Han Dynasty, and was recognized by the ruling class to a certain extent. Overall, the influence and acceptance of Huang-Lao's ideology in the political field of the early Han Dynasty are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

The first is the requirements and expectations of Huang-Lao's ideology towards rulers. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes the importance of virtue and rule of virtue, believing that rulers should possess noble moral character and conduct, and influence and guide the people through the power of moral examples. This is in line with the pursuit of rulers in the early Han Dynasty, who hoped to consolidate their ruling foundation by advocating for rule of virtue. The rulers of the early Han Dynasty, Liu Bang and Emperor Wu of Han of the Han Dynasty, to a certain extent accepted the requirements of Huang-Lao's ideology, tried to shape their own image of virtue, and governed the country with the idea of rule of virtue.

The second is the impact of Huang-Lao's ideology on policy formulation and decision-making processes. Huang-Lao's



ideology emphasizes the concept of governing without action and conforming to nature, and advocates that rulers should maintain a humble and self-discipline attitude, and minimize interference and interference with society. This ideology was applied to a certain extent in the politics of the early Han Dynasty. For example, when Emperor Wu of Han pursued the policy of "great unity", he adopted the concept of "great unity of thing" in Huang-Lao's ideology, that is, the pursuit of harmony and unity of all things. In addition, the rulers of the early Han Dynasty also respected the laws of nature and protected and regulated the social ecological environment by formulating conservation policies and agricultural measures.

The third is the pursuit of social harmony and stability in Huang-Lao's ideology. Huang-Lao's ideology advocates the concept of governing without action and following nature, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of individuals and society. In the politics of the early Han Dynasty, this ideology had a certain impact on the pursuit of social order and stability. The rulers hoped to promote social harmony and stability through moral education and governance, and avoided social unrest caused by excessive intervention and abuse of power. The impact of this concept was reflected at various levels, including political decision-making, social management, and cultural inheritance.

Huang-Lao's ideology had a certain impact on the politics of the early Han Dynasty, but its acceptance was not balanced. At the ruler level, some rulers in the early Han Dynasty expressed a strong interest in Huang-Lao's ideology and adopted its views, combining it with the centralisation system to consolidate their own ruling foundation. However, not all rulers held the same attitude towards Huang-Lao's ideology. Some rulers were more inclined towards Confucianism or Legalism, and held a reserved or critical attitude towards Huang-Lao's ideology. Nevertheless, as an important philosophical school, Huang-Lao's ideology still played a certain role in the field of political ideologies in the early Han Dynasty, and provided reference and enlightenment for the political thinking and theory of later generations.

3. The Core Principles and Political Concepts of Huang-Lao's Ideology

Huang-Lao's ideology, as one of the important schools of ancient Chinese philosophical thought, has profound influence and unique core principles and political concepts. This article will explore the core principles and political concepts of Huang-Lao's ideology, mainly including non-administrative and non-interventionist political views, the importance of rule of virtue and virtue, and the ideas of democracy and decentralization of power.

3.1 Non-administrative and Non-interventionist Political Views

Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes the political viewpoint of non-administrative and non-interventionist, believing that the government should intervene as little as possible in the people's lives. In this view, the Huang Lao School advocates that the responsibility of the government is to maintain social order and provide the most basic public services, rather than excessively interfering in personal affairs and free activities of the people. This viewpoint reflects the restriction of government power and respect for individual freedom. In Huang-Lao's ideology, the political viewpoint of non-administrative and non-interventionist is combined with the concept of natural harmony. The Huang-Lao School believes that the universe operates naturally, and the role of

the government should be to conform to natural laws without human intervention.

They advocate that the government should treat the people with full trust and respect, minimize intervention, and achieve social harmony and stability.

3.2 The Importance of Rule of Virtue and Virtue

The rule of virtue is a core concept of Huang-Lao's ideology, emphasizing governance of the country and society through virtue. The Huang-Lao School believes that virtue is an essential quality that rulers and leaders should possess. They advocate for governing the country with morality and influencing the people through examples and moral guidance, rather than relying solely on legal and administrative means. According to the concept of rule of virtue, rulers should set a positive example, inspire the people through their own good deeds and moral conduct, and promote social harmony and stability. The core idea of the rule of virtue is to cultivate and enhance the virtues and moral qualities of the populace. The Huang-Lao School contends that the prosperity and stability of a society rely not only on the government's governing capabilities but also on the moral standards and behavioral norms of its citizens. Therefore, they support enhancing the moral literacy and quality of the people through education and cultural development to achieve harmonious social growth.

3.3 The Thought of Democracy and Decentralization of Power

The democratic and decentralized ideas within Huang-Lao's ideology emphasize individual freedom and participation, as well as the reasonable distribution and limitation of power. The Huang-Lao School believes that democracy is a valid political system capable of fostering people's participation and independent decision-making. They advocate for governing the country through democratic means, granting people the right and opportunity to engage in political affairs to achieve fairness and justice. In Huang-Lao's ideology, the decentralization of power serves as an effective way to prevent authoritarianism and abuse of power. The Huang-Lao School argues that centralized power can easily lead to corruption and injustice; therefore, they champion the decentralization of power to various institutions and individuals to promote balance and oversight of authority. They support the establishment of a relatively balanced political system to prevent the abuse of power and the rise of dictatorship. Furthermore, the decentralization of power in Huang-Lao's ideology is intertwined with moral principles. They contend that power should be exercised by individuals of high moral character to ensure its correct implementation and fair adjudication. By decentralizing power, the potential for abuse and corruption can be mitigated, while also providing more opportunities for individuals to engage and oversee the process.

In general, the "grounding" of Huang-Lao's various abstract theories lies in the two issues of "governing the country" and "governing the body" (Guo, 2020). These concepts made significant contributions to the development of ancient Chinese political thought and exerted a profound influence on the political theory and practice of later generations.

4. The Application and Practice of Huang-Lao's Ideology in the Politics of the Early Han Dynasty

4.1 The Restriction and Guidance of Huang-Lao's Ideology on the Exercise of Power by Rulers in the Early Han Dynasty

Huang-Lao's ideology imposed specific restrictions and provided guidance on the exercise of power by rulers during the early Han Dynasty, aiming to ensure political stability and social harmony. The following are the key aspects of Huang-Lao's ideology that restricted and directed the exercise of power by rulers in the early Han Dynasty:

The first aspect is the virtue and moral cultivation. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes that rulers should embody noble virtues and moral development. They are viewed as role models in society and should guide the public through their own words, actions, and behaviors. Huang-Lao's ideology asserts that the virtues of rulers are essential for the stability and harmony of society, as their actions significantly influence the moral norms of the community. Therefore, rulers must consistently adhere to ethical standards of conduct, prioritize moral character and cultivation, and exhibit fairness and integrity when exercising power. Huang-Lao's ideology established clear restrictions and guidance for rulers' exercise of power during the early Han Dynasty to ensure political stability and social harmony. Huang-Lao's ideology highlights the moral conduct and cultivation of rulers, stresses the importance of governing the nation with morality, and requires rulers to lead by example, thereby influencing society with noble qualities and behaviors. This concept limited the authority of rulers, making them acutely aware of their responsibilities and obligations, not only as holders of power but also as moral leaders.

The second perspective is non-administrative and non-interventionist. Huang-Lao's ideology advocates for a political viewpoint that suggests rulers should minimize their intervention in society and individuals as much as possible. They believe that excessive government intervention can lead to social instability and personal constraints. Therefore, they argue that the government should intervene in social affairs with minimal force. This view imposes restrictions on rulers' exercise of power, encouraging them to be more cautious and to avoid excessive intervention and abuse. Huang-Lao's ideology advocates for a non-administrative and non-interventionist political viewpoint, which limits rulers' intrusive actions in society and individuals' lives. Consequently, rulers should strive to avoid excessive interference in social affairs while achieving political stability through respect for individual freedom and social autonomy. This perspective guides rulers to maintain restraint and humility in their power, preventing abuse and infringement on personal rights, ultimately making the political system more just.

The third concept is power balance. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes the importance of checks and balances, believing that power should be dispersed and balanced to prevent abuse by anyone. Rulers should establish mechanisms for mutual restraint to ensure balance and fairness in power. This ideology limits the exercise of power by rulers, prompting them to consider the opinions and interests of all parties in decision-making and policy-making processes, and to avoid personal arbitrariness and authoritarianism.

The fourth concept is the ideology of democracy and participation. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes democracy and public participation, asserting that the voices and opinions of the people should be respected and valued. Rulers should heed the voices of the people, address their needs and interests, and facilitate democratic participation through effective systems and mechanisms. This ideology guides rulers in exercising power, encouraging them to prioritize the rights and well-being of the people, thus avoiding neglect and oppression. Furthermore, Huang-Lao's ideology highlights the significance of democracy and participation, prompting rulers to attend to the voices and opinions of the people. Rulers are encouraged to value the rights and welfare of the populace, achieving democratic participation through effective systems and mechanisms. This ideology compels rulers to focus on the interests and needs of the people, considering the views and interests of all stakeholders during the policy-making and decision-making processes, while avoiding neglect and suppression people.

Huang-Lao's ideology provided clear restrictions and guidance on the exercise of power by rulers in the early Han Dynasty. By emphasizing the principles of virtue and moral cultivation, non-administrative and non-interventionist approaches, power checks and balances, and democratic participation, Huang-Lao's ideology limits the abuse of power by rulers, guides them to govern the country by virtue, maintains modesty and restraint, and ensures political stability and social harmony. These principles had a profound impact on how rulers exercised power in the early Han Dynasty.

4.2 The Influence of Huang-Lao's Ideology on the Policy-making and Decision-making Process of the Rulers in the Early Han Dynasty

Thought is the precursor to action. The Huang-Lao ideology, as a significant aspect of ancient Chinese philosophical thought, greatly influenced the policy-making and decision-making processes of rulers in the early Han Dynasty. In accordance with the core principles and political concepts of Huang-Lao's ideology, the following are its impacts on the policy-making and decision-making processes of early Han rulers Dynasty:

The first aspect is democratic participation and extensive solicitation of opinions. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes the importance of democratic participation and the broad gathering of opinions from all parties, believing that rulers should listen to the voices of the people, understand public sentiment, and formulate policies based on this input. In the early Han Dynasty, some rulers, inspired by Huang-Lao's ideology, adopted a method of extensive opinion solicitation. They established official advisory bodies, such as court deliberative bodies and advisory groups, to engage in dialogue and debate with individuals from all walks of life and learned individuals through forums, banquets, and other means, in order to gather opinions and suggestions from various perspectives. This democratic participation in decision-making enhanced the legitimacy and practicality of policies and improved their quality and effectiveness policies.

The second aspect is the decision-making process based on ethical behavior standards. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes that rulers should base their decisions on moral principles of conduct. During the early Han Dynasty, some rulers integrated the moral concepts of Huang-Lao's ideology into their policy-making and decision-making processes. They focused on their own cultivation

and virtue, and influenced the people through virtuous actions and good deeds. In their decision-making, they carefully considered various factors and upheld the principles of fairness and ethics to ensure the rationality and equity of policies. This decision-making process grounded in ethical principles contributed to the moral and sustainable nature of governance, strengthening the authority of rulers and fostering a sense of identity among the people.

The third aspect is the decision-making mechanism featuring decentralized power and checks and balances. Huang-Lao's ideology advocates for the decentralization and balance of power to prevent the abuse of authority and the emergence of authoritarianism. During the early Han Dynasty, certain rulers adopted the ideological concepts of Huang-Lao, establishing a decision-making mechanism focused on decentralization and power balance. They created various official positions, such as prime minister, lieutenant, and imperial censor, with each position serving to mutually constrain one another balanced. During the decision-making process, they seek the opinions of various departments and officials and reach a consensus through consultation and discussion. This decentralized and balanced decision-making mechanism ensures diversity and fairness, avoids excessive concentration and abuse of power, and promotes social stability harmony.

The fourth is the cautious and prudent attitude. Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes that rulers should maintain a cautious and careful attitude, thoroughly considering various factors and consequences in the decision-making process. In the early Han Dynasty, some rulers adhered to Huang-Lao's ideology and highlighted cautious decision-making methods. They would widely solicit opinions and listen to suggestions from multiple perspectives, fully understanding all aspects of the problem to make wise and careful decisions. This cautious and prudent attitude helped to minimize decision-making risks and errors, ensuring the rationality and feasibility of their choices policies.

The fifth principle is to promote non-administrative and non-interventionist governance. Huang-Lao's ideology advocates that rulers should not excessively interfere with the people's lives and freedoms, implementing a political stance of non-administrative and non-interventionist approaches. During the early Han Dynasty, some rulers were influenced by Huang-Lao's ideas and adopted corresponding policy formulation and decision-making methods. They respected the autonomy of the people, avoided excessive government intervention and regulation, and encouraged individuals to develop their personal potential and creativity. This non-administrative and non-interventionist decision-making principle enhanced people's freedom and personal development, fostering social progress and prosperity.

Huang-Lao's ideology significantly influenced the policy-making and decision-making processes of the rulers in the early Han Dynasty. Through democratic participation, ethical standards of conduct, decentralization and balance of power, a cautious and prudent attitude, and the principle of non-administrative and non-interventionism, Huang-Lao's ideology provided a strong decision-making framework and philosophy for the rulers of the early Han Dynasty. These ideological concepts and practical experiences were crucial for promoting the fairness, rationality, and feasibility of policies, maintaining social stability and harmony, and safeguarding the rights and freedoms of the people.

4.3 The Influence and Role of Huang-Lao's Ideology on Social Governance and Social Relations in the Early Han Dynasty

The Huang-Lao political philosophy achieved great success in the early Han Dynasty, successfully ushering in the era of the Wendi and Jingdi periods and promoting rapid socio-economic development (Xiong,2017). The following are the specific impacts and functions of Huang-Lao's thought in this regard:

Firstly, Huang-Lao's ideology promotes harmonious and balanced social relations. It emphasizes harmonious and balanced social relationships, highlighting the peaceful coexistence among people, between humans and nature, and between individuals and society. In the early Han Dynasty, some rulers drew inspiration from Huang-Lao's ideology and advocated for harmony and balance in social relations. They encouraged harmonious coexistence and mutual assistance among people, supported the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, and fostered positive interactions within society. This advocacy and pursuit of harmonious and balanced social relations helped reduce social contradictions and conflicts, enhancing social cohesion stability.

Secondly, Huang-Lao's ideology underscores the significance of governing through virtue. It believes that virtue is the key to managing society. In the early Han Dynasty, some rulers were influenced by Huang-Lao's ideology, focusing on the cultivation of moral character. They advocated regulating the behavior of the people through virtue, placed importance on the development of character and morality, and highlighted the ruler's own virtue as a role model. By promoting the rule of virtue and moral conduct, Huang-Lao's ideology served a normative and guiding role in the governance of early Han society, fostering moral progress and civilized development society.

Thirdly, Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes freedom and individual development. It advocates for individual autonomy, asserting that people should have the liberty to pursue and achieve their potential. During the early Han Dynasty, some rulers who were influenced by Huang-Lao's ideology valued personal freedom and growth. They supported protecting the rights and freedoms of the populace, encouraging individuals to explore their potential and creative capabilities. This focus on freedom and individual development fostered a free and open atmosphere in early Han society, stimulating the enthusiasm and creativity of the people, and promoting social prosperity progress.

Fourthly, Huang-Lao's ideology emphasizes the balance of power and fair governance. It advocates for this balance to prevent the abuse of power and the rise of authoritarianism. During the early Han Dynasty, some rulers were inspired by Huang-Lao's ideology and prioritized these principles. They established a relatively independent and mutually balanced political mechanism, ensuring the decentralization of power and a fair decision-making process. Their focus was on creating a fair legal system, protecting the rights and interests of the people, and facilitating fair judicial proceedings trials. Through checks and balances of power and fair governance, Huang-Lao's ideology played a restraining and balancing role in the governance of early Han society, maintaining social justice and order.

Fifthly, Huang-Lao's ideology stresses democratic participation and respect for public opinion. During the early Han Dynasty, some rulers were influenced by Huang-Lao's ideology and encouraged the public to engage in political decision-making and voice their opinions. They placed great importance on listening

to public sentiment and the voices of the people and respected individuals' choices and perspectives. By promoting democratic participation and respecting public opinion, Huang-Lao's ideology fostered a political atmosphere in early Han society, enabling the populace to more actively engage in social governance and decision-making processes, thereby enhancing social democracy and public involvement participation.

Huang-Lao's ideology positively influenced social governance and relations during the early Han Dynasty. It advocates for harmonious and balanced social interactions, emphasizes moral governance and conduct, values freedom and individual development, upholds power balance and fair governance, and encourages democratic participation along with respect for public opinion, providing a concept and framework for the governance of early Han society. These ideological concepts and practical experiences promoted social harmony and stability, advanced moral progress and the civilized development of society, safeguarded the rights and freedoms of the people, and made significant contributions to the development and progress of early Han society.

5. Conclusion

Huang-Lao thought, as an important thread in ancient Chinese philosophy, takes "Tao" as its core concept, integrating the natural non-action of Taoism with the wisdom of governing the world from Legalism. It not only constructs a cosmology of "following the natural laws" but also forms a governing strategy of governing by non-action. This philosophy has had a profound impact on political civilization and the evolution of traditional

culture during the Qin and Han dynasties. Its philosophy of "maintaining femininity and valuing softness" and the governing wisdom of "following the trend" still holds enlightening significance today—providing spiritual references for modern individuals to balance personal temperament and social pressure, along with ideological resources for exploring the integration of traditional wisdom and modern thought governance.

From a historical perspective, the rise and fall of Huang-Lao thought reflects the value choices of different eras regarding "nature" and "order". From a practical perspective, its dialectical thinking on the "relationship between heaven and man" may provide unique Eastern wisdom for addressing modern issues such as ecological crises and cultural conflicts. Delving into the modern transformation of Huang-Lao thought is not only a creative inheritance of traditional culture, but also a crucial foundation for building an ideological system that merges historical depth with contemporary relevance vitality.

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