

Discourses on Salt and Iron: A Study on the State Monopoly in China

Tuz–Demir Söylevi: Çin Devlet Monopolü Üzerine Bir Çalışma

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Abstract: The Reign of Xi Jinping has been characterized as assertive, unapologetic, and autocratic both at home and abroad (So, 2019). His strict control over Chinese companies and cracking down on private high-tech companies have become debated. If we look back economic system of the Chinese Communist Party, we will find that state control of the economy has been the primary trend. One might ask, what are the reasons for the Chinese Communist Party, particularly Xi Jinping's sensitiveness to private business, and where has the idea of state monopoly over the private sector originated? By highlighting the importance of the historical approach, rather than a progressive one, for analyzing the statecraft in contemporary China methodologically, the present paper tries to address this question by examining *the Discourses on Salt and Iron*, a famous classic piece recorded by Huan Kuan of the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD) and its legacy in successive governments. The first part of the paper focuses on the historical background of the Chinese state monopoly, which aims to show the historical event that led to the implementation of monopolistic economic policies and supportive rational arguments for its continuation. The second part sheds light on the continuation of this policy and illustrates how and why this policy is still alive today. By pondering above all, this study argues that China's main concern in the economy is maintaining the power gap between the authority and private merchants, which is the legacy of traditional Chinese statecraft.

Keywords: China, Iron and Salt, Tradition, State Monopoly

Öz: *Xi Jinping yönetimi, ulusal ve uluslararası düzeyde iddialı, özür dilemeyen ve otokratik olarak nitelendirilmektedir. Çinli şirketler üzerindeki sıkı kontrol ve yüksek teknoloji şirketlerine yönelik baskılar geniş çapta tartışmalara konu olmaktadır. Çin Komünist Partisi'nin ekonomik sistemine bakıldığında da, devlet kontrolünün temel bir eğilim olduğu görülmektedir. Xi'in özel sektöre olan hassasiyetinin nedeni ve özel sektör üzerinde devlet tekeli fikri, sorulabilecek önemli sorulardır. Bu makale, Çağdaş Çin'deki devlet yönetimini ilerici bir metodoloji yerine tarihsel bir yaklaşımla inceleyerek, Tuz ve Demir Üzerine Söylevler adlı ünlü klasik eserin ana fikri ve onun ardışık hükümetlerdeki mirasını analiz ederek bu sorulara cevap aramaktadır. İlk bölüm tarihsel bir perspektifle, tekelci ekonomi politikalarının tarihsel arka planı bu politikayı destekleyici rasyonel*

argümanları göstermeyi odaklanmaktadır. İkinci bölüm ise bu politikanın günümüzde nasıl ve neden hala canlı olduğunu açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Bunları analiz ederek bu çalışma, Çin'in ekonomideki ana endişesinin, geleneksel Çin devlet yönetiminin mirası olan otorite ile özel sektör arasındaki güç farkını korumak olduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin, Tuz ve Demir, Gelenek, Devlet Tekeli

1. Introduction: Looking at the Issue from the Different Angles

The last decade has seen a growing trend towards authoritarianism and centralization of power in China. It seems that under the leadership of Xi Jinping, the Communist Party is heading toward being the ultimate authority in both business and politics. (McGregor, 2019) His assertive and whole-scale autocratic administrative policy has been enforcing almost every sector being in tune with the national strategy of the Chinese Communist Party. Among the main targets of the government in recent years are wealthy tycoons and influential figures. In order to control giant billionaires and prosperous high-tech companies, the Xi Jinping government introduced various discourses such as “adjusting excessive income”, “redistributing the wealth”, and “common prosperity”. Even in 2017, China promulgated National Intelligence Law which made sharing data with the government necessary for all companies(‘China’s New Intelligence Law Codifies Espionage’, 2017). Along with this trend in domestic politics, business, and high-tech sectors, however, there is increasing concern over the future of private entrepreneurs in China. A noteworthy event in this regard that happened in 2021 was a hard strike on Alibaba, the company of e-commerce, retail, and technology. The holding was fined 2 billion pounds and its affiliate, Ant Group, one of the biggest digital payments firms in the world with more than 1 billion users in China, was forced to restructure under China’s new rules for platform companies(‘Is Alibaba’s Fate a Warning to China’s Tech Giants?’, 2021). Oddly enough, Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba Holding, disappeared for almost three months and surprisingly turned from a national icon of success to an “evil capitalist” and a “bloodsucking ghost.” (Yuan, 2020)

Alibaba and Jack Ma are not single cases in this regard. Tencent, a gaming and social media giant, and DiDi Global, a ride-hailing giant also faced similar strict control and regulation by the government. On 8th August 2021, the Chinese Communist Party issued a five-year blueprint for the purpose of reshaping China’s tech industry. In all likelihood, Xi is restructuring the Chinese economy and these are, in fact, a clear warning to the country’s private businessmen that the government does not tolerate the increased power of non-state figures in both the economic and political arena on one hand and revealed the strong desire of the state for wielding absolute power. The main question

here is what is the reason for Xi, correctly the Chinese communist government's sensitiveness to private business, and where this idea originated from?

As to CCP's centralized administrative behavior, people may tend to find the answer by examining the dictatorial approach of communist ideology, Leninist party-state for instance (Pearson, 2020). However, in this paper, I will observe the issue from a historical perspective. Through studying *the Discourses on Salt and Iron*, a famous classic piece, recorded by Huan Kuan of Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD), this paper tries to shed light on China's traditional and ongoing monopolistic views on the domestic economy. By researching *the Discourse* and its effects on successive governments, I will make the argument that the reason for state intervention in business in China lies in the political system based on the strong view of keeping certain power disparity between state and non-state actors on the purpose of maintaining the absolute authority of the government; and this is the legacy of traditional Chinese political and economic thought that shaped by its long historical experience.

In the field of China studies, numerous pieces of research have been done from the perspective of a progressive approach. As Guangbin Yang, professor of political science and dean of the School of International Studies at the Renmin University of China, the vice president of the Chinese Political Science Association and founder of Chinese Political Science and World Politics Studies, and many others such as Lu, Yan, Qin argued this approach failed to understand China phenomenon (Yang, 2021). For example, a common misjudgment based on the progressive approach is an assumption that China's economic prosperity would make China democratic and liberal. However, China is still autocratic and increasingly alienating itself from liberal values despite having the highest number of middle-class in the world. Professor Yang believed that the miscalculation is a sign of inconsistency between the established discipline and the traditional Chinese knowledge system, which is rooted in employing Western practices in China studies (Yang, 2021). By referring to China's 5,000-year, continuous cultural history, another Chinese scholar Qin Yaqing stated that some current Chinese practices could be found in its past tradition. He mentioned the phrase "Strive to build a harmonious world with long peace and common prosperity" voiced by former Chinese president Hu Jintao at the 2005 UN Summit and said this phrase has its origin in Confucian philosophy. He also underlined such a close bond with the past is completely understandable to the Chinese despite it may grotesque to others (Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).

On the other hand, Xi Jinping also attaches great importance to reviving China's past. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping has frequently reiterated "reviving advance and enrich outstanding traditional Chinese culture". He pointed out "Excellent traditional culture can be said to be the spiritual home of the Chinese nation that can never be separated. The theories of the hundred schools of thought of Chinese masters such as Laozi, Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, and Zhuangzi still have global cultural significance". Regarding the link between China's past and present, Yang also asserted China's 5000-year-old history of civilization remains intact despite the institutional mutations and no country in the world has such powerful historical civilization genes in its political scenario (Yang, 2021). As to the ideology in another study he pointed out that the political ideology in China has more or less remained unaltered in essence (Yang, 2021). With the contribution of recent Chinese scholars, the historical approach has been emerging as an alternative method for China study¹. In broad perspective, not only Chinese scholars, but others such as Huntington, (Huntington, 1997) Toynbee, (Toynbee, 1987) and Philip Kuhn (Kuhn, 2003) Mizoguchi, (Mizoguchi, 2011) Pines (Pines, 2012) also support the idea of continuation in Chinese civilization.

As discussed above, a different method should be applied to China study and the historical approach can be the best alternative since China has unique history and civilization which have been continued without significant foreign ideological intervention. Some may challenge this view by mentioning Marxism and Communism, however, it should not be neglected that communism was localized back to the period of Mao and now it is called "Communism with Chinese characteristics". The conservation of classical Chinese civilization and the Chinese political elites' strong emphasis on the value of tradition underlines the importance of Chinese history, culture, and philosophy for understanding China. Taking these into account, this study tries to explain the reason behind the suppressive policy of the Chinese Communist government under the leadership of Xi Jinping towards powerful merchant elites and key sectors from the perspective of the historical approach. In this regard, this paper examines *The Discourse on Iron and Salt*, a first and foremost comprehensive debate on state monopolism during the early period of the Western Han dynasty, the period developed a political-cultural structure that showed great resilience throughout history (Dingxin Zhao, 2015).

¹ For more studies on this method, see the recent articles published on the journal of *Chinese Political Science Review*.

The following pages of the paper consist of four sections under two parts; the leading section of the first part is about the long-drawn-out Hun-Chinese war which is the historical background and implementation process of state monopolism. This section shows that huge war expenditure is the main event push the government to apply such a policy. By exposing the fierce debate on the continuation or termination of official commercial monopolies, section two explains the rational defense of monopolism. The second part starts with a short tracing of the examples of the continuation of this policy and the final section examines the Chinese Telecommunication sector in order to show how and why state monopoly is still applying to key sectors in China.

2. Legitimization of State Monopoly

2.1. Historical Background

The Western Han dynasty (202 B.C – 9 A.D) was notable for the internal reinforcing of imperial power and external expansion of territory, and for extraordinary development of commerce and economic system. It thus occupies a vitally important place in the political and socio-economic history of China (C.-M. Chang, 1934). As the most powerful neighbor of the dynasty, Huns or *Xiongnu* (匈奴), hugely affected the political and economic policy of the Han. Interestingly scholars mostly conduct research on the military clash between these two big powers, yet how the war deeply changed the economic structure of the Han dynasty is rarely studied. *Discourse on Salt and Iron*, the comprehensive debate left its strong mark on China's economic policy, directly related to the 40-year-long war with the Huns and its consequences.

Huns had always been a big security threat for the Chinese since the Qin dynasty (221 B.C–201 B.C). Its' successor Han dynasty also faced a similar threat. However, different from Qin, the rulers of the Han dynasty had implemented *he qin* (和亲), the marriage alliance, policy Han. However, in the period of Wudi's (汉武帝), *he qin* was rejected by the Han dynasty and decided to fight with the Huns since it neither stopped the Hun attack effectively nor none of the semi-Chinese princes able to sit on the throne of the Hun Empire as the Han side wished.(《史记·卷九十九·刘敬叔孙通列传第三十九》 - 古籍备览 - 国学书苑 - 国学网, n.d.)

However, fighting with Huns was different from fighting against inhabited Chinese warring states because Huns were all cavalymen and warriors in nature. Deeply considering such advantages of his opponent, Han Wudi brought a great revolution into his military forces. He established 1.2 million cavalymen, 800,000 infantrymen, and 10.5 million men for logistic support in wars, which cost the Han government 100 billion

cash per year, far beyond the 12 billion annual national revenue (C. Chang, 2007). On top of that, the emperor also resettled more than 1 million Chinese in the newly conquered regions, west of the Yellow River.

Under Wudi's four-decade-long emphatic military campaign, the power of the Huns was destroyed to a large extent. Nonetheless, these successes were achieved at the expense of a series of exploitative economic policies, which put great pressure on the Han economy. In the ninth year of the war, the Han dynasty found itself in a harsh economic crisis; the war is continuing and it still needs big financial support, yet there is no additional income available. Since there were floods and famine in various regions of the country, the economic condition of the peasants was also worse (Pi, 2017), thus, raising the amount of tax cannot be a solution for Han Wudi's urgent and extensive financial desire. In such a problematic situation, the governments' attempt for solving financial sources in 120 B.C. led the country to implement an official monopoly on profitable businesses, salt and iron.

2.2. Realization of State Monopoly

In search of additional income, the emperor decided to run absolute authority on economy and politics. He set his sights on the big merchants and their business, the salt and iron industry which were the important means of subsistence and production for merchants since the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.) being indispensable commodities for Han society. Emperor adopted the suggestion of his superintendents of agriculture Dongguo Xianyang (东郭咸阳) and Kong Jin (孔仅) and headed the way to government intervention in the economy, the result was the establishment of the state monopoly on salt and iron in 120 B.C. (张传玺, 234).

Iron was in the hand of private businessmen since the Warring States period even if there were heavy restrictions and discrimination against merchants. The Cho and Cheng families of Shu, the Kong clan of Wan, and the Cao-ping family of Lu for instance had ancestors who had been doing iron manufacture in the Warring States period. Iron producers like them were the most powerful manufacturers during the first half of the Han dynasty and that is the reason why they were listed in "biographies of wealthy men" in the *Historical Records* by Sima Qian (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). Another large-scale, lucrative private sector in that period was salt production. Since raw materials for the salt business were only available in a limited region, anyone who does these businesses easily monopolizes the whole market and makes a huge profit (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008).

Besides finding income resources to finance the war, there was another reason why Wudi decided to crash the merchants. Before the application of the official iron and salt monopoly, merchants were very powerful. To obtain the raw materials and the fuel necessary to process them, it was essential to employ a very large labour force, and, most of their employees were slaves. The merchants trust them and these people therefore, according to the *Discourses on salt and iron*, were not always directly subject to the authority of the state, instead, they listen to the order of the merchant they worked for. Sima Qian's record in "Biographies of wealthy men" may help us to show how big the scale of private business was and how powerful merchants were before the economic state monopoly.

Diao Xian in Qi province did the fish and salt business and employed people from slave backgrounds. This business brought Diao Xian a profit of 20–30 million cash annually. (Sima Qian, 1993) Slaves he hired did business travel around the whole country in luxury carriages. With their wealth and wide network, they were able to consort with governors. They were not only rich and economically independent from the government but had good relationships with officials. So, at that time there was saying that "is it better to have a title in government or work for Diao xian?" Another example recorded on "Biographies of Wealthy Men" was private textile industry in the early period of Han dynasty. It is recoded that the wife of a high official Chang an-shih said to have employed 700 skilled domestic slaves in spinning. When Wudi's "equal supply system" was first initiated, several million bolts of cloth and 5 million bolts of silk were gathered at the capital, which shows the greatness of the private textile business (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). Furthermore, businessmen like iron and salt manufacturers also invested the profits in the land, thus becoming great landowners with control over large numbers of peasants that it opposed to the interests of the authorities. So, for the emperor Wudi or other advocators of state monopoly, as will be mentioned below, smashing them was for the security of the dynasty given that they are very powerful both economically and socially. However, the step taken by Emperor Wudi shaped relations between private business and the government itself.

When government control on iron and salt businesses was applied, two different methods of regulation were introduced. The practice of government-operated salt business was called private production and official marketing. The government-owned all thirty-four salt manufacturing agencies and recruited a group of salt producers. The state provides them merely with iron pots for boiling salt, but they strictly supervise their production process. After the salt is produced, it cannot be sold casually. It must

be sold to the government, and the government would organize the marketing process (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008).

The practice of state-monopolized iron business is called official production and official marketing. The government set up iron officials in various places, and all links from iron ore mining, smelting, and ironware casting to product sales are all under the government's management. The superintendent of agriculture had direct control over the forty-eight iron manufacturing agencies in the districts where the ore was mined and processes of melted down and recast scrap iron were done by other areas under the control of the local commandery or county administrations. Labor forces included original iron manufacturers, convicts, professional craftsmen, and occasionally government slaves. All production and marketing were done by the state agencies (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). If anyone violates the process and try to sell on the black market, he or she would forcefully wear a pair of iron sock on the feet, *tai zuozu* (铁左足), as a punishment. Although the various government-run agencies had used the original big salt merchants and iron smelters who were considered to have used some expert insiders, however, since the policy was a monopoly created by the use of political power, the state was the only one without branches or rivals, it excludes the competition, and it inevitably runs counter to the basic rule of the market.

Soon after the policy was implemented, various negative consequences emerged. The price of salt sold by the government has risen a lot. The iron utensils made by official factories were very expensive, but the quality was very poor, and ordinary people were reluctant to buy them. In many places, the situation of wood farming and salt-free food, *mugeng danshi* (木耕淡食), had appeared, that is, people can't afford iron farming tools, so they can only use wood to plow the land; and they can't buy salt so, only able to eat unflavoured vegetables. Therefore, Kong Jin, one of the main designers of the official salt and iron policy, asked the emperor to make corrections. However, Wudi continued state monopolism with his new superintendent of agriculture, Sang Hongyang (桑弘羊).

Sang is as famous as *Discourse on Iron and Salt* in Chinese history. Especially for researchers of Chinese economic history, he is both master and evil. He is the master because he solved the financial crisis of the Han dynasty in a crucial war period. His courage in maintaining an official economic monopoly policy played a vitally important role in defeating the Hun empire and guaranteeing the Han dynasty's security. On the other hand, almost everyone curses him because his policy made Han peasants impoverished, society went back warded as a result of his economic idea that

was incompatible with the natural law of the market. He is always remembered as a systemizer of government monopolism that has been continuing until the present day. In his poetry called Zhilin (志林), Su dongpo (苏东坡), a famous poet in the Song dynasty (960–1279) heavily cursed Sang Hongyang and even criticized great historian Sima Qian for his positive evaluations of him in his masterpiece *the Historical Records* (冯士彦, 2019).

He not only continued official commercial monopoly on iron and salt, but extended the policy to buy and sell local specialty products, and monopolized the entire country's market. Previously, due to the government's demand, local products had been transported to the capital city by merchants, who thus found great opportunities for profit. Sang kicked merchants out of this business as well by introducing two institutions operating in the capital and locals in the period between in 115–110 B.C. One worked in the capital was *pingjun guan* (平均官) "price standardization office" responsible for the standardization of market prices, and the locals were *junshu guan* (均数官), "equal supply office", who handled the purchasing in local regions and transporting and selling. The "equal supply office" took the responsibility for taxes in kind, but these taxes were paid only for local products which were abundant and suitable for export. Government orders locals to sell goods only to the official agencies and offices themselves received and transported the local commodities to the regions where they were in demand. In fact, the establishment of this institution meant that control over the process of whole transportation and circulation was transferred from merchants to the state (Kroll, 1978). *Pingjun* institution, on the other hand, was set up by Sang in 110 B.C. While the *junshu* institutions were established all around the country, *Pingjun* operated mostly in the capital and it was its task that *fix* of market prices. It purchased products in the market when they were cheap and sold them at a fixed price when they became expensive. By introducing this policy, the state managed to transfer the profit of the private sector to the state coffer on the one hand, and on the other hand, it broke the power of the rich merchants and subjected all the people to the state. It is very clear that the aim of this policy did not only increase the government's income but also to repress merchants (Kroll, 1978).

However, Sang Hongyang and Emperor Wudi did not satisfy with controlling the iron and salt industry. Further steps took place in 98 B.C. and a government monopoly in the brewing and selling of liquor was implemented (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008) and soon it extended to another profitable private textile business. When it comes to wine, Sima Qian mentioned very clear calculations in his book; if 1 million cash are invested in the

wine industry it would get 200,000 cash in profit every year. This is equivalent to the annual income of a state with a thousand chariots in the Warring States Period. Under Sang Hongyang's new wine production policy people can make wine by themselves, but all the raw materials needed for winemaking, such as koji, grain, etc., must be purchased from the government. However, after making wine, people can't buy it themselves, instead, they have to sell them all to the government, and the government organizes the marketing (Qiang, 2009). All these financial policies were highly successful in increasing state revenues.

Although these economic measures met the need to finance war expenditure and to consolidate the power of the Han Dynasty at that time, they also brought some inconveniences and difficulties to agricultural production, industries of any size, commerce, and also people's lives. It deprived the local princes and wealthy merchants of their vested interests, which inevitably aroused their strong dissatisfaction and opposition. Therefore, the problems of the state monopolization of salt and iron, and other products became major events in social, political, and economic life at that time. By the end of Wudi's reign, the empire was in a worse situation. Peasant rebellions erupted in many instances and refugees roamed around the country.

2.3. The Debate: Should It Be Continued or Stopped?

In 87 B.C. emperor Wudi died and Sang Hongyang, with his capacity as an imperial counselor, one of the top three positions in the empire, attempted to continue Wudi's financial policies into the next reign despite vehement opposition from merchants, and powerful families and even from the high ranking officials in the palace such as his political rival, regent Huo Guang (霍光), the grandfather of the young emperor Zhaodi (汉昭帝) (王宁, 1992). Huo Guang clashed with Sang's idea of continuing the state intervention economic policy and imperial expansion. Nevertheless, Sang never had an idea to rethink abandoning state monopoly because it was too profitable to be terminated. Huo, therefore, summoned more than 60 Confucian scholars from all corners of the country and supported them against Sang in the Conference on Salt and Iron held in 81 B.C. (Wagner, 2001).

Huan Kuan, a Confucianist senior official during the reign of Emperor Xuandi (74 B.C.–49 B.C.), compiled *Debate* based on the records of this conference. Whether or not to end the state monopoly on salt and iron, breweries also other crucial products, and policies such as "equal supply", "price standardization", unified coinage, and even a series of major issues like, military farming on conquered lands, and border defense,

and war against the Huns were the central topic of the Salt and Iron Conference. This was the first large-scale debate on national policies in ancient Chinese history. Confucian scholars firmly advocated getting rid of state ownership of the salt and iron business, backed privatization, and a return to the laissez-faire policies of the previous period. Here are some important reasons Confucian scholars put forward regarding this issue;

1. With these policies, in reality, the government entered into financial competition with the people. The court should not do it, should return the benefits to the people instead (桐生, 2015).
2. The iron produced by the government has uniform specifications, low quality, and high price and is not suitable for farmers. Iron officials often did not work in salt and iron shops thus people could not buy iron equipment on time that which negatively affected agricultural production, and it caused the farmlands to be barren and people doomed to live in poverty (桐生, 2015).
3. Due to the high price and poor quality of the salt and iron products, some citizens had to use wood to cultivate and eat salt-free meals. During the implementation of “equal supply” and “price standardization” policies, officials forcefully controlled the whole marketing process of local products, which led to a soar in the price nationwide. The result was that the poor became poorer and the rich became richer. It did not bring the benefits of balanced work and equal distribution as the court had expected.
4. The salt and iron monopoly and successive state intervention policies supported the Han dynasty’s expedition against the four barbarians², which affected the basic lives of the people. The citizens suffered from military service and heavy corvee, and the soldiers on the border struggled to defend the garrisons. It could not see what kind of benefits state monopoly on salt and iron brought to people (桐生, 2015).

Sang Hongyang and others adhere to the salt and iron monopoly policy. Their defense were;

1. The state monopoly on salt and iron business is an economic policy adopted by the court to solve the cost of conquering the Huns. If it is abolished, it will result in insufficient border military spending... and owing to the state monopolies, even if Han armies made expeditions east and west, expenditures were well provided for without increasing the taxes (桐生, 2015).

² Four barbarians in Chinese history refers to non-Han Chinese nations around China. For some study about the topic, look at (Ge, 2018)

2. Privatization of salt and iron provides the economic foundation for the rebellion of the princes, promotes the expansion of powerful families and the uniting of evil forces, causes illegal profiteers to monopolize the market, and would form the situation of “one family that harm hundreds of families” (桐生, 2015).
3. The implementation of “equal supply” and “price standardization” are all for the sake of equality and convenience for the people, and they originated from the purpose of enriching the people and country (桐生, 2015).
4. Economic policies such as the national monopoly of salt and iron have greatly opened up the wealth of the mountains and rivers in the country, making various goods more abundant. The imperial government is adequately funded, people are no longer in poverty, and agriculture is fundamentally benefiting from industry and commerce, up and down all are very rich (桐生, 2015).
5. Externally, the strength of the enemy states can be weakened by obtaining their assets through trade (桐生, 2015).

Sang and the other government representatives who participated in the *debate* showed no respect for Confucianist scholars. They openly degraded them and rejected their ideals policy as impractical for reality on the ground (桐生, 2015). They even described Confucius not only as a failed politician, but also stubborn, greedy, stupid, and shameless person that doggedly lobbied for his political ideas.³

Sang Hongyang and other representatives of the government overwhelmingly won the debate (Wan, 2012). However, in 80 B.C., Sang was exterminated with his whole family due to his involvement in the coup against the emperor and Huo Guang (班固, 2004). Ironically enough, Sang’s policies were continued by Huo, one who vehemently supported the Confucianist team against Sang during *the Debate*. State monopoly on various products and relevant policies that were implemented during the Wudi’s period continued except for three years from 44 B.C to 41 B.C. (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). This time Han government introduced a new interventionist policy again. In the years between 57 –54 B.C., they built storehouses called “ever-level granaries”, *Changping cang* (常平仓). The function of these storehouses was to buy grain when it was cheap and selling when it became expensive. In some cases, storehouses brought benefits to the

³ (桐生, 2015, pp. 560–561) On the Discourse on Iron and Salt, two sides have many counter arguments. However, this paper only mentioned the discussions on directly related to the official economic monopoly. Another hot debate on whether war against Huns were necessary is also not appears in this paper. Those interested can take a look at *the Discourse* itself.

people by controlling grain prices at a certain rate, but of course, it made a huge profit for the dynasty (Pan et al., 1950).

In 10 A.D, the Han dynasty under the Wang Mang (45 B.C – 23 A.D) went far beyond Sang hongyang and Huo Guang. They monopolized the business of salt, iron, liquor, the natural products of land and water, and copper mining, together with controls on prices and financial transactions. price standardization offices, which existed in the capital Chang-an, were set up in Luo-yang, Lin-zi, Han-dan, Wan, and Cheng-du. They again did the same thing bought unsold products very cheaply and sold them when prices were too high. They continued to beat down the private business by introducing different measures. For instance, the government lent money to the people free of interest for funerals and festivals, but at a 10% rate if they do business (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). In the reigns of Chang Di (76–78 A.D.) and Hui Di (89–105 A.D.), the same policy applied but never on such a large scale as in the early period of the Han dynasty. Also, for some period state control over the economy was changed the form that the monopoly of the central government transformed into local monopolization. These ups and downs in state monopolization showed that from the reign of Wu-di onward the government had an unstable relationship with the powerful families and great merchants (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008).

3. Legacy

The monopolistic economic policies originated by the Han government had a considerable effect on the development of the economic model of successive Chinese dynasties. Due to the iron ore being outspread and easily- mined, it had never again been monopolized by the governments. Salt business, however, continuously existed as state-owned business because it was a reliable source of government income as a vital commodity for people's daily life. Furthermore, maintaining state control of crucial sectors contributes to state security by preventing the emergence of powerful individuals. furthermore, centralized characters of Chinese dynasties always giving close and thoughtful attention to increasing the power of central government and curbing the ability of non – state actors. So, official control of lucrative business sectors continued in different forms in subsequent periods. In pursuance of revealing the effects of the Han dynasty's legacy on later governments, this section very briefly mentions state monopoly over key sectors until the first half of the last century. The following section will mainly discuss the period of the Chinese Communist government.

Every major dynasty from the late Tang (618–907) period onward created sophisticated methods for taxing or monopolizing the salt sector and other profitable business (Twitchett & K. Fairbank, 2008). When drinking tea became a widespread custom since Tang Dynasty, the government again turned tea into a material purchased only by the government. Vinegar is also inseparable for eating and cooking in China. During the period of Song Dynasty (960–1279), Wang Anshi, another famous politician and reformist, revived the policy of controlling commerce that vinegar was included in the scope of state monopoly. Tea had become the main export product from the 10th century onward due to increasing demand for tea in East Asia and both Song and its successor Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) prohibited private trading of tea (Po, 2018). Tea smugglers, according to official decrees, could be heavily punished which included the death penalty (Fu, 1993). In the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), salt, copper, and silver mining for coinage were also controlled by the state. This period saw another growth in salt consumption the Qing government had increasingly strengthened the control of the circulation of the salt industry by adopting a circulation system that combines monopoly operating privileges with monopoly market segmentation (鲁子健, 1992). Other money-making businesses were also among their target from time to time. For example, pottery kilns and silk productions were brought under official supervision and the procedure of state licensing was applied (Feuerwerke, 1998).

For the republican era (1912–1949), it is hard to mention the existence of strong state interventions in the business, or state suppression of the merchants as it was a period of chaos. The whole of China heavily suffered from the military clash between the warlords, the anti-Japanese war and the war between the Communist and Nationalist Party. However, we know that private entrepreneurs such as Song Ziwen (宋子文), a Harvard and Columbia University alumni gained the opportunity to be a powerful businessman and became economic minister of the Republic of China.

3.1. Can a Tiger Change Its Stripes?

Since the Chinese Communist Party came to power, especially during the period between the 1950s– 1970s, state monopoly over the various sector reached an unprecedented level due to the main character of the communist system that was imported from the Soviet Union on the one hand, and traditional monopolistic tendency on the other. The government monopoly was established in both the industrial and agricultural sectors through state-owned companies which were called production units and it expanded from urban to rural areas, and from production to consumption in 1953 (an gang, 2012). The main feature of them was state-owned and state-operated and land, food,

commodities, and labor were all controlled by the state (an gang, 2012). There were 10,533 companies subordinate to various departments of the Central Committee in 1965, while no single private company was allowed to operate (an gang, 2012). The 1980s was the turning point for China both politically and economically. The government allowed various sectors to be owned by private entrepreneurs over time. However, key sectors such as construction, oil, aviation, railway, electricity, telecommunication, etc., still remained under state control. Still, today, since the resource allocation mechanisms are in the hands of the state, state-owned enterprises get more privileges. The allocation of government subsidies, for example, only increased from 5% in 1998 to 15% in 2013 for private companies; however, the percentage for state-owned firms was witnessed from 15% to 45% in the same period (Harrison et al., 2019). Moreover, private enterprises find it difficult to access vital resources and licenses (Lu et al., 2013).

Changes in social and technological fields in different periods bring changes in the consuming habits of people. Parallel to this, the products considered to be indispensable for daily life also constantly show differences. While grains were the most needed material until the end of the Cultural Revolution in China, the 1980s onwards, the energy and service sector, most prominently oil and gas, transportation, electricity, telecommunication, and potentially, automobiles emerged as key sectors thanks to the booming of mass production and dramatic development of telecommunication. This shift turned these businesses into key sectors in terms of both economic and strategic ways and the government realized an absolute state monopoly over them (Hubbard, 2016). In today's world, which is defined as the digital era, service sectors such as the internet, telecommunication, and e-commerce have become an integral part of our daily life and conspicuously, the state monopoly in China has kept up with these changes. Despite state monopoly exists in various sectors such as oil, gas, railroad, aviation, telecommunication, banking, media, etc., this section particularly takes the Chinese telecommunication sector as an example of the living phenomenon of official monopoly on key sectors present-day China. It starts with a brief development path of the Chinese telecommunication industry and continues with the type of the three dominant telecommunication companies and their business scale.

3.2. Historical Account of the Telecommunication Sector in China

The history of Chinese telecommunication dates to the Post and Telecommunications Departments in the 1950s. Being companies in a pure Soviet-style communist state, they were born as state-owned enterprises. The management system adopted to these two departments was "unified leadership and separate management". The formation of a

highly centralized planned economic system has concentrated the actual management authority of the entire telecommunications industry in the central government. The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications even difficult to participate in the decision-making of important issues such as telecommunications investment and tariff pricing in the post and telecommunications industry (陈亮, 2010). Model of each department was official planning, official investing, and official marketing.

Even if there was a rapid development in the scale of infrastructure during the period from 1980 to 1994 compared to the years 1950–1980, however, management model remained the same (Liang, 2010) and the quality of the service was poor. The whole communication business was under the monopoly of the Post and Telecommunications Department (Loo, 2004) that specialist strongly expressed their dissatisfaction with its inefficiency and monopolistic behavior. Aiming at accelerating the development of the communications industry the China Institute of Electronics, China Communications Industry Association, and China Electronics News jointly held a seminar in June 1992. Most of the main participants were asked to break the monopoly, introduce a competition mechanism, and open the communication market and give full play to the capabilities of the private network. Very soon, they jointly submitted a formal request report to the State Council for the formation of another telecommunication company, China Unicom. As to the joint report, the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) strongly opposed it. They pointed out that the sector is related to the national economy, sovereignty, and security and also relates to people's livelihood (张宇燕, 1995).

Although the request rejects by MPT, vice Premier Zou Jiahua and Zhou Rongji supported the joint report and officially permitted the foundation of another operator in December 1993. However, at another meeting in April of next year, Premier Zou underlined that only the Department of Posts and Telecommunications and China Unicom are authorized by the state to operate telecommunications business. Other private networks can participate in China Unicom, but cannot establish an independent communication company. He also added that anti-monopoly in the telecommunications industry will carry out step by step, and it is by no means free competition that the state would not intervene. The meeting also agreed that China Unicom will be affiliated with the State Economic and Trade Commission (张宇燕, 1995).

In fact, the establishment of China Unicom did not bring any change in state monopoly. If it is necessary to speak of a change, official investment, and official marketing turned into mixed investment and official marketing, and a division of duties was made between

three state-owned companies. In other words, Chinese Unicom took over some services, such as renovating the dedicated communication networks of the Ministry of Railways and the Ministry of Electric Power, providing long-distance telephone services to the society, and operating wireless communication, etc (张宇燕, 1995). It is true that competition and division of services boosted the efficiency and quality of the service but, now China has three state-owned telecommunication companies.

In 1998~2004, a few more operators were involved in the telecommunications sector. Actually, in 1998, the National People's Congress passed a resolution to decompose the former China Telecommunication Department into China Telecom, China Mobile, Guoxin Paging, and China Satellite Communications. At the same time, the Ministry of Information Industry also adopted a series of policies to strengthen support for China Unicom; for instance, Paging merged into China Unicom, Unicom was granted the right to operate the CDMA network, injecting Railcom's business into China Unicom, allowing Unicom to provide low-cost services, etc. In addition, Jitong, China Netcom, and Railcom have successively entered the telecommunications market (陈亮, 2010). By 2000, the telecommunications market was in a state of competition. Nonetheless, there was a huge gap in market share between China Telecommunication and the rest; statistics of 2000 show that China Telecommunication alone controlled 99.7% share of local calls, 97% of long-distance calls, 65% of IP telephony and 98% of the Internet; and remained share was left to the rest operators (陈亮, 2010). The situation of China's Telecommunication dominance has not been substantially improved.

The period between 2004–2009 was the turning point of the Chinese telecommunication sector. Dramatic development in mobile telecommunication changed the status quo. China Mobile and China Unicom witnessed an astonishing increase in market share that in 2006 and 2007, they both enjoyed over 20% increase each year. Former hegemon China Telecommunication started to lose its market share to the newly emerged two. Very quickly, since 2008, the dominant position of China Telecommunication was replaced by China Mobile. This time government intervened in the situation again. In May 2008, The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued an announcement on deepening the reform of the telecommunications system. The announcement approved the “five-in-three” reorganization model. The specific reorganization model is: China Telecommunication acquires China Unicom's CDMA network, China Unicom merges with China Netcom, China Satcom's basic

telecommunications business is merged into China Telecommunication and China Railcom is incorporated into China Mobile (蔡君, 2008).

The reorganization resulted in the realization of the domination of the Chinese telecommunications market by three giant state-controlled enterprises, China Telecommunication, China Unicom, and China Mobile through consensus. Here let's look at these companies' property type and scale of business to understand the sector's total revenue and ownership.

3.3. Property Type and Business Scale

Except control China's domestic telecommunication market, all these three giants operate overseas as participant companies in China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, since the target of this study is the domestic market, companies' foreign business will not be considered. In order to illustrate state and enterprise relations in modern-day China, this part briefly looks at the size of the market and the government's influence on these companies either economically or politically. Let's start with China Mobile.

China Mobile is a Chinese state-owned company and the world's biggest mobile network operator with 946.375 million subscribed households as of 2020 (中国移动5G用户净增1386万户 达8405.7万户_通信世界网, n.d.) and 500 thousand employees since 2019 (中国移动通信集团有限公司介绍_中国移动通信, n.d.). It is the commercial name of China Mobile Limited (中国移动有限公司) and China Mobile Communications Group Co., Ltd. (中国移动通信集团有限公司). In December 2017, the company underwent a corporate restructuring. The type of enterprise was changed from an enterprise owned by the whole people to a wholly state-owned company (中国移动通信集团有限公司介绍_中国移动通信, n.d.). It operates in mainland China and Hong Kong and mainly provides mobile voice and multimedia services such as fixed-line telephony, Mobile telephony, broadband internet, digital television, and Internet television. Since 2010, China Mobile controls 70% of the domestic mobile services market share and as of June 2021, its total operating revenue stood at RMB 443,647 billion (China Mobile Limited, 2021), about \$69,756 billion according to 2022 currency rate (*China Dimension*, n.d.). The most recent updated overview on the company's official page shows that China Mobile's more than 72.72% of its shares are owned by its state-owned parent company China Mobile Communications Corp and the remaining approximately 27.28% was held by public investors (*China Mobile Limited – About China Mobile > Overview*, n.d.).

As for China Unicom, it is the central state-owned company that offers services including cellular, paging, long distance, data, and the Internet to government bodies, military organizations, various industries, and the general public. As a major shareholder, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council owns 98.45% of the total share (‘中国联通’, 2022). According to the statement on its official page, the company describes itself as “a provider of basic communication services to support the Party”. Besides, “China Unicom has adhered to political building to lead its efforts in thorough implementation of the decisions and deployments of the CPC Central Committee” in recent years. The company also contributes to optimizing and enhancing state-owned capital in the telecommunication sector.

The company holds large amounts of consumers and huge profits. By the end of 2021, China Unicom reported about 460 million subscriptions (*China Unicom (Hong Kong) Limited*, n.d.). According to data released by China Unicom's financial report, the number of its employees in 2020 was 242,121. (C114通信网, 2021) Data provided by *Statista* shows that in 2020, it generated a revenue of approximately RMB303.84 billion, about \$48 billion (*China Unicom*, n.d.). Regarding its future development strategy and its main responsibilities, China Unicom positioned itself to “make a full endeavor on the track toward the digital economy, with “Big Connectivity, Big Computing, Big Data, Big Application, and Big Security.” (集团介绍, n.d.) This shows that the company is playing a pivotal role in accomplishing national missions for building a new digital base for economic and social development as stated on its official page (集团介绍, n.d.).

As to China Telecommunication Group Co. Ltd., another behemoth in the Chinese telecommunication market, it is a central enterprise funded and established by the Chinese state alone. On April 1995, the central government decided to implement the operation mode of the Post and Telecommunications Department. On the basis of the General Administration of Telecommunications of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, the establishment of China Telecommunication was approved. Under various reforms and reorganization by the state, the company has become a super-large communications operation enterprise in China.

The company mainly engaged in comprehensive information services such as mobile communications, Internet access and applications, fixed telephone, satellite communications, and ICT integration with its 400,000 employees (*中国电信集团有限公司 China Telecom*, n.d.). As it was mentioned above after the previous reforms in the telecommunications industry in China, a large number of industries unrelated to the

operation of communication networks were assigned to China Telecom by the Department of Posts and Telecommunications (陈亮, 2010). In order to improve the operating level and efficiency, China Telecom was stripped and reorganized these industries, and on this basis, provincial telecommunications companies were established ('中国电信', 2022). The background and the course of development reveal that the company was founded, organized, and operated by the Chinese government. When it comes to its scale of business, China Telecom has total revenue of 393.6 billion yuan, about \$62 billion according to data from May 2021 (财务分析专业研究机构, 2021) and as of November 2021, the company's subscribers had reached 618 million in the service area of mobile, wireline broadband, and access lines (*China Telecom Corporation Limited - Company > Overview*, n.d.).

By evaluating the developments and reforms of the Chinese telecommunication market since the establishment of this sector in China, and operators' property ownership and scale of the business on the ground, it is possible to notice a few features as follows; 1) the reforms mainly aimed at not privatizing the sector but improve service quality, enhancing compatibility with foreign operators and responding to new demands; 2) reforms were realized not as a response to market demand, but as a result of the state's need and strategy; 3) operators that were later included in this sector have emerged as a result of the consensus with the state; 4) services and market share among the three always balanced through negotiation, not through competition; 5) the market is astonishingly big in terms of both revenue and employees; 6) the state did not compromise on official controlling, guiding, regulating and marketing. That is to say, since it is a strategically important and very profitable sector, it has been kept under the monopoly of the state from the beginning.

4. Different Period, Same Concern

It is not difficult to find for someone familiar with Chinese history that Chinese dynasties rarely distribute power and always give priority to centralized authority, which is very different from European empires that share powers with the church and kings. As we have seen today, modern China is also no exception. In Chinese political history, intolerance and high sensitivity toward non-government actors are consistent phenomena. As discussed above, the economic mentality of keeping lucrative sectors under state control has remained as a main trend since the Han period. As to this situation, one might naturally ask why and how the economic policy shaped 2000 years ago still has a strong influence. During the Salt and Iron Conference, the political the ramification of letting private businessmen be powerful was mainly discussed by the

Legalist statesmen. It was regarded as a political issue and the main concern lies in the centralized political system and statecraft shaped by the consensus between Confucian and Legalist administrative philosophy. Legalist statecraft attaches great importance to weakening the power of the people vis-à-vis the state as it sees the state-citizen relations as zero-sum games. This is very clearly stated in *the Book of Lord Shang*, one of the key classics of Legalist governing philosophy (Yuri Pine, 2019). Since the Legalist-Confucianist hybrid centralized administrative method dominated imperial China, as an indispensable part of it, state monopoly in key sectors lasts until the end of the Qing dynasty.⁴ However, the end of the imperial age couldn't be able to make a fundamental change in the administrative culture of China. When The People's Republic of China was established, it inherited the centralized nature and many administrative methods of imperial China by mixing them with the Communist method under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Thus, as to Communism in China, it is better to say Communism Sinicized rather than China becoming a communist state. State monopoly on the economy is a political issue and it would only change when a fundamental political revolution happened in order to change the centralized political system that originated from and developed through imperial China. As loudly claimed by Chinese scholars, historical experience played crucial and decisive in Chinese political culture and that is the reason why governing method of imperial China can be effective and alive despite a long gap of 2000 years.

Another important question could be what is the main reason for the government's concern over private sectors? Since economic power is the root of political power as St. Simon put forward by analyzing of the French Revolution (Neumann, 1950), for authoritative governments it is necessary to curtail the economic power of non-state actors. Of course, it doesn't mean that the state should prevent individuals to accumulate wealth. Even though China has had a centralized political tradition from the beginning, there is no evidence of banning private entrepreneurship in Chinese history except during the Mao period. Thus, curtailing economic power is the meaning of keeping a satisfied gap between the economic power of the state and individuals and it is crucial to understand that "the satisfied gap" should be enough for the state to exercise absolute superiority over merchants. State-person economic relation in present-day China proves this too; the state allows non-state actors to get rich by

⁴ This paper also underlines that state monopoly in economy shows different in different period. Mostly, it depended on the power of the central authority. During the period of unification, the state monopoly implemented when the authority saw it necessary. However, when there were several coexisted, it made central government weak, which made state monopoly difficult as well. See (Wang, 2017)

developing their own private business, however, “regulate” them if the state believes their power reached the level to compete with the state and pose threat to its superiority. Therefore, it would be more reasonable to read the case of Jack Ma and other tech giants from this perspective. The government has realized that if these companies would not “regulated” they could quickly become very powerful private enterprises that would parallel the party. This is a sign that there is a limit in the Chinese domestic market for private companies on how much power they can possess.

Controlling profitable and strategic sectors is essential for the state to maintain the “gap” mentioned above. These sectors show differences at different times. While they were salt and iron in the Han dynasty, tea in the Ming period, and energy in the recent past, the telecommunication industry is crucial in modern China thanks to the rapid development of the digital sector and full-scale integration trend between human society and the virtual world. It goes without saying how intertwined we are with the internet and telecommunication. Almost every sector and every individual highly depends on this sector and allocates a certain amount of fixed expenditure to this service on monthly bases so that it has maintained sustained prosperity and development. As to China, the profit is incredibly big due to its huge population. By the end of 2020 for example, China had over 989 million internet users, representing 20% of the globe (cycles & Text, n.d.). Thanks to these advantages, China made about \$214 billion in revenue in 2020 from telecommunication services and according to the China Academy of Information and Communication Technology, the digital economy accounted for 38.6% of Chinese GDP in 2020.⁵ Apart from huge economic profit, as a massive data collector, this sector is extremely important for the AI industry, a strategically crucial sector today.

As for the logic behind the official monopoly on salt and iron during the Han dynasty and the state control over modern China's telecommunications sector, it is possible to say that the idea of creating absolute domination of the state over powerful businessmen and key sectors is the main reason. As Sang Hongyang defends the official marketing of iron and state by saying “privatization of salt and iron provides the economic foundation for the rebellion of the princes, promotes the expansion of powerful families and the uniting of evil forces, causes illegal profiteers to monopolize the market”, from the perspective of the government with centralized authoritarian characteristics such as current day China, allowing non-state actors, whatever they are merchants or public figures, acquiring too much power put the authority under the risk. In light of this reality,

⁵ 中国信息通信研究院, ‘中国数字经济发展白皮书’, April 2021, 6, 11.

it is clear that the telecommunication sector is extremely lucrative, huge, strategically crucial, and has incredible numbers of workers that can be compared to iron and salt in the Han period, in monetary value, large personnel capacity, and strategic importance. Rather than examining modern China's official monopolistic behavior on crucial and lucrative sectors from the philosophy of communism and governing method of the Leninist party state, this study argues that examining it from the traditional administrative method of Chinese politics may provide broad and deep insights into this phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

Dealing with the subject of state intervention in business in China necessitates understanding the state's concern for non-state actors. The centralized political system that formed from Chinese historical experience believes absolute authority of the government is the key to state security and longevity. Therefore, powerful individuals or groups are mostly seen as a potential threat to the ultimate superiority of the government. As the first comprehensive and long discussion about economy and politics in Chinese history, *the Discourse on the Salt and Iron* systematically explained the importance of the state monopoly over the crucial sector and its contribution to the vital interest and security of the state. *the Discourse* can also be a very important explanation of relations between power and money, merchants and bureaucrats that it shed light on understanding the importance of maintaining power disparity between businessmen and authority in the context of state security.

As it was mentioned above, the state control over lucrative businesses hugely affected subsequent dynasties they took different sectors under state control at different times. It seems that such political tradition is very deeply rooted in the Chinese style of governance that authority could not tolerate domestic peer competitors in any area. The reformist Sang's linking the privatization of salt and iron to the revolt of princes and the expansion of powerful families to the unification of evil forces is very important to understand this sensitivity. What is more, CCP vice premier Zou Jiahua's emphasis on state control over the Chinese telecommunication sector illuminates Chinese policymakers' position on the economic model of China. Finally, undisputed state control over the telecommunication sector today and Xi Jinping's regulation or crackdown on high-tech and e-commerce behemoths manifested of this long traditional concern. Introduced laws and regulations such as "anti-monopoly law", "adjusting excessive income", "redistributing the wealth", "common prosperity" etc are just euphemisms for downsizing the power of tycoons and taking key sectors under state control.

As to the importance of the historical approach in analyzing contemporary Chinese statecraft, it is unwise to argue all Chinese policy behaviors are based on Chinese historical experiences and thoughts or it is impossible to say that there is unchanging Chinese traditional political culture that is rooted in the past. However, the effects of the Chinese traditional mentality on present-day policies should not neglect. It, at least, helps us see the whole picture or provide another angle to examine the issue.

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