

Labor Obligations & Taxation – Theme 2.2 Early Economies

Use the following sources to compare labor obligations and taxation in Norman England, Heian Japan, Sung China, and the early imperial Incan empire. How did the four state systems control labor? Did governmental requirements for labor seem to affect the economies? What other kinds of evidence do you need to assess the ways the economies were affected?

Norman England

In 1035, the Norman conqueror William ordered the creation of an inventory of what he had claimed in England. It was called the Domesday Book, and his deputies recorded in it the value of what the Normans conquered. William used the records to decide how to distribute the fruits of the conquest both to himself and to his followers. That valuation and distribution of wealth is a common element in the way societies have dealt with economic issues throughout history. With the assessment, William and about 200 other new aristocrats, along with about 100 major churches, owned approximately 75 percent of the assessed value of the entire country. The majority of the people worked as agricultural laborers on private estates or manors.

In a manorial record, 1037:

They say that John of Cayworth holds one house and 30 acres of land, and he owes two shillings a year at Easter and Michaelmas, and he owes one cock and two hens at Christmas worth four shillings And he ought to carry the manure of the lord for two days with one cart, using his own two oxen, the work to value eight pence, and he receives from the lord three meals of the above value each day; and so the work is worth three pence clear (Kevin Reilly, *Worlds of History: A Comparative Reader* [Boston and NY: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2000], 1: 237–38.)

Heian Japan

The estates, or “shôen,” really grew out of the breakdown of the imperial government in the late eighth century; between the eighth and eleventh centuries, noble families or religious institutions such as the temple of Todaiji, the Buddhist temple in Nara, or the temple of Toji in Kyoto amassed large estates in the thousands of acres. Everyone who lived on an estate had certain rights and obligations no matter what their social status—ranging from the estate owner to the managers, who represented the interests of the usually absentee landlord, down to the tenant farmers. Tenant farmers either received some living from the land they farmed, or they paid rent on the plots they farmed. The typical farmer’s household paid three kinds of taxes: a tax in the form of grain, a tax in the form of textiles, and a tax in the form of labor service to the state. In practice, the grain tax could be converted into more of the other two, and the labor tax could be converted into more textiles. Cloth, especially silk, came to serve almost like currency in this system.

Incan Empire

The Incan empire was a system of widely separated ecological niches, each producing its own range of goods that supported its inhabitants: potatoes and llamas on the high plateau, maize and peppers in the valleys, and honey and nuts in the Amazon rain forest. The empire operated without money or markets. In a region without large beasts of burden or wheel carts, the great labor need was for human bearers to transport goods across ecological niches, or for maintenance of the road system. Hence, taxes were always measured by labor, whether they were at the local or imperial level. The Incan bureaucracy was organized at the local level around a kin group called the “ayllu.” Everyone belonged to an ayllu, because this sort of group was the basis for the distribution of farmlands, pastures, and other resources. A local lord called a “kuraka” ruled the ayllu. The Incas used the kurakas to rule indirectly. The kurakas maintained authority by distributing material goods and food. These goods included cloth, maize, beer, and cacao.

[One of the ethnic groups subject to the Inca] the Wankas were sent to tend fields of food and to make clothing and maids were named for their wives; and native clothing and all things that they could produce were ordered put into storehouses, and similarly, it was ordered that those who worked in their fields and houses receive something from the storehouses. (Terence D'Altroy and Timothy K. Earle, "Staple Finance, Wealth Finance, and Storage in the Inka Political Economy," *Current Anthropology* 26, no. 2 [April, 1985], 193.)

Sung Dynasty: Northern (960–1126) and Southern (1127–1279)

As during the previous periods, most peasants in Sung China remained in their natal regions and worked as tenant farmers to escape paying taxes to the government. An increase in agricultural production, due to the government's import of Champa rice and support of new irrigation technology, led to increased wealth for the individual farmer. The large landowners and religious orders found ways to evade their obligations, so the burden of taxes often fell to the independent small farmers who paid their taxes using copper coins or silver rather than grain. Contributions to the government granaries continued, however, to help provide grain to the general population during times of famine. The Sung administrators, selected on the basis of rigorous civil service exams, decided to diminish the traditional labor obligations for peasants. Some peasants went to the expanding areas around cities to work as day laborers. Urban life became more attractive as foreign trade increased through the southern seaports. Chinese merchants' status improved when the government encouraged the export of Chinese goods as far as East Africa. Foreign merchants, including Arabs and Muslims, were allowed to operate in the southern port cities. By the mid-twelfth century, the southern Sung dynasty received about one-fifth of its state revenue from maritime taxes. There were also expanding systems of credit based in part on the government printing more paper money. The peasants still owed military service to the state, but many were able to buy their way out; during the later period of the Sung dynasty, diplomacy with antagonistic northern neighbors generally held sway instead of war. Increased commercialization of the economy—especially along the Yangtze River—accompanied the growth of urban centers. Hangzhou, for example, had a population of 391,000 households, compared to Rome's average population of about 35,000 households and London's of about 20,000 households. The Sung population surge led to greater domestic demand for goods and services, including better transportation networks. For many elite women, foot binding became a fashion and a sign of conspicuous consumption, showing that those wives and daughters did not have to do any work.

The experience of Wang Ge, a twelfth-century industrial entrepreneur, illustrates the magnitude of economic opportunity and enterprise that existed at that time. With a small capital investment, Wang acquired a timber covered mountain. He began to produce charcoal, employing local farmers in the off-season. Local iron ore deposits allowed him to set up two iron foundries, employing about 500 workers. Wang ran one of the foundries himself. A manager supervised the other. With the profits from the foundries, he acquired two more assets: a wine shop and a lake where he employed several hundred families in the fishing trade.

Description of Hangzhou, 1235:

Various businesses are designated by the word 'company' ... even physicians and fortune tellers are included ...artisans sometimes call their businesses 'workshops,' such as a comb workshop, belt workshop, gold and silver-plating workshop. (Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* [NY: The Free Press, 1993], 179.)