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What's in a Slogan? The Political Rationale and the Economic Debates behind “Enrich the State” (*fuguo* 富國) in Early China

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The reason being, in this case, that the government had recently been telling farmers to grow as much corn as possible. “Food is a munition of war,” they were told, “and the farm should be treated as a munitions factory.” And so, where once there had been green, now there was gold.

Jonathan Coe, *The Rain before It Falls*¹

Introduction

In contrast to the progress of material culture, the evolution of words challenges the ability of historians to detect rich layers of meanings that tend to merge into each other when seen from a distance. In certain historical moments of deep changes, language and terminology are not immediately adapted or updated to reflect current usage or new social circumstances. Certain words or notions survive the intuitions or the institutions from which they originally stemmed. Boundaries are blurred by the natural evolution of words and new pragmatic adjustments. In short, whereas history of material culture deals among others with dating and description

1 Coe 2009: 50–51.

of tools (plow, swords, carts), intellectual history may envision keywords or core notions in a society as tools whose shapes can remain unaltered for some time but whose functions, users and locations are subject to constant changes. And yet, thorny and vexed as it may prove, this exercise in cognitive archeology is a critical task for historians who study ideas, values and representations.

In the following pages, I shall focus on a slogan that splices together one of the most appealing keywords of the Warring States period (453–221 BCE), *fuguo* 富國 (“enrich the state”), and its frequent corollary *qiangbing* 強兵 (“strengthen the army”). The key-phrase *fuguo* in Chinese political culture has a long, winding and complex history that illustrates the idea that keywords command an attitude of hermeneutic wariness. Indeed, the term *guo* 國 is, so to speak, fraught, or blessed, with a semantic ambivalence that makes the slogan teeter between two goals, the state and the country, or in other terms the government or the people.² *Fuguo* can signify two contradictory programs: 1) make the *country* rich by protecting the interest of the people against usury and private speculation; 2) enrich the *state*, and thus the government by taking out what people have stockpiled—their food, grains or their cash reserves.

Starting from this semantic ambivalence that gives rise to two distinct economic agendas, I shall address the following questions: what kind of individuals should be primarily enriched: the commoners, the elite, or the ruler, and who should be prevented from becoming rich? How should the *guo* be enriched concretely: with grain or gold, with manpower or new lands? And by which methods? I will examine in the following pages the

2 One should note here in passing the polysemy of the *min* 民, which we translate here as “people.” During the Warring States period, the logic of contrast (determined by categories) seems to have determined the exact meaning of *min* in each occurrence: humans as opposed to the spirits, the ruled in distinction with the ruler, or the commoners in contrast with the elite. The semantic spectrum of *min* is explained in Pines (2009: 190). Pines (2009: 262n13) further mentions Qiu Xigui’s suggestion that when deities or Heaven are invoked or mentioned, *min* may well refer to all human beings, ruler and ruled alike.

major policies that were devised and sometimes implemented: taxations, cuts in expenses, exploitation of natural resources, agricultural production, state monopolies and financial speculation.

I shall try to show that the slogan *fuguo* was originally part of a narrative on the legitimation of a strong centralized state; it voiced the urge to implement certain economic policies that are sometimes at odds with one another. The recurrence of the slogan across Chinese history may well have given the ruling elite the sense of a common language, a continuous mission and a set of common goals. It belongs to a cluster of political keywords and formula that set a framework within which crucial debates on the nature of the state could take place.

It is hard to know when and by whom exactly the phrase *fuguo* (and sometimes its corollary *qiangbing*) were first coined and promoted. Their earliest extant traces are in the *Shangjunshu* 商君書 (hereafter, *Book of Lord Shang*), though the policies encapsulated in this term surely predate the compilation of the book.³ At the time, it must have come off as an offensive formula when deciphered in the light of the ruler's moral mission as sanctified in earlier textual traditions. And yet, this slogan blazed a trail for other thinkers and statesmen over the course of the fourth and third centuries BCE. It pinpoints the reformist spirit of the day and encompasses the entire Chinese world of the Warring States period, especially Qin, Wei (where it is associated with Li Kui 李悝 [d. ca. 400 BCE]), and Qi.

I shall start by analyzing the sociopolitical background of this slogan, explain its economic implications and account for its consequences for the social organization of the state. In doing so, I shall refer to elements of a broader debate among four major texts of the Warring States period, *Mozi* 墨子, *Xunzi* 荀子, the *Book of Lord Shang*, and *Guanzi* 管子, in which we

3 故治國者，其專力也，以富國強兵也。“Hence he who rules the state well consolidates force to attain a rich state and a strong army” (*Shangjunshu* III.8: 60 [“Yi yan” 壹言]; Transl. Pines 2017: 8.2). For the recurrence of this formula in association with Qin statesmen, see *Zhanguo ce* 3.13: 117 (“Qin ce 秦策” 1); *Shiji* 74: 2343; for its association with Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE), see *Yantielun* X.55: 567.

can retrace economic and political debates revolving around the notion of *fuguo* (and partly of *qiangbing*). The semantic ambivalence of the key term *guo* and the various possible ways of defining wealth foster the debate about the best way to manage human communities and ensure prosperity.

1. New Trends in Warring States Times

The political, economical, and military history of the Warring States period has been extensively studied by Yang Kuan 楊寬 and Mark Edward Lewis, among others.⁴ In what follows I shall therefore give only a brief overview of the context that directly underlies the political slogan under consideration. Of primary importance for our discussion are decisive innovations in the art of smelting and casting iron from ca. 5th century BCE. These entailed momentous consequences for agricultural production, warfare methods and commercial activities. Tools and weapons became more rapidly produced, and much more diverse and enduring.⁵ Their widespread dissemination improved agricultural productivity and prompted the rapid clearing of wastelands for cultivation. During the Warring States period, we can observe a general trend toward a rational management of agriculture in states such as Qi, Wei and Qin. Advances in hydro-agricultural methods and modes of plowing led in turn to new forms of taxation and innovative ways of levying funds. The basis of economic development lay in the maximization of agricultural production and the optimal exploitation of salt, iron, other resources, and soil, which entailed an exploitative attitude towards nature.

The increasing efficacy in the management of agriculture was spurred by the proliferation of massive armies, which necessitated huge supplies of

4 Yang Kuan 2003; Lewis 1990 and 1999.

5 For instance, traditional weapons (such as lance 矛 and halberd 戈) were henceforth produced in greater quantities and forged in the newly strengthened iron, in parallel with the extension of armament (such as iron armors, helmets, crossbows, grappling-lances 鉤鉞 and spears with hooks 戟). See Yang Kuan 2003: 303–309.

food. If a “strong army” was an imperative, it became inextricably tied to the obligation of “enriching the state.” The symbiosis of the two slogans fostered the economic debates of the period.

Progresses in industry and in the production of agricultural goods also buttressed the market economy. The most remarkable phenomenon over the course of these three centuries (roughly 500–200 BCE) is obviously the development of commerce and industry, which exerted a critical influence on several statesmen and political reformists. These favorable conditions for commerce could account for the rise of merchants, some of whom were able to build gigantic fortunes and gain unprecedented prominence. Their newly gained positions, as we shall see below, compelled thinkers and statesmen to ask who should be allowed to get rich, on what grounds, and which merits preferably should be rewarded.

In the wake of these new departures, profit-maximizing attitudes towards the natural world gradually emerged by the end of the Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE), and transformed traditional methods to manage territories. This economic dynamism also expands on the scale of time: the computing skills and the ready availability of arithmetic operations enabled astute merchants and profit-oriented ministers to make financial plans and even to speculate on future profits.⁶ This economic turn reshaped discourses on human agency among a certain elite. Territories could now be viewed as a huge pool of material resources, and each profession was evaluated according to its usefulness and output.

The large-scale economic ideas that merchants put into practice for their private interests or for the benefit of the state were permitted not only by new tools but also by significant improvements in abstract reasoning and in calculus operations, which facilitated control over the material world by numbers and figures, and enabled complex operations such as anticipation

6 See below in the section devoted to the *Guanzi*.

of recipes or the prediction of supplies and demands.⁷ This cognitive progress pertains to three domains: 1) tax policy, 2) the administration of natural resources and 3) labor organization.

After this all too brief outline of the historical background in which the slogan *fuguo* appears, we can now turn to the major texts that promote and discuss the idea of “enriching the people.” I will first examine a trend of thought that overlaps with doxographic categories in order to set forth a historical continuity between Mohist and Confucian texts, which all favor the interpretation of *guo* for the benefit of “the people.”

2. Society against the State? Enrichment of the Country in the *Mozhi*

The Mohist school gives a moral translation of the political principle of “enriching the country” in two striking formulas: “seek the interest of the whole world” 求天下之利 and “get rid of what causes harm to the world” 除天下之害.⁸ These formulas are both an explanation of what should be done and a prohibition of what is usually undertaken for the sake of the state. The *Mozhi* assumes that the rulers and the high officials in charge of the state “all want to have a rich country, a big population and an orderly use of punishments and administration” 今者王公大人為政於國家者，皆欲國家之富，人民之眾，刑政之治。⁹ Yet, the enrichment of the state is not viewed as a process of predatory accumulation. It is above all a question of self-restriction. Mohists try to drive home the idea that time, skills, and strength have necessarily objective limits. Therefore, a high level of material and cultural refinement is seen as a yardstick to measure the widespread

7 See Chemla and Ma 2015. A good illustration of these progresses of abstract reasoning in economic policies is provided by *Guanzi* XIII.72 (“Hai wang” 海王, transl. Rickett 1998: 373–374).

8 See the beginning of chapter “Fei yue shang” 非樂上 (“Against Music, 1”) (*Mozhi* VIII.32: 379).

9 *Mozhi* II.8: 66 (“Shang xian shang” 尚賢上).

level of poverty in the country. The Mohist interpretation of the key formula “enrich the country” drives a wedge between the people and the state, since the latter, as it appears, contains the very seeds of the ruin of the former. Accordingly, a sage ruler should endeavor to enrich its people—partly by self-imposed cuts on expenses. This core idea stems from the early stratum of Mohist chapters, written between the 5th and 4th centuries.¹⁰

聖人為政一國，一國可倍也；大之為政天下，天下可倍也。其倍之非外取地也，因其國家，去其無用之費，足以倍之。

When a sage rules over the state, the wealth of the whole state can be doubled. When he rules over the whole world, its wealth will be doubled. This increase is not due to the seizing of lands abroad: simply relying on countrymen, and cutting unnecessary expenditures, suffices to bring about this increase.¹¹

One of the keys to the enrichment of the state lies in the increase of a young and healthy population. Rather than endeavoring to attract people from other states, the *Mozi* sketches out the pioneering idea of a new birth policy (purportedly inspired by the ancient kings):¹²

昔者聖王為法曰：「丈夫年二十，毋敢不處家。女子年十五，毋敢不事人。」此聖王之法也。

In ancient times, the sage kings said: “No man of twenty would dare to be without a family; no girl of fifteen should dare to not serve a man.” Such is the model of the ancient kings.¹³

¹⁰ For useful references on the datation of the *Mozi*, see Wu Yujiang 1994: 1025–1055. Different views are summarized in Defoort and Standaert 2013.

¹¹ *Mozi* VI.20: 147 (“Jie yong 節用 shang”).

¹² Historically, this policy can be ascribed to King Goujian of Yue: see *Guoyu jijie* 20: 635 (“Yue yu shang” 越語上) on marriages and 20: 636 on government measures in support of women giving birth.

¹³ *Mozi* VI.20: 147 (“Jie yong shang”).

Three main sources of extravagance and wastefulness are identified and repeatedly denounced: 1) elaborate music and rituals, 2) lavish funerary customs, and 3) aggressive large-scale warfare.¹⁴

Enriching the state is above all a question of preventing the constant depletion of wealth, people and energy for the sake of fulfilling desires that stand outside the strict sphere of natural needs. The elite who splashes out on luxurious goods and delicacies is urged to resorb the economic conflict between their spending habits and the needs of the multitude. Obviously, neither architectural patrimony of urban centers nor the personal treasure of the ruler (collection of pearls and jades, rare fauna, etc.) are elements to be taken into account in the wealth of a state.¹⁵

2.1 The Fair Fruit of Frugality

The ambiguity embedded in the term *guo* enables the slogan *fuguo* 富國 to win apparent consensus. The author of the chapter “Geng zhu” 耕柱 asks very rhetorically if the treasures of the past are really liable to enrich the state/the people (*guojia* 國家) and associates this term in the same passage to the expressions “benefit the people” (*li min* 利民) and “benefit men” (*li ren* 利人).¹⁶ The author of “Ci guo” 辭過 (“Dismissing excess”), a later chapter of *Mozi* which sums up earlier doctrinal elements, suggests that the sages of the past were primarily concerned by the lot of commoners. The enrichment of the population found a partial solution in the reduction of daily habits to bare necessities, even for the ruler, instead of promoting a program of economic development based on the optimal exploitation of natural resources and manpower. The authors make their point quite clearly:

14 The *Zuozhuan* 左傳 hold these activities as the main business of the elite: 國之大事，在祀與戎: “The great affairs of the state consist in sacrifices and wars” (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, Cheng 13: 861)

15 *Mozi* VI.20: 147 (“Jie yong shang”).

16 *Mozi* XI.46: 658 (“Geng zhu”).