Entry: well-field system (Jingtian)

The well-field system, which originated during the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC), called for a forty-acre square of land to be divided into nine equal parts; the character “well” 井 (jing) illustrates this distribution method. Eight peasant families occupied the eight outer squares and jointly cultivated the center square on behalf of the landowning aristocrat. The well-field system was part of the larger fengjian structure, which connected aristocrats through kinship ties. An effect of this system on the Chinese language is that the character gong represents both “public” and “lordship.”

Although the system in theory was geometric, its application was not. The nine squares were likely divided unequally to adapt to the natural landscape. A tension thus existed between the administrative form that political leaders conceptualized at the top versus its realization on the ground. A continuation of this tension is suggested by the Confucian emphasis of orthopraxy over orthodoxy—one stresses correct formulation even if little relationship exists between the formulation and the thoughts of the people using them.

Despite Mencius’ praise of the organization in 300 BC, the system had collapsed by the Warring States period (481–403 BC). This breakdown may have delayed China’s transition to capitalism. First, by replacing the dual economy powered by peasant and lords with a single economy fueled only by lords, capital was unable to establish a new mode of production. Second, a split in the previously united elite class allowed the political (bureaucrats) elite to suppress the economic (merchants and landlords) elite.

252 words