

The Development of the Southern Economy during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

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Abstract: The Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties marked the beginning of the southward migration of ancient Chinese economy. Since then, China's economic focus has gradually shifted from the north to the south, and this process was finally completed in the Tang and Song Dynasties. This paper reveals the background of economic development in the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties from four dimensions: natural environment, politics, economy and military, and deeply explores the development of agriculture, handicrafts and commerce in the south. The development of land development and agricultural economy in the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties was not only reflected in the construction of water conservancy in some areas, the increase in unit area yield and population growth, but more importantly in the expansion of rice planting area, the advancement of production technology and the irrigation area of farmland. In terms of handicraft industry, during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, handicraft industry in the south developed in many fields, among which textile industry, shipbuilding industry and paper-making industry developed significantly. In terms of commerce, commercial activities in the south increased during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and both bureaucratic and private commercial activities were frequent. The remarkable progress in agriculture, handicrafts and commerce in the south laid the foundation for the long-term prosperity of the southern economy and germinated the buds of the gradual shift of the national economic center to the south.

1. Introduction

The current focus of China's economic development is in the southeast region. This situation is not formed in recent decades, but has been formed over the past two thousand years. The southward shift of China's ancient economic center of gravity is an economic phenomenon in Chinese history. Before the Qin Dynasty, only parts of the Yangtze River Basin in the south were initially developed. After the Qin Dynasty unified the country, a large number of northern people moved to the south to avoid chaos, bringing advanced production technology, which enabled the southern economy to develop rapidly. However, by the Han Dynasty, the social and economic development of the south was still very backward, and the overall economic development level was far inferior to that of the advanced northern regions. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, with the frequent wars in the north, a large number of farmers migrated to the south, bringing advanced production technology and production tools to the south, the southern economy developed, and China's economic center of gravity began to move south. Therefore, it is very necessary to study the economic development of the southern region during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and it is also meaningful to understand the current economic structure of China.

In the past, scholars have conducted many studies on the development of the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, but they have mostly focused on the influence of a single factor or a certain economic sector. There is still room for further research and evaluation of the overall development of the south during this period, as well as the excavation of historical materials. This paper uses historical materials such as "Book of Jin", "Book of Chen", "Book of

Liang", "Book of Sui", " Book of Song ", and " Records of the Three Kingdoms " to mainly examine the following contents: First, explore the background and reasons for the economic development of the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties from the aspects of natural environment, politics, economy and military; second, examine the performance of land development and agricultural development in the south; third, examine the status of industrial and commercial development in the south.

2. Literature review

At present, academic research on the economic development of the South during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties primarily centers on its causes and manifestations. Scholars generally attribute the economic rise of the South to three main factors: population migration from the North, the favorable natural environment, and water conservancy construction. Cai Erkai emphasized that northern migration brought advanced agricultural techniques and labor to the South,spurring agricultural growth [1]. However, Wang Dajian and Liu Dezeng argued that many migrants became soldiers rather than farmers, and even those engaged in agriculture struggled to adapt to the southern environment, sometimes harming local productivity [2]. Cheng Minsheng highlighted the region's favorable water and heat conditions for agriculture [3], while Jiang Fuya pointed to the role of irrigation and water conservancy in driving economic development [4].

In terms of specific economic sectors, research has focused on agriculture, commerce, and handicrafts. Zheng Xiongfei and Liu Jie noted that land annexation by aristocratic families hindered agricultural development [5], whereas Yelena stressed the diversification of grain crops due to policy and cultural exchange [6]. Xu Kangning added that wheat cultivation and its technology saw advancement during this era [7].

In commerce, Wang Bo suggested that market systems matured during this time [8]. Yan Xin emphasized the Yangtze River's role in urban economic integration and the rising importance of merchants [9]. Zheng Haotian examined luxury goods trade, asserting that elite demand boosted foreign trade and cultural exchange, but widened social inequality [10].

Regarding handicrafts, Xu Yuhong found that folk craftsmanship progressed in Jiangnan [11]. Tu Zhihao linked Buddhist influence to the exotic style of crafts [12], while Luo Zongzhen noted that artisans gained relative independence and improved production methods [13].

While prior research provides a strong foundation, it often isolates individual factors or industries. This article seeks to integrate these elements to comprehensively examine the southern economy's development, including land use, commerce, and industry during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties.

3. Background of the Development of the South during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

The economic development of the South during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties was shaped by multiple factors, including climate, migration, politics, and technological advancement. The relatively favorable natural environment was a key advantage. Zhu Kezhen's research indicates that China experienced a significant cooling period from 100 to 500 AD, with average temperatures dropping by 2.5–3 °C. Harsh conditions in the North—marked by frequent snow in Luoyang and a freezing Huai River—led to declining agricultural productivity due to drought, desertification, and deteriorating irrigation systems [14]. In contrast, the South, less impacted by extreme climate shifts, benefited from the drying trend, which helped transform swampy areas into cultivable rice fields [15]. Over time, especially in the Yangtze River Basin, the climate became more suitable for human settlement and agriculture. Enhanced rainfall and moderate temperatures improved per-unit agricultural output and stability [16][17].

Technological progress since the Qin and Han dynasties—such as the adoption of iron farm tools,ox-drawn plows, and irrigation—enabled effective land reclamation and crop diversification. The influx of northern migrants introduced wheat cultivation, which, combined with rice farming,

popularized a double-cropping system in the South. The region's biodiversity also contributed to economic diversity, supporting the production of mulberry, hemp, fish, fruits, and medicinal herbs.

Population migration due to prolonged northern warfare also played a crucial role. Conflict during the Three Kingdoms and Western Jin periods rendered vast northern areas uninhabited, prompting large-scale southward migration. Sources like the **Book of Jin** note that 60–70% of aristocrats moved south [19]. Historian Tan Qixiang estimated that 900,000 migrants accounted for one-sixth of the Southern Dynasties' population, though actual figures were likely higher due to undocumented private dependents [20]. These migrants brought labor, capital, culture, and advanced production methods, stimulating economic activity.

Unlike the North's frequent regime changes, the South enjoyed relative political stability. The Eastern Jin and successive Southern Dynasties (Song, Qi, Liang, Chen) maintained regional unity and largely defensive postures, avoiding costly northern expeditions [21]. This stability allowed southern regimes to focus on internal development. Talent promotion also helped. For instance, Sun Quan and Wang Dao encouraged the use of local and lower-class talent to consolidate rule and promote loyalty [22]. Humble backgrounds were no barrier; many military and administrative roles were filled by such individuals, ensuring effective governance and economic leadership.

Technological adaptation further advanced southern agriculture. Northern farming methods were modified to suit the southern terrain. The South developed paddy field tools, such as specialized plows, and emphasized ox-plowing. **The Book of Song** records widespread use of oxen during the Liu Song Dynasty [18]. Due to the region's soft soil and scarcity of oxen, southern farmers adopted a single-ox plowing method. Meanwhile, iron smelting flourished in areas like Jingzhou and Yangzhou, supporting tool production.

In sum, a confluence of favorable natural conditions, northern migration, political stability, technological progress, and institutional support laid the foundation for the South's economic rise during this era.

4. Land development and agricultural development in the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

Ancient China was an agricultural society, and land-based taxation was its main fiscal source. Therefore, successive dynasties emphasized land and agricultural development. During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, southern agriculture progressed significantly due to government policy and land systems.

Land development during this period involved three aspects: population migration, agricultural technology, and water conservancy. In the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, many northern gentry and commoners migrated south. To manage and integrate them, the government established overseas prefectures and counties. These institutions preserved the privileges of northern elites while easing tensions with southern gentry. The Han migrants comprised about one-sixth of the southern population. Their settlement stabilized the region and facilitated agricultural development.

Technological advancements also played a role. Southern agriculture improved through enhanced tools, farming techniques, and land management. The development of iron tools boosted productivity. Fan Yun of the Southern Dynasty noted in his poem *Governing West Lake*: "They have gathered by the old pond and started to plant rice in the new field...they are very happy to see the bumper harvest of fish and rice." This suggests the use of rice transplantation. Guo Yigong's *Guangzhi* described "Shao" grass, used as green manure under rice crops in winter, showing early fertilizer practices [23]. These innovations improved efficiency and supported southern agriculture.

Water conservancy projects were another key factor. To ensure irrigation, major projects were built along the Yangtze River, especially in Anhui and Jiangsu. In Anhui, Wupi and Qimenyan were significant irrigation systems. In Jiangsu, Chishan Lake was developed during the Three Kingdoms, and Lianhu Lake was artificially created in the Western Jin to manage floods and irrigation. These projects improved irrigation and productivity, underscoring the importance of government investment in agriculture.

Government policy throughout the period prioritized agriculture. Rulers promoted farming and

sericulture, reduced corvée labor, and tied officials' performance to grain output. For example, Emperor Yuan of Jin evaluated local officials based on grain production and reduced labor demands to let people focus on farming. Emperor Wen of Chen personally instructed officials to follow the farming calendar [24]. Liu Yu of the Song Dynasty emphasized grain storage, while Emperor Wen continued his policies, ensuring full land utilization and promoting mulberry planting and weaving. These efforts led to population growth, stable governance, and high agricultural tax revenue. Historians later praised this era as the "Yuanjia Reign."

The land system also evolved, promoting agriculture. Large landownership expanded, and powerful families—like the Qiao clan and Three Wu gentry—controlled land, labor, and technology. While the state couldn't undertake large-scale development, these families filled the gap, often converting forests and wetlands into productive estates. Although exploitative, their estates absorbed many refugees, combining land and labor and improving efficiency. According to the *Book of Song*, Jiangnan had “hundreds of thousands of hectares of good farmland... one mu worth one or two taels of gold.”

Overall, southern agriculture flourished during this era. As Shen Yue observed, regions like Jingzhou and Yangzhou had strong populations and fertile lands, with harvests sufficient to feed many counties [18], demonstrating the remarkable development of agriculture in the south.

5. Development of industry and commerce in the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties

During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the southern regions of China experienced significant economic growth in handicrafts and commerce. Government-run handicrafts, managed by official bodies, developed rapidly due to two primary factors. First, the ruling class's immense demand for luxury items stimulated production. For instance, the horse harness of a favored Southern Qi concubine was adorned with exquisite carvings and colorful silk threads [25]. Second, frequent warfare created a constant need for military supplies, from weapons and armor to chariots and warships, promoting the growth of related industries. The craftsmanship of these workshops was exceptionally high, exemplified by imperial carriages with intricate gold, silver, and tortoiseshell decorations [26].

The textile industry saw major development. The scale of official silk weaving grew substantially, and rulers' policies also encouraged folk silk production to flourish in new areas. Weaving technology advanced, notably when craftsmen from Shuzhong introduced Shu brocade techniques to the south of the Yangtze River [27]. While silk was largely for the elite, linen remained the primary fabric for commoners. This is reflected in imperial records, which show that rulers bestowed far more linen than silk upon their ministers, indicating its greater production and availability.

Given the Jiangnan region's network of rivers, its shipbuilding industry was highly developed. Government workshops produced thousands of warships, and new designs were created for naval warfare [28]. Private shipbuilding also thrived, with innovators like Zu Chongzhi developing the "thousand-mile ship," capable of traveling over one hundred miles a day. Papermaking, invented in the Han Dynasty, was also refined. Production increased to the point that the government mandated paper use over wooden slips [29]. Quality and aesthetics improved, with the creation of colored papers praised for their beauty in contemporary poetry [30].

Commerce flourished in the south, aided by its dense river network, which facilitated safe and efficient water transport, and its relative political stability compared to the war-torn north. Commercial activity became widespread, with one source describing Jiangnan during the Southern Dynasties as a place where many engaged in trade [31]. Commerce took two main forms. Bureaucratic commerce was common, with officials engaging in large-scale, long-distance trade for personal profit. Private commerce also grew, with small vendors and farmers taking their own agricultural and sideline products to local markets to support their families, even during times of hardship like famine [32].

In summary, the development of handicrafts and commerce during this era were intertwined.

Advancements in industries like shipbuilding directly enabled the expansion of trade, allowing goods such as silk to be transported widely, which in turn further stimulated commercial prosperity.

6. Conclusion

Land development and agricultural economy in the south during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties was not only reflected in the construction of water conservancy projects in some areas, the increase in yield per unit area and the growth of population, but more importantly in the expansion of rice planting area, the advancement of production technology and the area of farmland irrigation. In terms of handicraft industry, during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, many fields of handicraft industry in the south developed together, among which the textile industry, shipbuilding industry and paper-making industry developed significantly. In terms of commerce, commercial activities in the south increased during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and both bureaucratic and private commercial activities were very frequent. The remarkable progress in agriculture, handicraft industry and commerce in the south laid the foundation for the long-term prosperity of the southern economy.

During the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the economic development of the southern region was of great significance in Chinese history. While wars were frequent in the north, the relatively stable political, military and social environment in the south provided good conditions for the sustained development of the economy. Throughout the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, in terms of the development of social economy, there was a trend of the advanced production technology of the Central Plains economic zone being promoted and expanded to the south of the Yangtze River and remote areas, which narrowed the long-standing imbalance and disparity in economic development between the north and the south, and germinated the buds of the gradual shift of the national economic center of gravity to the southern region.

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