

Research on the Property Inheritance System in the Song Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

The Song Dynasty was a time of change in the running of feudal China, as the prosperity of the commodity economy led to an increase in the concept of individual private ownership, and the law therefore paid more attention to the protection of private property rights, as demonstrated by the developed system of property succession. Compared to the previous dynasties, the Song Dynasty's property inheritance system was more rigorous and flexible: it expanded the range of inheritance subjects, explicitly provided for testamentary and subrogation inheritance, focused on the management of the property of the household, and made women's property inheritance rights statutory, thus responding to the need to improve the social status of women. The many enrichments and improvements made the Song Dynasty an irreplaceable part of the history of property succession in ancient times. Despite its historical limitations, the Song Dynasty has provided a valuable reference for future generations and is an important inspiration for the construction of contemporary inheritance systems.

KEYWORDS

Song Dynasty; Property inheritance; Women's property inheritance rights

1 Introduction

The property inheritance system is gradually formed with the development of human society and is the inevitable result of the establishment of private ownership. Since the day when the hereditary system replaced the abdication system, private ownership was born in the slave society. Although there were many restrictions on the productive forces, private ownership had not been greatly developed, but this was an important symbol of the inheritance system on the stage of history. In the Shang Dynasty, the basic inheritance principles of "brother to brother" and "father to son" were established, which laid the foundation for the primogeniture inheritance system of the Western Zhou Dynasty. However, the majority of society, the exploited laborers, did not have access to any means of production through such a system of inheritance. It could be seen that the inheritance of property in this period relied on the inheritance of status. It was not until the Western Zhou Dynasty that the two began to gradually separate, although at this time the rulers still focused on the status inheritance system. In general, it is undeniable that an independent property inheritance system is slowly taking shape.

During the Tang Dynasty, when feudal society entered its heyday, the traditional system of property inheritance also flourished. The Tang Dynasty first made a clear distinction between the succession of ancestral halls and inheritance of property. The former was ostensibly for the inheritance of sacrificial rights, but in essence it was inseparable from the inheritance of officials and lords, which symbolized political power, so it had little significance to the common people. By

contrast, the latter was a major event related to every family. The legal provisions of the Tang Dynasty on the inheritance of family property were comprehensive, mainly embodied in the Household Order, especially on the principles of inheritance and the division of property. It is particularly noteworthy that the Tang Dynasty made preliminary provisions on the inheritance of women, that is, when the family is divided, the maiden can share half of the bride money of the unmarried brother as her dowry.

The Song Dynasty absorbed and drew on the inheritance provisions of the Tang Dynasty, and showed greater adaptability and flexibility in the formulation of laws. Taking into account of the realities of Song society, the legislator expanded the scope of inheritance subjects, and clearly stipulated testamentary and subrogation succession, focusing on the management of family property by the household. In addition, the Song Dynasty dealt with the issue of female inheritance in a more detailed manner, making up for the lack of property rights for women as the main members of the family, and reflecting the affirmation of women's role in society, which was also an important breakthrough in the Song Dynasty's property inheritance system.

2 Basic features of the property inheritance system in the Song Dynasty

2.1 Separation of ancestral halls from property inheritance

In ancient times, the inheritance system was divided into ancestral halls and property inheritance, with the former being the main means of family continuity in ancient China and a prerequisite for property inheritance. In the Song Dynasty, the legislator enriched and improved the decree on property inheritance, and the property inheritance system was further developed. Although it did not completely get rid of the influence of the ancestral halls inheritance, from the perspective of the relevant legal provisions and practical operation, the property inheritance system in the Song Dynasty had developed independent contents. For example, in the case of household extinction, the maiden, the married daughter and the returned daughter all enjoyed certain property inheritance rights, only that they enjoyed different shares according to their different statuses. This provision has already broken the long-standing restriction on property inheritance by the ancestral line, reflecting the separation of the two systems of inheritance during the Song period.

2.2 More informative and complete provisions on inheritance of property

Compared with the provisions of the Tang Dynasty, the Song Dynasty not only has more provisions and stricter norms, but its legislative technology is even more advanced in the history of the property inheritance system. Whether it is the principle provisions or specific system contents, can be said to be complete. Apart from the legal status of the heirs and inheritance share, the property inheritance system in the Song Dynasty also includes the distribution of assets rules, and even the handling of inheritance disputes and the statute of limitations have been stipulated. The Song Dynasty also refined the scope of heirs to household property and made it clear that under what circumstances did a widow enjoy the right to inherit property, which was a great advance in the history of China's civil law development.

2.3 Adequate attention to legislation on testamentary succession

Compared with the Tang Dynasty, the legal provisions on testamentary succession in the Song Dynasty were obviously more comprehensive, which not only specified the conditions and forms of

testamentary succession, but also added the rules for merchants to dispose of their property through wills, and the contents were more conducive to the full realization of the will of the decedent. As the ultimate manifestation of the right of the decedent to dispose of his private property during his lifetime, testamentary succession indicated that the decedent enjoyed the right to dispose of his property to a certain extent independent of the patriarchal system. The legislation on testamentary succession in the Song Dynasty was a powerful manifestation of the development of private ownership and the deepening of the concept of private ownership in society at that time, which was of great significance in breaking the integrity of family property and further promoting the development of the commodity economy.

2.4 Expanded property inheritance rights for women

Although the Tang Dynasty gave the maid the right to receive half of the bride wealth of the unmarried brother as a dowry, this was not the right to inherit property in the real sense, and this property would be brought into the husband's family with the marriage of the maiden, resulting in the outflow of the father's property, which violated the feudal patriarchal system that strictly protected the family property. However, in the Song Dynasty, the commodity economy developed, and women appeared in both household production and commercial business, and women's awareness of rights was awakened, and they gradually realized that they had to defend their economic and property rights. Against this background, it was not disputed that women could obtain inheritance rights, and the legislators also complied with the needs of the times by granting women the legal right to inherit property. In the case of a maiden, for example, although her share was only half of that of a male heir, the nature of the rights was the same, and in the case of household extinction, the inheritance rights enjoyed by the female were even greater. The various regulations made by the Song Dynasty and the social impact they produced were beyond the reach of the previous dynasties.

3 The main contents of the property inheritance system in the Song Dynasty

During the Song Dynasty, the property inheritance system was further optimized, and its contents were more rigorous and perfect than that of the previous Dynasty. In addition to continuing the inheritance form of equal sharing among the sons, the ruler adjusted and refined many of the provisions in accordance with the actual situation of society at that time. During this period, testamentary succession was legally recognized, subrogation inheritance developed in different ways, and the provisions on women's property inheritance rights were more detailed. The development of the property inheritance system in ancient China to the Song Dynasty can be said to have reached its peak, and it is of great practical significance to study the specific contents of it.

3.1 Statutory succession

The Song Dynasty inherited the principle of "equal distribution among the sons", which, according to the provisions of the Household Decree cited in the Song Penal System, was to be distributed equally to all, regardless of whether they were in the first line or in the second line, regardless of whether they were older or younger, and even to the "posthumous son". Men, as heirs of the family, were of course able to inherit the family property. As for women in the Song Dynasty, although they had no access to ancestral inheritance, they were entitled to half of their brothers' inherited property rights. Despite the "quantitative" difference, this right was a sign of women's gradual transition from their traditional subordinate status in the family to an independent status,

and was undoubtedly a step forward for society.

Ancient Chinese feudal society insisted on the family standard and strictly implemented the family property system. In order to maintain the dominance of the feudal patriarch, the law attached great importance to the division of property and prohibited the division of family property to achieve the fundamental purpose of consolidating the imperial power. In terms of the time for the equal division of children, the family property was usually distributed after the death of the parents, which was also the mainstream practice at that time. Some families voluntarily divided property when their parents were still alive, which was also recognized by law. However, it was forbidden for the children to force the division of the family's property. There are some issues that need to be noted: Firstly, part of the property should be set aside as the parents' pension to ensure their quality of life and welfare; Secondly, the surplus property should be distributed equally among the sons; In addition, family members should also have adequate communication and consultation, operate in accordance with relevant legal provisions and procedures, and jointly maintain family harmony and social stability.

3.2 Testamentary succession

The reform of the inheritance system in the Song Dynasty inherited the tradition of the previous generations on the one hand, and developed even further on the other hand. Testamentary succession officially became a legal form of property inheritance, and it had priority effect. The legalization of testamentary inheritance confirms that the deceased has the right to dispose of his property during his lifetime, which is the result of the development of social economy and private ownership to a certain extent in the Song Dynasty. Its appearance in China's economic history and legal history has great symbolic significance. In the system of testamentary succession, the scope of heirs is very broad. Whether they are legal heirs or others, of the same clan or of a different surname, and regardless of whether they are in a family or not, all can become testamentary heirs, which provides a more flexible and personalized option for property inheritance.

There are two forms of testamentary succession in the Song Dynasty, one is the testamentary will, that is, the text written and signed and sealed by the testator himself; The second is an oral will, which is a way that the testator will only use when he is illiterate or sick and cannot write, this kind of will cannot be kept, and it is easy to be forged, so its credibility is not as high as the suicide note. In order to ensure the legitimacy and validity of a will, the following conditions need to be met. Firstly, the will must be "notarized" by the local government, which is one of the prerequisites for the will to be legally effective.^[1]

Secondly, the will should protect the interests of the legal heirs and cannot violate the law. Thirdly, the testator must be of legal age and have the corresponding capacity. Finally, the decedent must be approved in his family before he can make a will. In addition, a widow's will can only be effective when there is no "successor".

3.3 Succession by subrogation

Subrogation refers to the fact that, in legal succession, if the heir dies before the decedent, the property that he or she should have inherited can be inherited by a descendant of a direct blood relative, and this type of inheritance includes the two types of inheritance: "the son inherits the father's share" and "the wife inherits the husband's share".

The emergence of the subrogation system has played an important role in the transmission and continuation of the family, in safeguarding women's rights and interests, and in avoiding the transfer of property to foreigners.

3.3.1 The son inherits the father's share

The Song Penal System states that when a brother dies, the son may inherit the father's share. If all the brothers die, then all the sons shall share equally. Among them, the scope of "son" is not limited to biological children, but also includes adopted children and stepchildren of the opposite sex, and surviving children can also inherit the family property according to the provisions of the son's inheritance of the father's share. The legislators' fundamental purpose in establishing this form of subrogation was to preserve the family's ancestral halls, protect the family's property and avoid the outflow of the family's assets due to inheritance problems, and so the law did not impose any restrictions on the form of inheritance known as "subrogation by the son".

3.3.2 the wife inherits the husband's share

Although a wife has the right to inherit her husband's property, the right is subject to multiple restrictions. Firstly, there must not be a son in the family, or else the property should be inherited in accordance with "the son's share of the father's share". Secondly, the wife must not remarry, as remarriage will directly lead to the loss of the right of subrogation. Lastly, after the death of the husband, the widowed wife needs to set up a separate heir for her husband, and all of the property that she has subrogated must eventually be transferred to the son that she has raised. It can be seen that the reason why the law provides for the "wife's inheritance from her husband" is merely a disguised way of encouraging widows to remain faithful to their husbands, which is a result of the supremacy of men and the low status of women in feudal society.

3.4 The property inheritance of household extinction

The Song Penal System added a new division of "assets of the household extinction" to the Household Marriage Law, which made special provisions for the property inheritance of families without male heirs, reflecting the Song Dynasty's concern for the property management of the household extinction, and at the same time, according to the time of the formation of the adoptive relationship, the property inheritance law differentiated between adopted sons of household extinction families and provided for the system of establishment of succession and succession of destiny. The property inheritance law distinguishes the adopted children of the family according to the time of the formation of the adoption relationship, and provides for the system of succession of an established stepchild and an ordained stepchild.

3.4.1 Inheritance of property of an established stepchild

In the case of the death of a husband and the survival of a wife and the absence of an heir in the family, in order to ensure the continuity of the family's lineage, the property of the household extinction is protected and maintained by adopting a child. However, there was a restriction on the eligibility for the creation of an established stepchild, i.e., the heir must be a junior member of the decedent's family in order to meet the needs of the traditional society. This practice confirms the fact that the "establishment of a stepchild" is in fact a form of ancestral succession, and once the status is established, the stepchild enjoys the same legal status as a natural child, including the right to inherit property.

3.4.2 Inheritance of property of an ordained stepchild

In the event of the death of both husband and wife, the husband's next-of-kin, the ascendant, appoints an heir for the family, which is known as the "order of succession". Similarly, a stepchild

must be a junior member of the decedent's family. The difference, however, is that the legal status of an ordained stepchild cannot be equated with that of an established stepchild or a natural child, because the subject of the ordained stepchild's appointment is only a close relative of the family, not a member of the family, i.e. this type of parent-child relationship is not based on the will of the family members concerned.^[2]

Although the rights of a stepchild are legally guaranteed, there are many restrictions on the inheritance of property by a stepchild, and there are cases in which a stepchild is unable to inherit the property of the family to which he or she has been succeeded.

3.5 Special provisions of the female property inheritance system

The inheritance system of ancient China was based on patriarchy and blood relations, emphasizing the status and rights of men, and this system has long subjected women to great restrictions in terms of family inheritance, property succession and marriage. By the Song Dynasty, women in the civic class, which had grown in the commodity economy and urban development, were increasingly involved in all areas of society, and played an undeniable role in the trade exchanges and development of towns and cities during the two Song dynasties.^[3] Compared with the Tang period, the social status of women in the Song Dynasty was significantly improved and the range of rights they enjoyed was further expanded. Against this background, the rulers made more detailed regulations on the inheritance system of women's property, and the content was more innovative and flexible.

3.5.1 Inheritance rights of the maiden

In the Song Dynasty, women's property inheritance rights expanded, especially in the case of the maiden. It was mainly manifested in the improvement of her property inheritance status. In the Tang Dynasty, the maiden was only entitled to half of her unmarried brother's dowry.^[4] But in the Southern Song Dynasty, the amount of property the maiden was entitled to was increased to half of that of her brother. At the same time, due to the influence of traditional social attitudes, women in the inheritance of property is subject to a lot of restrictions, since they have to be married to the family of a different name, the inheritance rights that married women enjoy are often weaker than the maiden.

Since the maiden has not got married, and have been living in her father's family, she is still regarded as a member of this family. If both parents died and there is no male heir in the family, the maiden can inherit the property and her inheritance share is usually more than the other people. In the case of household extinction, even if there is a stepson involved in the inheritance of the family property, the maiden has the same inheritance rights as the stepson, and her share of the inheritance is higher than that of a returned daughter.

3.5.2 Inheritance rights of married women

When a woman gets married, her husband's family becomes the center of her entire life and her relationship with her father's family changes. Although a married woman can inherit part of her parents' estate, the law is very strict on this point and requires that the following three conditions must be met: no male heirs, no will, and no maiden in her father's family. In addition, the law excludes a married woman from the right to inherit her father's property: she must fulfil her filial duties and must not conspire with her husband's family to acquire her father's property, or else she forfeits this right of inheritance.

3.5.3 Inheritance rights of returned daughters

A woman who has been married but returns to her father's family because of divorce or death of her husband is a returnee, in which case she belongs to her own family, and therefore she has the right to inherit a part of the property in the case of household extinction.^[5] At the beginning of the Northern Song Dynasty, the returned daughter could still share the property of the household, and then her inheritance rights gradually declined. And in the Southern Song Dynasty, the returned daughter's share of the property inheritance of the household was cut down to only half of that of the maiden. The reason for this is related to the fact that there were more ways for returned daughters to acquire property.

4 The Role of the Song Property Inheritance System in the Development of Song Society

The achievements of the Song Dynasty in the area of property inheritance were unprecedented in the history of China's feudal society, both in terms of law and practice. However, while promoting social progress, the Song property inheritance system also had its historical limitations because of the specific context of the feudal era.

4.1 Positive effects

4.1.1 Effective resolution of inheritance issues

The inheritance laws and regulations prior to the Song Dynasty were too general and abstract and were often ambiguous and difficult to understand when implemented, leading to inconsistent usage. By contrast, the Song Dynasty made its regulations concrete and written. The legislators regulated the shares of inheritance, the rules for the distribution of assets, the conditions and forms of testamentary succession, etc., and even the statute of limitations. In terms of contents, the property inheritance system of the Song Dynasty had numerous provisions and a complete system. In terms of forms, in addition to officially promulgated decrees, the system encompassed many different forms of regulations. In addition, the legislator granted certain inheritance rights to the stepchild and son-in-law who had supported the decedent, and expanded women's property inheritance rights to meet the demands of the times for the advancement of women's social status.

4.1.2 Promotion of private rights protection and commodity economy development

In traditional feudal society, people's ideological tendency was to emphasize obligations rather than rights. However, in the Song Dynasty, because of the influence of the developed commodity economy, the concept of private rights deepened, the concept of righteousness and profit shifted, and the trend of emphasizing profit over righteousness began to emerge. The rulers gradually realized the importance of safeguarding the rights and interests of individual private property and increased the number of laws on ownership, one of the results of which was a well-developed system of property inheritance.

According to the law at that time, the legitimate property of the descendants was protected, and the elders were not allowed to infringe on their property rights arbitrarily, which was obviously against the requirements of feudal ethics and morality, and it could be seen that there was a tendency to break through the ethical regulations in the legislation of the Song Dynasty. The Song Dynasty enriched and perfected the property inheritance, not only strengthened the protection of private rights, but also laid a solid foundation for the prosperity of the commodity economy at that

time. It can be seen that the property inheritance system in the Song Dynasty can be further developed thanks to the promotion of the commodity economy, and the legal system in line with the requirements of the times can also create a favorable economic environment, and play a dynamic role in the development of society.

4.2 Historical limitations

4.2.1 Lack of guidance from the theory of legal system of commodity economy

During the Song Dynasty, the guiding ideological status of Confucianism did not change, and the formulation of laws needed to follow Confucianism, so on the whole, the property inheritance system of the Song Dynasty was still based on the maintenance of the traditional feudal family culture as the first priority. Although domestic and foreign trade were developed in the Song Dynasty, and there were a lot of economic exchanges with foreign merchants, it did not provide qualitatively different conditions for the development of feudal society, and the contents reflected and guaranteed by the inheritance law were still the political and economic relations of feudal nature, which served the feudal society. At the same time, due to the lack of theoretical guidance, the state of legislation has become increasingly complex, with numerous legal provisions stacked on top of each other, which does not effectively guide the development of judicial practice.

4.2.2 Increased competition between the government and the people for profits

According to the property inheritance regulations of the Song Dynasty, if one wanted to inherit property through a will, one had to fulfil the obligation to pay taxes on the deed first. During the Southern Song Dynasty, the government set up specialized institutions to manage the relevant affairs and formulated corresponding regulations. Compared with the Northern Song, the Southern Song government's financial revenue was even more stretched. In order to expand its revenue, one of the measures was to expand the state's rights over the property of the deceased. For the property of the household extinction, not only did the government increase the number of items and the amount of its officials, but it also cancelled the inheritance rights of collateral relatives, and the inheritance tax was levied.

4.2.3 Upholding the traditional male-centered patriarchal system

Although the Song legislators made historical progress by granting women the right to inherit property on certain occasions, the principle of the legislation as a whole remained male-centered. For example, the law still encouraged widows to remain faithful to their wishes and not to remarry in order to enjoy certain inheritance rights, which was also a reflection of the principle of "kinship" in property inheritance law. Despite the development of a thriving commodity economy, the Song Dynasty's philosophy of rationalism and Confucianism still insisted on the notion of idea of "man is noble and woman is humble", and the traditional notion of kinship continued to influence the specific provisions of the law of inheritance.

5 Implications of the Song Dynasty property inheritance system for contemporary times

The inheritance system of the Song Dynasty eased the social conflicts at that time, promoted the development of politics and economy, and played an important role in inspiring the construction of the relevant systems for the future generations and even for the contemporary times. Its content

and spirit have not only been continued in the Civil Code, but also guided the direction of solving certain existing social problems, and continuously promoted the development and progress of the society.

5.1 Focus on the consistency of rights and obligations

During the Song Dynasty, due to the deepening of the concept of private rights and the intensification of selfishness in society, people's property relations with each other became more and more complicated, and the seizure of property between family members could also occur, especially in the case of household extinction. For this reason, the rulers made provisions for the consistency of rights and obligations, making it clear that the acquisition of inheritance rights must be based on the assumption of legal obligations. Both natural and adopted children could inherit if they fulfilled their obligations. In the event of failure to fulfil the obligations of birth, upbringing, death and burial, the parental authority may, at its discretion, deprive the heir of the right of inheritance or even impose certain legal sanctions.^[6]

The property inheritance system of the Song Dynasty emphasized the consistency of rights and obligations in terms of both maintenance and inheritance, a spirit that is also carried out in the inheritance section of the Civil Code. The Civil Code combines the fulfilment of the heir's obligations to the decedent with the heir's right to inherit and how to exercise that right, in order to ensure the consistency of the heir's enjoyment of rights and the assumption of obligations, which is manifested in the following ways. Firstly, widowed daughters-in-law or sons-in-law who have fulfilled their primary obligation of alimony may inherit from their in-laws as first-order heirs. Secondly, the existence of a basis for living together, the existence of a relationship of actual support, and other factors are taken into account to determine the consistency of rights and obligations. Secondly, the existence of a common basis for living together and the existence of an actual relationship of support are taken into account in determining whether stepparents and stepchildren can enjoy the right of inheritance from each other; thirdly, in the division of the inheritance, those who lived with the decedent or who fulfilled the main obligation can receive a larger share of the inheritance, while those who have the ability and conditions to support the decedent but who have not fulfilled the obligation to do so should not receive a share of the inheritance or should receive a smaller share of the inheritance.

5.2 Enhancement of women's social status

During the Song Dynasty, women began to participate actively in family production and business activities, and their social status was raised, as evidenced by the inheritance of family property. The rulers weakened the influence of ancestral halls, gave women the legal right to inherit property, and developed a property inheritance system that was adapted to the actual situation of the society, which also served as a reference for the design of the relevant system in later generations.

After the founding of New China, in the context of the new era, social productive forces have developed to a high degree, and equality between men and women has been explicitly stipulated as a constitutional principle, so that women's role has become even more unchecked. In terms of safeguarding women's rights and interests, the State has introduced a number of laws and policies, which have provided strong institutional support for women's participation in social construction. However, due to the deep-rooted feudal mentality, many rural areas are still, to some extent, subject to the family-oriented concept. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on ideological emancipation, and only when women's awareness of their rights is awakened and their cognitive abilities improved

can supporting protective measures be effectively promoted. China's Constitution specifies the content of the current education system, and through a sound education system, the awareness of equal rights for men and women is instilled in all aspects of social life, so that more and more women will come to realize that the right to equality is the most basic right of all human beings, and will continue to push forward the improvement of women's social status.

5.3 Harnessing the dynamic role of the legal system for social development

The Song legislators adjusted and perfected the property inheritance system on the basis of the previous Dynasty, in order to adapt to the level of economic development of the society at that time, and designed and studied special problems, demonstrating their great concern for and meticulous grasp of the overall social situation. The legislator's sound civil norms not only promoted the protection of private rights, but also eased the turbulent social situation and gained a relatively stable space for development, and at the same time made an indelible contribution to promoting the further development of the commodity economy. Therefore, we must attach importance to giving full play to the dynamic role of the legal system in the development of society, so that social development can be driven by a practical legal system.

The inheritance system is closely linked to the level of development, material base and economic conditions of society. In the more than 30 years between the promulgation of the original Inheritance Law and the implementation of the Civil Code, the traditional family model in China has changed, and new conflicts in the field of inheritance need to be resolved by a new system. Taking the loss of inheritance rights and the system of forgiveness as an example, the Inheritance Part of the Civil Code has added the cause of loss of inheritance rights, the right of forgiveness of the decedent's right to choose, and the loss of the right of the legatee to receive a bequest.^[7] Compared with the old law, the current provisions not only safeguard the freedom of will of the decedent, reflecting tolerance and care for the deficient heirs, but also help to maintain the order of inheritance and promote social harmony, which is in line with the actual needs of family inheritance and social development in China.

6 Conclusion

The legal system of property inheritance in the Song Dynasty made a breakthrough on the basis of following the previous Dynasty, which not only played the role of consolidating the rule and stabilizing the society, but also conformed to the requirements of the times, and had an irreplaceable position in the history of property inheritance in ancient China. It is the carrier of the social and economic relations of the Song Dynasty, the epitome of the social and political relations, and the result of the interaction of economy, politics and culture in that period, with unique characteristics of the times and rich academic research value.

In the context of building a harmonious society, we should also start from the perspective of legal history, explore local resources, and absorb and learn from the valuable concepts and systems therein. More importantly, we should learn from history, safeguard the realization of the right of inheritance in an all-round and multi-angle manner, and promote the construction of the socialist rule of law in China.

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