

# Journal of Chinese Humanities

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## Editor's Note

After more than a year in preparation, the first edition of *Journal of Chinese Humanities* has finally arrived.

Our intention behind creating this new journal is to allow the entire academic world to better understand and observe China, to allow all scholars to follow the academic trends happening within China, to provide scholars with a way to stay abreast of the current thought and research coming out of China. If we are successful in providing such service to the reader, we have become what we sought out to be: an intellectual bridge between China and her outside observers, in other words, a bridge between those who study China and the China that they study.

It is important to understand China. China is not only ascending to the world stage, but also solidifying her central position on that stage. And as has been the case every time a new power emerges, the world order changes with it. There is no reason to believe that China's ascension will be any different.

China has had an increasing presence and influence on world affairs over the last few decades, but this has not changed the fact that, in the eyes of too many, China and all that her long culture entails remain a mystery. It is ironic that a nation so large can remain behind a cloud mystery for so long, yet China never ceases to confound and astound the outside world in what it has achieved and how it has endured. The continued development that so many experts claim to be impossible has proven to be a reality. China's unique path—political, economic, social—continues to defy Western theories that use their own cultural histories to predict how, when, and why China will meet its next crisis. All this demonstrates to us that there is still so much to China that needs to be explained and clarified to the Western world.

Paramount among what needs to be shown to the Western world are the intellectual trends taking place right now inside China. For much of the history between the East and West, there has been a disparity of mutual understanding. That is to say, China's knowledge of the West has far exceeded the West's knowledge of China. And if we take this one step further, we can attribute this lack of understanding to insufficient channels for understanding. In the face of China's recent and undeniable influence on world affairs, the need for channels of understanding is greater than ever. The creation of *Journal of Chinese Humanities* is our attempt to provide such a needed channel.

With this in mind, the uniqueness of this *Journal of Chinese Humanities* lies in the fact that the majority of research articles and book reviews that we introduce to Western sinologists are from Chinese scholars working in China. Instead of focusing on what Westerners have to say about China, we show the English-speaking world what China says about China. In the face of so much (Western-language) literature available to us about this complex country, research coming out of China itself seems conspicuously underrepresented. This problem needs to be remedied if the East and West are to have a proper dialogue in the hope of real mutual understanding.

But our *Journal of Chinese Humanities* was not born simply from good intentions. Behind its inception is the long-standing Chinese-language humanities journal *Wen Shi Zhe* (文史哲) published at Shandong University, also known by its English name, *Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*. *Wen Shi Zhe* has been one of the pillars of academic discussion in China since its first issue in 1951. Its broad range of humanities topics and dedication to creative research value have kept it at the vanguard of intellectual trends for more than half a century. Drawing upon the resources and high standards of *Wen Shi Zhe*, Shandong University has decided to carry forward this tradition to the outside world, and has thus created an English-language journal on Chinese humanities.

In this effort to make China's voice heard in international dialogues, we select and translate for the Western reader articles from top Chinese scholars in their fields. Each issue has a specific theme pertaining to literature, history, or philosophy, and the majority of articles concentrate on topics related to this theme. Each issue will also include a limited number of contributions from Western authors, in order to ensure multiple view points and inspiring dialogues.

The theme for this inaugural issue is "Forms and Formation of Chinese Society." This has been an important topic of philosophical and historical debate in China for the last one hundred years, as it has much to say not just about our past but also our future. The articles in this first issue focus primarily on the formation of ancient Chinese society and its evolution over the two thousand year span between the Qin and Qing Dynasties. With articles such as "The Society of Patriarchal Clan System," "The Era of Prefectures and Counties," "The Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Course of History since Middle Antiquity," and "New Thoughts on the Social Forms in Ancient China," these Chinese authors attempt to find theoretical frameworks that can accurately explain China's unique course of history. This issue also includes

articles that study the more recent history of Chinese society, how it changes, and how these changes are perceived and manifested. “From *kang* to *kongtiao*: China's Twentieth Century Cooling” and “The Refracted Moment: Photographing Chinese History in the Making” both attempt to capture the nature of Chinese society's recent changes from a very particular vantage point.

We hope that our readers will enjoy *Journal of Chinese Humanities*, whether the reader is a professional sinologist or simply an interested China observer. Despite having set lofty goals for ourselves and this journal, it is our humble hope that Western readers will be able to benefit from the academic literature offered here, and in turn contribute to this journal and contribute to the important ongoing discussion between the East and West.

*Wang Xuedian*  
*Journal of Chinese Humanities*  
Editor-in-Chief

# The King's Power Dominating Society— A Re-examination of Ancient Chinese Society

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## Abstract

In terms of social formation, the most important characteristic of traditional Chinese society was how the king's power dominated the society. Ever since the emergence of written records, we see that ancient China has had a most prominent interest group, that of the nobility and high officials, centered around the king (and later the emperor). Of all the kinds of power exerted on Chinese society, the king's was the ultimate power. In the formation process of kingly power, a corresponding social structure was also formed. Not only did this central group include the king or emperor, the nobles, and the bureaucratic landlords, but the "feudal landlord ecosystem" which was formed within that group also shaped the whole society in a fundamental way. As a special form of economic redistribution, corruption among officials provided the soil for the growth of bureaucratic landlords. At the foundation of this entire bureaucratic web was always the king and his authority. In short, ancient Chinese society is a power-dependent structure centered on the king's power. The major social conflict was therefore the conflict between the dictatorial king's power and the rest of society.

## Keywords

king's power – landlord – social classes – despotism – social form

A long-held and popular theory claims that the economic base determines the social superstructure. In this scenario, power relations belong to the super-

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structure and political forms are a result of the concentration of economic resources and processes. Unlike that theory, the idea of “the king’s power dominating the society” centers on how dictatorial power operated as a system and controlled ancient Chinese societies. A narrative of history based on this idea will be different from a narrative formed on the theory of base and superstructure, sometimes with a total reversal of cause and effect in describing some specific historical processes.

Such a shift in theory and the resulting narratives do not simply come from my own arbitrary decisions, but is a result of many years’ accumulation of academic research. It first started with Mr. Wang Yanan’s outstanding idea. In his book, *A Study of Chinese Bureaucratic Politics*, he made an insightful argument about political power determining the economy. He wrote, “The absolutely dominant power of the emperors and kings in Chinese dictatorial bureaucratic politics was established on the basis of absolute control of land, which was the basic productive means for the whole society, and furthermore on the exploitation of the surplus of agriculture labor and the possession of the products of the labor. The dominant power showed its economic power through the control and possession; it showed its political power through taking the control and realizing the possession.”<sup>1</sup> However, Mr. Wang’s argument took the perspective of economics and its starting point was the landlord system (which is different from the estate ownership system).

For that reason, although Wang started the argument for “the dictatorial power dominating the society,” it is still within the framework of “the king’s power dominating the society” for the following reasons. First, the idea of “the king’s power dominating the society” looks at history from the perspective of political power instead of economics (the landlord system). An absolute kingship or monarchy is not a concentration of economic relations led by the landlord system. On the contrary, the society was dominated and controlled by the power from above. Second, this idea does not typically invoke the concept of “bureaucratic politics,” for the dictatorial ruler was the only true central agent of politics. Though a ruler needs and depends on a group of bureaucrats to realize his rule, bureaucrats are not active agents of politics for they are only servants of the ruler. Therefore, there was no room for independent “bureaucratic politics” or “scholars’ politics” or “yeomen politics.” Although a ruler could take forms other than a king or an emperor—for instance the emperor’s mother or powerful ministers or eunuchs—the system was the same.

1 Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo Guanliao Zhengzhi Yanjiu*, China Social Sciences Press, 1981, p. 166, p. 122.

In the concept of “the king’s power dominating the society,” “the king’s power” here is despotism in essence. The reason I use the term “the king’s power” is because the concept of “imperial power” was not introduced in China until the Qin Dynasty, while the concept of “the king’s power” had been used throughout the history. Furthermore, “the king’s power,” monarchy, imperial power, and feudal despotism all have similar meanings. Of course, the king’s power in different historical periods had different features.

Here, I am introducing a concept of “kingly-powerism,” which refers to both a social system and an ideology. It is neither a social form nor a power network, but a social system of control and operation. It can be divided into three levels: first, the power system centered around the king’s power; second, the social structure built upon this power system; third, the ideology that accompanies these two levels. Its specific content can be summed into the following eight aspects. First, ever since the emergence of written records, ancient China has had a most prominent interest group, a group that centered around the king and the nobles and later developed into a group that included the king, the nobles, and the bureaucrats. Although its members kept changing, the structure of the group was very stable. It was this interest group that controlled the society. Second, the king’s power was a special entity that was based on social economy but also went beyond social economy. It was a result of competition through military power or violence, which is a non-economic means to get hold of economic production. The statements, “The one who wins the war becomes the king,” and “(one) wins the world on a fighting horse,” both described such a process. This kind of political power can also be seen as military or violent power. Third, in a society ruled by king’s power which was based on violence, it is not that the economic factors determine the division of power, but that division of power determines social and economic distributions. Fourth, among all of the social structures (power structure, economic structure, hierarchy structure, kinship structure, etc.), the king’s power structure was the most dominant. Fifth, of all the kinds of social powers (political power, clan power, paternal power, husband power, religious power, trade association power, economic subject power, etc.), the king’s power was the ultimate power. Sixth, in daily social life the king’s power works as a social hinge, especially in the aspects of personal control, taxation, levies, military service, and some economic monopolies. Seventh, all social and political chaos ended with a return to the king’s power system. Eighth, the idolization of the king’s power was the core of the ideology and culture, and “the kingly way” was the representation of social rationality, morality, justice, and fairness.

## I A Dictatorial Empire: The Result of Politics Determining Economic Activities

Despite the quaint claim that a ruler “wins the world by having the right way,” there is a consensus that dictatorial empires were built upon violence or the fulfillment of a movement that had military power as backup. However, the academic field has different opinions about the reasons an empire comes into existence, and most scholars take mainstream historical materialism as the theoretical lens. For example, to answer why the Qin Dynasty unified China, scholars have sought answers from politics, economics, culture, nationality, and history, yet have never reached agreement about the main cause of the unification. Of all views, the most popular explanation was that Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor, followed the people's will. He satisfied the people's wishes and unified China to solidify feudal relations of production and to advance the development of productive forces. This explanation helped to construct an idealized image of Qin Shi Huang.

Such explanations can be inspiring. However, they are all deductions based on a certain theory and they lack analyses of specific historical processes and supporting historical facts. As a matter of fact, as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, the three ideas of “making the king respected, expanding the land, and strengthening the military”<sup>2</sup> had been closely integrated with each other. All of the fast-moving wars during the Warring States Period were launched to compete for land and population. The strong states would not stop until they had annexed the weak. Some kings, thinkers, and lobbyists at that time kept talking about unification, or in their words, “a hegemon,” “the course of the hegemon,” “the emperor” “make the world one,” “stabilize the world by making it one,” “the son of heaven,” “annex the world,” “eliminate all the other states,” “annex other kings,” “swallow the whole country,” “become an emperor and rule,” “control other vassals all across the country,” “there are only four sides of the earth, and within that all people should belong to a same country,” “the whole world should be one,” etc. All these different sayings reflect the same theme: all the local rulers should fight to be the ruler of the whole country.

Qin Shi Huang was one of these ambitious local rulers. What made him different was that he was moving faster than anybody else on the same track. Dun Ruo said: “If the King of Qin becomes the emperor, the rest of the world will have to pay tribute.”<sup>3</sup> Other lobbyists at that time all understood that Qin

<sup>2</sup> *Zhanguoce. Zhaoce er.*

<sup>3</sup> *Zhanguoce. Qince si.*



“won’t stop until all soldiers of other states are dead and all people become Qin’s subjects.”<sup>4</sup> After the unification, Qin Shi Huang himself made it clear that “within the frontiers, all land belongs to the emperor, and all people are the emperor’s subjects.”<sup>5</sup> His words are absolutely in accordance with other people’s analysis of him. Therefore, the unification by Qin and the establishment of a dictatorial nation was a result of power determining economic activities.

If we broaden our historical perspective, it is not difficult to notice that not only the Qin Empire, but every dictatorial empire in ancient Chinese history was the result of politics determining economic activities. It is more accurate to say that the dictatorial power system was a result of power determining economics, especially distribution, than to say that it was a result of some kind of land ownership system (state ownership or private ownership). The amount of resources distributed was related to the amount of power possessed, and that is why people were desperate to pursue power. The feudal unification and the centralized dictatorial power were formed in the fight for power. Of course, it was not a personal or duel-like fight, but a group activity that was centered on the ruler and based on the military and bureaucracy. A dictatorial power system formed by military might has two most obvious characteristics: it transcends economics, and it is a military bureaucratic entity that centers on the king. By transcending economics it ignores economic laws and sometimes even goes directly in the opposite direction; by being a military bureaucratic entity it has endless desire and exercises brutal exploitation of social wealth. Centralization of power was the means to the end of usurping economic interests. Therefore, economic relationships would certainly be transformed during the process of power centralization. Or in other words, political power was not necessarily a centralized representation of economic forces, but rather the dictatorial empire was a result of politics determining economics. The high centralization of political power has no direct relation with economic forms, such as forms of land ownership. Political power had its own independent existence that directly controlled the means and products of production. In many historical circumstances, centralized politics did not come after the means of production became owned by the state. On the contrary, highly centralized politics would directly appropriate means of production and take ownership of them for the state, or for private ownership by the nobles.

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4 *Zhanguoce. Weice san.*

5 *Shiji. Qinshihuang benji.*

## II The King's Power, Social Stratification, and the Shaping of the Whole Society by "The Feudal Landlord Ecosystem"

Is social stratification a natural result of economic activities, or is it created by power dynamics? Generally speaking, social stratification in Chinese history was a result of both factors, but the dominant class was formed by power distribution and thus was a derivative of power. Not only was the group including the emperor, the nobles, and the bureaucratic landlords created by political power, but the "feudal landlord ecosystem" which was formed within that group also shaped the whole society in a fundamental way.

### A *On the Formation of the First Generation of Landlords*

Ancient China became a feudal society (for the time being we will still use this concept) no later than the Warring States Period. How did the landlords in the Warring States Period come into existence? Academia has been applying the theory that productive forces determine the relations of production and the theory of base and superstructure, and has ascribed the emergence of the new landlord class to private land reclamation, which was caused by reforms in productive means. However, the first generation of landlords in China in fact did not emerge as a result of the natural expansion of small-scale peasant economy and annexation of land, which has been the dominant opinion in the academic circle. Instead, those landlords arose through the transformation of the group of "vassals, gentlemen ministers, bureaucrats, big households with nobility, yeomen, etc.," and this groups' identity was predominantly political. Therefore, the conclusion that political power determines economics is derived by studying history.

Specifically speaking, the ways that political power determines economics can be divided into four aspects: the dominant role of politics in land transfers; hierarchical control of society; politics determining production distribution; and the status of each class of feudal landlords.

#### i The Dominant Role of Politics in Land Transfers

During the Spring and Autumn Period it became a fashion to acquire land. A special phenomenon during the process of land acquisition at that time is worth noticing, which is that it was through political rather than economic methods that land changed hands. In other words, the land transfers were not carried out through equal exchange or by selling and buying, but were derivatives of political and military activities. And thus arose a strange phenomenon: land transfers without a land market.

At that time, land transfers were mostly conducted between vassals and gentlemen ministers. The following are the ways they exchanged land among each other.

The first way was by enfeoffment, which means the superior grants the land to his inferior. There were many different kinds of enfeoffment at that time, including “to grant,” “to reward,” “to authorize,” “to order,” “to give,” “to return,” “to support,” etc.

The second was by fighting. There is no principle here; it only depends on power. The fighting could be between a king and his minister, or between vassals and gentleman ministers. In the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Guoyu*, fighting over land was also called “invasion,” “entering,” “acquiring,” and “dividing,” and the land acquired after invasion was called “*jiang*,” meaning territory.

The third was redistribution of land by moving the local people. For example, “Qiji, the prince of Chu, moved the state of Xu to the territory of Yi, which actually was Chengfu. He then added the land of Zhoulai and Huaibei to Xu; Wu Ju granted land to Xunan. Randan moved people of Chengfu to the territory of Chen, and gave Chen the land of Pu and West Xi as compensation. He also moved people living outside of Fangcheng to Xu.”<sup>6</sup>

The fourth was by demanding. Demanding is different from invading, for it relies on politics instead of violence. “Zhibo asked Han Xuan for land. . . and was given a land of ten thousand households,” he then “asked for land from Zhao.”<sup>7</sup>

The fifth was using land as means for political purposes. To break the alliance between Zheng and Jin, Chu “sent an envoy to meet with prince Cheng to establish alliance with Zheng, promising him the land in Ruyin.”<sup>8</sup>

The sixth was that some people volunteered to give back some of their enfeoffed land for a number reasons. Such actions were called “to give as a gift,” or “to deliver.” For example, Qi Yin “delivered” some of his land to other nobles in return for asylum. Chen Huanzi defeated the Luan and Guo, and could have taken their land, but he took Yan Ying’s advice and decided to “give to other nobles as a gift.”<sup>9</sup>

The seventh was the exchange of land for political needs. “Count Zheng asked to offer sacrifice to Duke Zhou instead of Mount Tai, and to exchange the area of Beng near Mount Tai for the area of Xu in the state of Lu.”<sup>10</sup> This kind of

6 *Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong jiunian.*

7 *Hanfeizi. Shuolinshang.*

8 *Zuo Zhuan. Chenggong shiliunian.*

9 *Zuo Zhuan. Xianggong ershijiunian; Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong shinian.*

10 *Zuo Zhuan. Yingong shiyinian; Zuo Zhuan. Yingong banian.*

exchange was also considered as borrowing. According to *Zuo Zhuan* chapter *Huangong Yuan Nian*: "Count Zheng used a piece of jade for the deal of land of Xu. This was because he wanted to achieve the purpose of offering sacrifice to Duke Zhou and exchange Beng with Xu." Although it looked like an exchange on the surface, the political purpose was the real cause.

The eighth was the nobles or the administrators reallocated the land with administrative orders. For example, the state of Jin "changed the old land allocation." Zheng Zisi "reformed and made each field bordered with a trench." Zichan continued Zisi's reform. The state of Chu also "wrote down the land and fields, and measured the forests."<sup>11</sup> All these were reorganizations and reallocations of land through administrative orders.

The ninth was through selling and buying. "The minorities live on the prairie, and they treasure goods over the land, therefore they sell the land."<sup>12</sup>

Except for the ninth way, almost all means of land transfer were realized through political and military means instead of economic means. The reason is that land ownership was affiliated with politics, and the centralization of political power led to land ownership.

By the time of the Warring States Period, with the power centralized around the ruler, the ruler also controlled the allocation of land ownership. By granting land as fiefs to the nobles and officials, the ruler thus created a group of elites and landlords. At the same time, he also granted a lot of land to the peasants and made them registered affiliates of the state controlled by the state. These peasants were also called the state's agricultural slaves.

## ii The Control Over Society by the Hierarchical System

A hierarchical system undoubtedly is established upon certain economic bases, but the direct cause of hierarchy is political. The extent of influence of a hierarchical system signifies the level of control over personal freedom by political power. When a hierarchical system not only determines people's social status but also their economic status, it means people have very limited freedom beyond the political scope. The more the people are subordinate to political power, the less likely it is for them to become economic agents.

The Spring and Autumn Period was an era of wars, and the hierarchical system that centered around the King of Zhou was under attack. For some people, this led to more freedom, but the hierarchical system itself did not go into decline. All the people at that time were still living within the hierarchy.

11 *Zuo Zhuan. Xigong shiwunian; xianggong shinian; xianggong sanshinian; xianggong ershiwunian.*

12 *Zuo Zhuan. Xianggong sinian.*

Therefore, except for the ultimate ruler, everybody else was a political subordinate, inadequate to constitute an economic agent. In such circumstances, it was impossible for economic activities such as buying and selling land to be independent from political intervention. A lot of famous ministers at that time, who had huge wealth and many followers, not only lost all their wealth but sometimes would be reduced to slavery when they lost political battles. For example, famous nobles Li, Shao, Qing, Yuan, Gu, Ji, Qing, and Bo in the State of Jin were all “reduced to slaves.”<sup>13</sup> It was a common phenomenon during the Spring and Autumn Period that political status determined one’s economic status.

During the Warring States Period, an important development in the hierarchical system was the implementation of the entitlement system among the military, the officials, and also the commoners. The *Yantielun* chapter *Xiangyu* cites *Zuo Zhuan* and explains: “That commoners can be entitled also was not started by Kaiping, but dated back to the Warring States Period.” During the Warring States period, distribution of wealth was closely tied to the entitlement system. A higher title gave one access to more assets, land, and servants. The entitlement system not only determined people’s social status but also controlled people’s economic life. Therefore, many people deemed it among the ruler’s most important powers and duties to confer titles. It was considered one of the “three treasures” and “six powers”<sup>14</sup> for the king to rule the country.

If we focus on the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, we can see that the feudal landlords were composed of such people as the vassals, gentlemen ministers, bureaucrats, noble households, yeomen, etc. Most of them did not become prosperous through economic means, but through violent fighting and political power. Although they did not create a feudal economy based on the feudal economic relations, they had great influence over the fate and existing form of feudal landlords. Therefore, the emergence and survival of feudal landlords went beyond the sphere of economics.

### iii Politics Determining Distribution

The distribution of social production is a very complicated matter. Seen from the situation in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, distribution was mainly carried out through three forms: state taxation, labor

13 *Zuo Zhuan. Zhaogong sannian.*

14 The “three treasures” were “orders, money, and rewards” (*Guanzi. Zhongling*). The “six powers” were “power to make live, to kill, to make rich, to make poor, to make superior, to make inferior” (*Guanzi. Renfa*). The most important power was the power to grant or deprive salary and rewards.



levies, and state spending. State spending, the budget for the king's living expenses, and salaries and rewards for officials were all determined by politics. Salaries for officials included their income for working, while rewards for officials were counted as additional gifts. Although listed as separate items, they were often mixed. Some rewards were counted as salary. For example, the King of Wei rewarded Gong Shuzuo "a hundred acres of fields, and counted it as salary."<sup>15</sup>

If taxation is the primary redistribution, then state spending, the king's expenses, and officials' salaries can be seen as the main content of secondary distribution. During the Warring States Period, there were three main types of salaries and rewards for officials: the first was fiefs, which were very popular; the second was grain; and the third was currency. Besides these, clothing and treasures and jewels were also granted as rewards. Many officials with their salaries and rewards became landlords in the Warring States Period.

In summary, during that time, economic principles were not the first things considered in distribution and re-distribution of social wealth. There were still some people who managed to become landlords through economic means, but they were not the majority.

#### iv The Status of Different Classes among the Landlords

In the Warring States Period, the vassals were the biggest landlords, and they acquired almost all of their wealth through political and military means. The second class was titled lords. They were a special class among the feudal landlords, second only to the vassals. According to historical records, there were a little more than one hundred of them. There were two ways to become a titled lord in the Warring States Period. The first way was through military achievements. As stated in *Guanzi*: "When other states are attacking us, those ministers who can come up with good strategies to benefit the state should be granted land and title; those who fight and achieve victories on the battlefields should also be rewarded and entitled."<sup>16</sup> The second way was through kinship. For example, Su Qin once said: "the fathers and brothers of nobles can also be titled."<sup>17</sup> Besides these two ways, in the Warring States Period someone could become a title lord because of his personal fame. Essentially, entitled lordship was a form of redistribution of power and wealth. As well, it also happened that some high officials and those who were appreciated by the king were given fiefs as salary or reward. The growing number of less prominent officials,

<sup>15</sup> *Zhanguoce. Weiceyi.*

<sup>16</sup> *Guanzi. Kuiduo.*

<sup>17</sup> *Zhanguoce. Zhaoce'er.*

their descendants, and yeomen undoubtedly also belong to the group of landlords, and many of them lived upon fiefs and income from bestowed fields. Clearly, all these landlords' wealth was maintained through political power.

In summary, the first generation of landlords in Chinese history came into existence mainly through political moves. It is a historical fact that the first generation of landlords acquired their status through non-economic methods.

### **B      *The Origin of Landlords in Qin and Han Times, and How the Power-Centered "Feudal Landlord Ecosystem" Shaped the Society***

Starting from the Qin and Han Dynasties, the creation of feudal landlords was still primarily through political privilege and power-based redistribution. The occasional buying and selling of land was not based on a free and fair market. Generally speaking, there were three ways of becoming big landlords.

First, violence and political maneuvers created big landlords. War, illegal and violent invasion, and legal political distribution were different forms by which politics determined the economy. In those processes, it was not that profit was transformed into land ownership, but that violence and privilege were transformed into land ownership.

Second, land was acquired through the combination of political violence and buying and selling. Forcing others to sell land was a popular way of annexation. It was not buying and selling in a fair and equal market, but rather deals made by coercive force. By forcing others to sell, land lost its character as goods, and the price was merely symbolic. Therefore it was more like robbery under the name of buying. In this process, political violence played the dominant role.

Third, people bought and sold land. In this process, land buying and selling appears free, but in reality there were no social conditions for a real free market in the feudal era, and the buying and selling of land was a less common phenomenon. Most land was already controlled by non-economic forces before it entered the market. The limitations on personal freedom were a big obstacle to the commoditization of land. When an agricultural producer was not free himself, the land he occupied could not enter the market, for one's land could not be freer than its owner. Although some buying and selling of land looked fair on the surface, a deeper investigation reveals that political violence rather than natural economic law was the real force behind those deals. A lot of historical records show that people were forced to sell their land when heavy taxation drove them to the point of bankruptcy, for they had no other option than to sell land. Although it is possible that in a market buying and

selling can be free, the determining factor behind these deals was still political violence.

Therefore, it is fair to say that the middle and upper level of feudal lords came into being through political means. Although their numbers were limited, they were the center of the landlord class and thus shaped the characteristics of the feudal landlords group. Political privilege was more decisive than economic advantages for those who became landlords.

In ancient China, an effective way for landlords to expand their property was to collect profit through acquiring land. An even more effective method was to acquire land by taking advantage of official power. Therefore, the most effective way for one to become a landlord or expand his property was to become an official, and to become an official one had to get educated. Thus, the tripartate of literati, bureaucrats, and landlords became an ecosystem that centered on acquiring political power. This ecosystem encompassed the economy, politics, and culture. Culture or education can be directly transformed into political power, which then can be directly transformed into economic profit. A lot of phenomena in the feudal society were closely related to this ecosystem.

First, the existence of this ecosystem was one of the fundamental causes of the expansion of the bureaucratic group and the increasing power of feudal landlords.

Second, the fate of each landlord was closely related to this ecosystem. On one hand, this ecosystem was the social circle of most landlords, especially the middle and upper class of landlords. On the other hand, this ecosystem also broke the strict boundary between higher-status and lower-status landlords, and also opened a channel between the rich and powerful and the poor and inferior. A feudal landlord could not maintain his class status in the long-run just by being rich, but had to rely on this ecosystem. Some big households and families after the Eastern Han Dynasty maintained their prosperity for a long time mainly because they kept up a strong web of relations within that ecosystem.

Third, the activity of this ecosystem also helped boost the development of feudal culture. Since at that time people sought education in order to become officials, and literature and culture were subordinate to the needs of the officialdom, political ethics and culture were highly developed and became the mainstream of ancient Chinese culture, which played an important role in upholding feudal rule.

Fourth, since most feudal bureaucrats were scholars, the bureaucrats were the most cultured social class. Furthermore, with the expanding bureaucratic organs and competition among political ideas, the politics of ancient China

were imbued with rationality. Although the king and the emperor and the gods were enshrined and respected in temples, most critical political decisions were made through rational argument instead of invoking the divine. In dealing with critical political matters, the officials would enter a quasi-intellectual competition and come up with different solutions to compare and debate. In another way, the ancient Chinese politics was very flexible. The bureaucratic system itself was to some extent flexible, and the changing of officials also made changing policies possible. Besides this, it is also worth noticing that in bureaucratic politics the officials also resorted to schemes and tricks in competition for power. Conspiring created partisanship, and therefore the history of ancient Chinese bureaucracy was also a history of rivalry among different parties. Although some of those fights were about right and wrong, most of them occupied the moral gray zone.

Fifth, the activity of this ecosystem of the feudal landlords, especially those in officialdom, was characterized by its prevalent hypocrisy. Like Ming Dynasty historian Li Zhi said: “(the officials) in public claim their advocacy of *dao*, but privately they do everything for wealth and social status.”<sup>18</sup> On the surface, the feudal landlords all claimed themselves as followers of Confucius and Mencius, pursuing the values of benevolence and propriety, morality, peace and love, and devotion to the people. But the real situation was quite different, with corruption and abuse of power prevalent. Of course, this kind of hypocrisy was not unique to the Chinese feudal bureaucratic landlords. All exploiting classes in any society share this hypocrisy. However, in comparison, the Chinese bureaucratic landlords are more striking and more adroit at playing the two-faced character.

Sixth, since the landlords lived by collecting land rent and employing the labor of the commoners, the officials lived by collecting tax, ensuring social stability, and acquiring wealth by taking advantage of political power, and the mainstream culture was a bureaucratic culture which served to uphold the king's power, the center of this ecosystem was feudal politics, leaving the society's economy in a subordinate position. Economics only became valuable when it served the feudal politics, or else it became superfluous. When it came to the economy itself, more attention was paid to distribution than production.

The activity within this ecosystem created a huge group of feudal bureaucrats. It also developed a highly sophisticated feudal bureaucratic culture and cultivated many feudal bureaucratic landlords. This ecosystem attracted almost all of the human talent into the official sphere. It played a key role in safeguarding the feudal rule, but exerted very little positive influence on the

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18 Chapter Two, *Xufenshu*.

development of social economy. It was one of the fundamental reasons that Chinese history saw such little progress for such a long time.

### C *Corruption: The Soil for the Growth of Bureaucratic Landlords*

To investigate the question of social distribution in ancient China, it is necessary to conduct research into the relationship between corruption and social distribution. By corruption, I mean the phenomenon of officials taking advantage of their positions and political power to demand money from others, take bribes, embezzle public property, use public power for private gain, and otherwise illegally seek economic profit. In ancient China, corruption among officials can be seen as a special form of redistribution, which should be added to the other three major forms of distribution, namely taxation, labor levies, and land rents for landlords. It was an important link in the social economic process at that time, and was also a major method for accumulating wealth.

Therefore, we should not view corruption as a topic for moral consideration, but should consider it an actual economic phenomenon. We used to see corruption as abnormal in a society. However, from a different perspective, it is a special normality. Power can be viewed as a universal ground for exchange—everything comes after power. Power can become obsolete if one does not use it, therefore under the right conditions the bureaucratic landlords would surely take hold on to their power and accumulate as much they could. As pointed out in *Bureaucratic Politics in China*, “*The Twenty-Four Histories* is in fact a history of corruption.”<sup>19</sup> The popular saying, “there is no official that is not corrupted,” basically tells the truth.

#### i The Omnipresent Corruption

Although corruption was never legal, it remained a prevalent phenomenon. According to historical records, corruption was in existence as early as the Western Zhou Dynasty.<sup>20</sup> In the Warring States Period, corruption became more common. Han Fei said of that time: “Those who played tricks and seek private gain and who lied to the king, and those who bribed widely allied themselves with important ministers, these people get fame and wealth, even their fathers and sons get to share that.”<sup>21</sup> In the Qin and Han Dynasties, with the emergence of a political system that centralized power, corruption became even worse. Zuo Xiong of the later Han Dynasty said: “Those officials who only

19 Wang Yanan, *Zhongguo guanliao zhengzhi yanjiu*, p. 116, China Social Sciences Press, 1981.

20 In *Shangshu Lvxing*, “loving goods,” one of the five wrongdoings, meant officials taking bribery.

21 *Hanfeizi. Jianjieshicheng*.



take bribes enough for their daily living are deemed as clean; those who take more than their family can use are deemed as corrupt.”<sup>22</sup> In the Wei and Jin Dynasties, officials also “seek wealth and ask for bribes, knowing no limits; they give the living official positions and deal people titles; they won’t do anything unless bribed.”<sup>23</sup> In the Song Dynasty, according to Bao Zheng’s estimate, “six or seven out of ten officials take bribes and abuse power.”<sup>24</sup> In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, it became even worse. In 1421, Zou Ji of the Ming Dynasty once submitted a report to the emperor, and said at that time “corrupt officials are everywhere; exploitation is reaching people’s bones.”<sup>25</sup> The Qing Dynasty witnessed more prevalent corruption: He Shen, the Minister of Defense at the time of Emperor Qianlong, was said to have accumulated a billion pieces of silver through taking bribes.

## ii Forms of Corruption in Feudal China

In ancient China, corruption was practiced in many ways, and most of them fall into the following three categories.

First, corrupt officials took advantage of their power to take what they wanted or blackmail people. This was most common among local officials. For example, in the Northern Wei Dynasty, an official named Yuan Dan, who was the Inspector of Qizhou, “was corrupt and abusive, he would take everything he wanted, like a horse or a cow, and he became people’s common concern.” When people told him he was too greedy, he was shameless enough to say: “there are 70,000 households in Qizhou, on average I don’t ask for more than 30 dollars from each household, how can you say that I’m greedy?”<sup>26</sup>

Second, corrupt officials took advantage of state income. Sun Zhenglan of the Ming Dynasty described such corruption this way: “Some officials sit high in their power seats, looking respectable like a god and authoritative like a tiger. Sometimes they make a small task a bigger one, or make a private matter a public one, or make a temporary job a long-term one.”<sup>27</sup> This kind of corruption was also popular in the Qing Dynasty. For example, in Hunan people were asked to pay one tenth of their income for tax, but actually “they paid more than two or three tenths.”<sup>28</sup>

22 *Houhanshu. Zuoxiongzhuan.*

23 *Cefuyuangui. Qingjianbu. tanmao.*

24 *Songshi. Li Xinzhuan Zhuan.*

25 *Mingshi. Zoujizhuan.*

26 *Taipingyulan. Renshibutan.*

27 Chapter 36, *Mingshilu filu. Chongzhenchangbian.*

28 *Zhao Shenqiao, Zhaogongyigong shenggao*, chapter 6.

Third, corrupt officials took advantage of state spending. Officials in charge of various infrastructure and other state projects were given opportunities for such corruption. For example, Tian Yannian, who was the Grand Minister of Agriculture in the Han Dynasty, took advantage of the state policy of paying to hire ox carts for peasants, and lied about the number of ox carts to gain private profits.<sup>29</sup> In the Qing Dynasty, officials in charge of river regulation “took river problems like floods as an opportunity to seek profits. All high level ministers viewed river regulation as an outer treasury. Even if all the money was used, it still was not enough for river regulation.”<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, corrupt officials in charge of the state treasury took the opportunity to steal from the treasury. For example, *Zhoufuyuangui* recorded the story of Tang Qing, who was the inspector of Shouzhou and “embezzled money and goods from the official warehouse.”<sup>31</sup> *Suishu* recorded the story of Zhengyi, who was also an inspector and ‘arbitrarily embezzled public money for his own use.’ *Sanguozhi* also recorded a story of an official of Quzhou County who “stole cloth from the official warehouse.”

Fifth, corrupt officials took bribes. In ancient China, high ranking officials usually did not have opportunities to directly exploit common people or have access to the state treasury. However, they would widely engage in bribery. Qin Yiben of the Ming Dynasty once said: “The officials in remote places were sources of income for officials in more important places; and all officials were sources of income for officials who were part of the court’s central cabinet.”<sup>32</sup> According to Liang Tingdong, the Minister of Defense in the Ming Dynasty, every time local officials came to the capital city to see the emperor or take exams or reviews, each of them had to spend five or six thousand gold pieces in bribes.<sup>33</sup>

#### D Ancient Chinese Society as a Power-Dependent Structure

Ancient Chinese society had a power-dependent structure, which extended to various aspects of social life. In the production relation, the possessor of productive materials and the producers (workers) constitute an absolute or strongly dependent relationship. The economic relationship between people was close to the relationship between masters and slaves. As for political relations, the emperor or the king, the bureaucrats, and the commoners were

29 *Hanshu. Kulizhuan.*

30 *Xiaotingzalu*, chapter 7.

31 *Cefuyuangui. Mushoubu tandu.*

32 *Mingshi. Qianyibenzhuan.*

33 *Mingshi. Liang Tingdong zhuan.*

clearly differentiated within the hierarchical system, which stipulated that the emperor or the king dominated the officials, and the officials dominated the common people. Within the bureaucratic group there also existed a clear hierarchy, with higher ranking officials dominating the lower ranking ones, and the lower ranking ones dependent on the higher ranking ones. In terms of kinship, the clan law stipulated dominant-subordinate relations between the primary and derivative households, the male parent and other family members, the elder and younger generations, elder and younger brothers, husband and wife, and children of the first wife and children of concubines. Among the kinship relationships, fathers' dominance over their sons was an absolute. As for other various social relationships, almost all of them have a hierarchical map that defined one party as the dominant and the other as dependent. Following that, all social actors except the emperor were to some extent endowed with the characteristics of a slave. That "every person is a slave" was a social reality created by the production relations, social relations, political relations, and the corresponding cultural values.

Alongside the power-dependent structure was the universal and absolute worship of authority. In order to maintain this kind of authority, the dominant class always tried to deprive the dependent classes of their independence and freedoms. The relationship between the authoritative and the dependent was essentially a relationship between a master and a slave. The dominant class added a divine element to their authority so that they would be worshipped by the whole society.

Among all those with authority, the emperor or the king was at the top of the pyramid. The power dynamics of ancient China shared a common tendency that all power eventually converged on the king. The centralization of the king's power originated from the value of "five singularities of the ruler" and the strengthening of military and punitive power. "Five singularities of the ruler" refers to the following: "the ruler is the single possessor of the country; the ruler enjoys a singularly ultimate status; the ruler has a singular position in the hierarchy; the ruler enjoys his singular power; and the ruler is the single final decision-maker." Such values, popular and universalized at that time, helped to support the centralization of the king's power.

The notion of the "five singularities of the ruler" was the basis for traditional Chinese politics. The kings and emperors surely espoused this idea, and so did almost everybody else, except the very few people who did not support a kingly regime. Even Buddhist and Daoist monks were supporters of such ideas.

Realizing the "five singularities of the ruler" depended on military and punitive power. The king's power came from military victories, and military power

was behind most political power. A new dynasty came into being only after violent revolution and military dominance. *Hanshu* chapter *Xingfazhi* reads: "The son of heaven stabilizes the world with soldiers." There is also a popular saying that "a scholar can't reason with a soldier." This was the overall characteristic of political systems. How come so many learned and reasonable people were cruelly killed in history? The answer is that violence determines politics. The principle of violence was the ultimate principle of the ancient Chinese political system. This is not to say that every matter had to resort to violence, but that violence always loomed behind politics.

The king's power was a more decisive factor in ancient social structure and social relations than the economy. There was room for the development of society and the economy only if such development did not conflict with the king's power.

There have been various abnormalities and alternations of the imperial power, but all returned to the imperial power. The Xinhai revolution ended imperial power in China, but certain characteristics of imperial power have remained. The basic source of such power is still some kind of value and a privilege guaranteed by violence, which surpasses the society and economy.

#### E      *The Conflict between the King's Power and the Whole Society was the Major Social Conflict*

*A Study of Chinese Bureaucratic Politics* proposed an illuminating argument that the major social conflict was that between the bureaucrats and the people. But we would argue that the major conflict in ancient Chinese society was between the dictatorial king's power and the whole society.

First, the huge amount of taxation and labor levy demanded by a dictatorial state was a major cause of social instability. Chinese history may have witnessed the largest number of peasant uprisings among all countries. Of course, exploitation and oppression by the landlord class was one of the causes of peasant uprisings. However, no matter how severely the landlords exploited the peasants, the peasants could still rent out their land, and thus that kind of exploitation still followed the simple law of reproduction. Under the social conditions of feudal China, so long as the peasants could maintain simple reproduction of what they had previously produced, large-scale social unrest would not break out. Therefore, national scale peasant uprisings were not caused by landlords' exploitation but by the taxation and labor levies demanded by the state. Large amounts of taxation and labor levies imposed by the dictatorial power deprived the peasants of the means for simple reproduction. Left with no choice, the peasants then would take the risk and fight with their lives. We do not agree with the opinion that landlords in ancient China

were more evil than landlords of Western Europe, for it does not accord with historical facts. In feudal China, it often happened that a registered commoner would flee to a landlord's household to avoid paying taxation and giving free labor to the state.

Further, the dominant and centralized dictatorial power was in sharp contrast with separate and weak individual peasants. The feudal state with a military and bureaucrats could arbitrarily attack the peasants, while the peasants had no means to fight back. Such a discrepancy of power surely helped nurture the tyrannical characteristics of the dictators, who became even more fearless in destroying the capacity for simple production. This is also why a lot of thinkers and politicians in history deem the emperor as the person who was empowered to decide common people's fate.

In summary, the king's power dominated all aspects of the society, including the social resources, materials, and wealth. It also dominated agriculture, industry, commerce, culture, education, science, and technology, and the fate of every member of society. In a society ruled by the king's power, all people and materials were to some extent at the disposal of political power. All theoretical or actual care for the people was only a means to political ends. Within the gigantic power structure, the local had to obey the central, the inferior had to obey the superior, and ultimately all had to obey the ruler.

#### F *About the Question of Social Form*

Two complementary aspects should be studied regarding the question of social form: first, an overall study of social form; second, an in-depth discussion of "the king's power dominating the society."

As for the first aspect, there are three specific questions: first, the basic question of social relation forms; second, the question of social control and operational systems; third, the question of social ideology. These three questions are interrelated but also differentiated.

##### i About the Basic Question of Social Relation Forms and the Analytic Methodology of "Class-Community"

Basic social relations means the general social organization of classes and other particular relations. We can classify all social relations into two categories: one is the basic class relations and the other is "social communities," which is more complicated than social relations. Within social communities there are class relations and also relations that transcend class. A social community can be as small as a family, or as big as a nation. Basic class relations are the foundation for other social relations, and therefore restrict other social relations. However, other social relations do exist by themselves and cannot be



totally subsumed into class relations. Therefore, perhaps we can propose an analytic methodology of "class-social community."

ii            The Most Important Characteristic of Traditional Chinese Society  
                  was "The King's Power Dominating the Society"

In a society ruled by the king's power, which was formed on the basis of military power, the economic forces did not determine the power distribution, but rather the power distribution determined social-economic distribution. Socio-economic relations were a result of power distribution and possession. During the process of forming the king's power system, a corresponding social structure also took shape. With its military might, the king's power needed no intermediary to own and dominate the whole nation. In the feudal society, political power was the power to possess land and dominate people's lives. The allocation and distribution of power was also a process of allocating and distributing social wealth and status. The relations within the group of the king's power, the nobles, and the bureaucrats were the foundation of the political system, the social structure, and also the system of social interest distribution. Through power or force, this group and its members controlled, occupied, and dominated most land, people, and social wealth. The land ownership became centralized not because of market behavior, but because of power intervention. This group was the dominant class of the social structure and dominated all other social factors.

iii            Ideologically Speaking, Kingly-Powerism was the Foundation  
                  of the Culture

The most important content of kingly-powerism is the theory and shared idea that the king was superior and the officials were inferior. The idea that the heavens, the Way, the sage, and the king are unified, put the king in an ultimate position of authority. Such an ideology reifies, absolutizes, and ontologizes the king, making the king the same as rationality, law, and morality. It sets all hope on the king or the emperor. Although many people criticized various rulers in history for failing to live up to such an ideal, they could never move beyond the paradigm of imperial power or a kingly regime. Such ideology and culture led to the reality that the more people set hope on a sagely king, the more difficult it became to get rid of the real kings.

Corresponding to the king's superiority was the inferior position of the officials. It was a divine or cosmological order that the officials and the commoners were inferior to the kings. All derivatives of the theory of *yin* and *yang* put the king in the position of *yang*, and the officials and the people at the position of *yin*. This was defined as a cosmological order, a destiny, and an inevitable

necessity. Officials and common people could only serve as the ruler's subjects, subordinates, servants, slaves, and tools. "The ruler was born with the world worshipping him." "As subjects, the people need to look up to the ruler to live." The king or emperor was the symbolic parent who raised everybody. Since subjects were inferior beings that could only live upon the ruler's mercy, they naturally belonged to the ruler. Social conditions like power and hierarchy undoubtedly served to impose such a dominant-subordinate relationship in the society, and the universalized ideology further made people voluntary subjects. Therefore, a universalized and normalized ideology played an even more prominent role in regulating people's behavior. Faced with the sagely king, the subjects culturally and psychologically were filled with a feeling of guilt and wrongness. Even when officials remonstrated with the emperor, they did it with a sense of guilt. Therefore it was common to see such sentences in the officials' remonstrating letters to the emperors as: "I am putting life at risk to say this;" "I am feeling very humbled and full of awe;" "I'm so filled with awe and consternation," etc. These sentences were not just polite, empty words, but were evidence of how the officials defined and positioned themselves in front of the king.

# Society of Imperial Power: Reinterpreting China's "Feudal Society"

*Feng Tianyu*

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## Abstract

To call the period from Qin Dynasty to Qing Dynasty a "feudal society" is a misrepresentation of China's historical reality. The *fengjian* system only occupied a secondary position in Chinese society from the time of Qin. It was the system of prefectures and counties (*junxianzhi*) that served as the cornerstone of the centralized power structure. This system, together with the institution of selecting officials through the imperial examination, constituted the centralized bureaucracy that intentionally crippled the hereditary tradition and the localized aristocratic powers, and hence bolstered the unity of the empire. Feudalism in medieval Western Europe shares many similarities with that of China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but is quite different from the monarchical centralism since the time of Qin and Han. Categorizing the social form of the period from Qin to Qing as "feudal" makes the mistake of over-generalizing and distorting this concept. It runs counter to the original Chinese meaning of *fengjian*, and severely deviates from the western connotation of feudalism. Moreover, the decentralized feudalism in pre-Qin dynasties and the later centralized imperial system from Qin onwards influenced the generation and evolution of Chinese culture in vastly different ways.

## Keywords

feudal – *fengjian* – imperial system

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For more than half a century on the Chinese mainland, the prevailing view on the social form of China from Qin (221-206 B.C.) to Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) is that it was a feudal society, similar to that of medieval Western Europe. This view describes the development of the social forms of all nations and countries as a single linear process and ignores the significant differences in social forms between most oriental countries including China and the pre-modern Western Europe. It misrepresents the reticular structure of the diversified history of different parts of the world.

## I The Original Meaning of *Fengjian* (封建) and “Feudalism” and their English and Chinese Translations

Originally, *fengjian* was a clearly defined concept, meaning emperors offering official rank and land to vassals and allowing them to establish a state on the land, known as “offering (*feng* 封) land, and establishing (*jian* 建) vassal states.” This system started as early as the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.) and was conducted on a large scale in the early Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), first by King Wu of Zhou, and then by the Duke of Zhou.

In ancient documents such as *Zuo Zhuan* (*Zuo’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), *fengjian* has had a consistent denotation, i.e. “offering land for establishing states”. *An Analytical Dictionary of Characters* (*Shuowen Jiezi*) defines *feng* as “the land of appointed vassals” and *jian* as “the establishment of state rules.” The system of the emperor offering land for the vassals to establish states, the patriarchal clan system, and the hierarchy formed in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, all constitute an organic whole as is recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*:

Therefore, the son of Heaven establishes States; princes of States establish clans. Heads of clans establish institutions at a lower level and the same applies to officials under the heads of clans; great officers have their sons and younger brothers as their subordinates; as for the common people, artisans, merchants and traders, their rankings are decided according to their closeness to the officials.<sup>1</sup> The Duke of Zhou, grieved by the rebellion by his two brothers Guanshu and Caishu, raised the members of the

1 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990), “The Second Year of the Duke of Huan,” p. 94.

royal family to be ruler of States, intending them to safeguard the court of Zhou by acting as its fences and screens.<sup>2</sup>

The Duke of Zhou lamented that the demise of both the Xia and the Shang Dynasties resulted from the supreme rulers' estrangement from their relatives. Consequently, he offered ranks and land to many of the royal relatives so as to consolidate the reign of Zhou. The principle behind offering ranks and land to the rulers' relatives is the basis of the patriarchal clan system, which is based on the affinity of the relatives to the rulers. No consensus has been reached on the number of vassal states established during the early Zhou Dynasty, but the number is believed to be between several dozen to several hundred. What is certain is that most were ruled by the royal family of Ji. *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* records that five ranks of peerage were offered in the Zhou Dynasty. Boqin, eldest son of the Duke of Zhou, and Kangshu, younger brother of King Wu of Zhou, as members of the Ji family, were promoted to lords of the states of Lu and of Wei, respectively. This act highlighted the "tenet of loving relatives," a common theme in Confucian political thought. Jiang Taigong, as a member outside the royal family, was promoted to ruler of the state of Qi as a reward for his wholehearted service to King Wu of Zhou. The chosen vassals enjoyed hereditary right to rule which was in accordance with the patriarchal clan system. As rulers of the "lesser clans" (*xiaozong* 小宗), the vassals were required to obey King of Zhou, who was the ruler of the "greater clan" (*da zong* 大宗), and pay tribute and provide military service to him.

During the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), various feudal lords conferred fiefs upon family members and people who had rendered outstanding service to the rulers. However, while being allowed to collect land tax as well as industrial and commercial taxes, these people did not have the right of hereditary rule. Meanwhile, more distant vassal states such as Chu and Qin began to implement the system of prefectures and counties so as to strengthen their states' respective central power. From then on, the system of enfeoffment and the system of prefectures and counties coexisted and sometimes contended with each other. After having unified the whole country, Qin completely replaced the system of enfeoffment with the system of prefectures and counties. This is reflected in "Treatise on Geography" of *The Book of Han*: "Qin united all within the four seas. It regarded the institutions of Zhou as weak and attributed the collapse of Zhou to the great power of vassal states. Hence, it did not

2 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, "The Twenty-Fourth Year of the Duke of Xi," p. 420.



adopt any enfeoffment at all. Rather, it divided the kingdom into prefectures and counties. It destroyed the heritage of previous sages and left little to be found.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is a bit exaggerated to claim that “it did not adopt any enfeoffment at all”. Inscriptions on the unearthed relics of Qin show that there was still vassalage such as *liehou* (列侯) and *lunhou* (倫侯), these official ranks were granted without any land offerings or land was offered but without governing power. In the early part of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), the court carried on the system of prefectures and counties and at the same time enfeoffed many vassals from the royal family as well as other clans,<sup>4</sup> empowering them to “rule their states”. Nevertheless, these vassals soon became confrontational forces against the central court. Having tasted the bitterness of vassal rebellions, the Han rulers started to limit the governing power of the heads of states to “make the vassal states diminish on their own.” At the time of Emperor Wu of Han, “vassals could accrue salaries from the collected tax, but could not participate in the governing of the states.”<sup>5</sup> They were the so-called *shifengguizu* (食封貴族, literally, nobles endowed with food) who could do nothing but be loyal to the emperor. Later dynasties conferred official ranks and land on royal members and meritorious officials but stipulated that the vassals had only economic power, not political power. In other words, “the vassals were given the ranks but not the authority to govern the people; they were granted the land but had no say in state affairs.”<sup>6</sup>

This was the common situation for nobles since the time of Qin, which was a sharp contrast with the Zhou Dynasty when the enfeoffed nobles, such as feudal lords, were in control of military, political, financial, and cultural affairs. Although there were attempts throughout the dynasties to reduce the vassals’ power, they still managed to rise in rebellion in almost all dynasties. Even in the extremely centralized Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), Zhu Di, Prince of Yan, launched the *Jingnan* Campaign (靖難之役, *jingnan* means rectifying disastrous disorder) during the reign of Emperor Jianwen; and Zhu Chenhao, the Prince of Ning, staged an uprising during the reign of Emperor Zhengde.

3 Ban Gu, “Treatise on Geography,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 28, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962, p. 1542.

4 According to “Table of Sons of Nobles,” “Table of Meritorious Officials” and “Table of Nobles from Families of the Imperial Consorts” of *The Book of Han*, altogether 408 sons of nobles, 283 meritorious officials and 112 nobles from families of the imperial consorts were enfeoffed in the Han Dynasty.

5 Ban Gu, “Table of Nobles Related to the Imperial Clan,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 14, p. 395.

6 Wang Qi, “A Textual Research of *Fengjian*,” *Continuation of General Study of Literary Records (Xu Wenxian Tongkao)*, Vol. 194, a Ming-dynasty block-printed edition of Songjiang County in 1602, p. 3494.

For this reason, each dynasty took measures to “weaken the power of the vassals” (*xuefan* 削藩) and strengthen the system of prefectures and counties and that of non-hereditary officials, regarding these systems as the backbone of sustained centralized power.

Liu Zongyuan (773-819) of the Tang Dynasty claimed in his essay “On Feudalism” that the replacement of feudalism by the system of prefectures and counties was an inevitable historical trend. He made insightful remarks on how the two systems came into being and what their respective strengths and weaknesses were, and in doing so, further clarified the meaning of *fengjian*.

From the perspective of *feng* as offering land and *jian* as establishing states, the *fengjian* system only occupied a secondary position from Qin onwards. It was the system of prefectures and counties that served as the cornerstone of the centralized power structure. This system, together with the institution of selecting officials through the imperial examination, constituted the centralized bureaucracy that crippled the hereditary tradition and decentralized aristocratic power, and hence bolstered the unity of the empire. Consequently, Chinese culture became a unified culture in real terms over the long course of two thousand years. This outshines medieval Europe and Japan, which had numerous separatist vassals, as well as India, which had its countless rajahs.

Starting from late Qing and early Republic of China, with western learning spreading to the East, the meaning of *fengjianzhi* (封建制) was enriched and complicated.

It is reasonable to say that at the turn of the 20th century when the eastern historical terminology met its western counterpart, the connotation and denotation of *fengjianzhi* did not deviate from its original meaning. And it is correct to translate *fengjianzhi* into “feudalism” of the medieval European system, as has been done by Japanese scholars between the late Shogunate times and the Meiji period such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Nishi Amane, as well as by Yan Fu, Liang Qichao and other Chinese intellectuals from late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. At that time the concept of *fengjian* was not generalized or misused. “Feudalism” of medieval Europe is highly equivalent to the ancient Chinese *fengjian*. Hence, such a translation is accurate and practical.

*The Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* defines “feudalism” (or “feudal system”) as:

A social system of rights and duties based on land tenure and personal relationship in which land was held in fief by vassals from lords to whom they must render certain services and were bound by personal loyalty. In a broader sense, the term refers to the “feudal society,” a form of civilization that flourished especially in a closed agricultural economy. In such a

society, those who fulfill official duties received remuneration in the form of fiefs either because of their personal or voluntary links with their ruler. The fiefs they held were hereditary. Another aspect of feudalism was the fief or manorial system, under which the overlords exercised over their serfs a wide variety of privileges, including the punitive, judicial, and fiscal rights.<sup>7</sup>

In the Middle Ages, most Western European countries and Japan featured such a feudal system. Some characteristics of the medieval culture in Western Europe and Japan, such as the weakening of kingship, the split of political power, hierarchy, the samurai tradition, serfdom, personal bondage, and the idea of vengeance, all derived from feudalism in this sense.

Feudalism in medieval Western Europe shares many similarities with that of China during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but is quite different from the monarchical centralism since Qin and Han. Yan Fu had a clear understanding of this. In translating *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* written by Adam Smith, Yan Fu transliterated “feudalism” into “拂特之制” while in translating *A History of Politics* by Edward Jenks, he translated feudalism as “封建制度”. He believed that during the two thousand years from the reigns of Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun till the Zhou Dynasty, the feudal system in China was so similar to Western feudalism that an analogy could be made. That is why he translated “feudalism” into *fengjian*. However, from Qin and Han to the Ming and Qing dynasties, the bureaucratic system of prefectures and counties was marked by imperial autocracy, centralism, non-hereditary official institution, the imperial examination system and so on. This was entirely different from the traditional hereditary feudal society and was in fact “non-feudal” in nature. A master of both Chinese and Western learning, Yan Fu was keenly aware of the historical similarities and differences between China and the West. He stated that Chinese feudalism spanned the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou and disintegrated around late Zhou and early Qin. Since Qin, China displayed an “autocratic dynasty” (or autocratic monarchy). In Western Europe, feudalism started and ended two thousand years later than in China: “The beginning of feudalism can be traced back to the time roughly equivalent to China’s Tang and Song dynasties. As for the end of feudalism, represented by the republicanism in France and the founding of

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7 *The Concise Encyclopedia Britannica* (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 1985).

America, it just happened one or two hundred years ago.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Yan opposed drawing a parallel between China’s mid-ancient times (Qin and Han onwards) and the Middle Ages in Western Europe, and objected to the practice of putting these two different systems under the same framework of *fengjian*. On this issue, Liang Qichao and Qian Mu shared similar views with Yan Fu.

## II Misuse and Overgeneralization of the Term “Feudalism” in 1930s-1940s

Between the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the debate on social history, some Chinese historians followed the example of European historical period division and referred to China’s mid-ancient times (from the Qin to Qing dynasties) as “feudal society”. Since the 1940s, they modeled the division of Chinese historical periods upon the “five social forms” (primitive society—slave society—feudal society—capitalist society—socialist society) adopted in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* and named the period from Zhou to Qing “feudal society.” Despite divergence regarding the historical starting point of feudalism (whether being Western Zhou, Warring States period, or Wei and Jin Dynasties), there was a near consensus that the medieval and early modern China was “feudal.”

Categorizing the social form of the period from Qin to Qing as “feudal” makes the mistake of over-generalizing and distorting this concept. First, it runs counter to the original Chinese meaning of *fengjian* (enfeoffed land which was not subject to transferable trading; decentralized political power and a great many vassals). Second, it severely deviates from the western connotation of “feudalism” (conferring land and ranks upon vassals, the fief system, personal bondage, ultra-economic deprivation and serfdom). Thus, the over-generalized term “feudalism,” as including a bureaucratic regime of monarchical centralism and landlord economy with transferable land, is indeed a misnomer that is historically inaccurate.

Clearly, there is a mismatch between the concept and the meaning for this newly coined term “feudal.” Taking it as the stem to form phrases about social forms—“feudal system,” “feudal society,” “feudal age,” etc.—misrepresents historical fact. As a result, due to the misuse of a key term, a grand narrative of China’s history lost its reticular development feature. There has been a lack of a system of clearly-defined concepts essential for a study on issues

8 Yan Fu, “Preface to the Translated Version of *A History of Politics*,” *Collection of Yan Fu’s Essays*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1986), p. 135.

that have long been examined in historical circles, such as “the periodization of Chinese history,” “the internal division of China’s feudal society,” “forms of feudal land ownership,” “the sprouts of capitalism in China,” and “the reason why Chinese feudal society remained such a long time.”

Over the past several decades, under the influence of the theory of linear historical development, and also because of the misuse of concepts in translating foreign words and creating new words, many people have grouped China’s dynastic history from Qin to Qing under misplaced moniker of feudalism, and then incorrectly likened China’s dynastic history to the feudal society in Western Europe, when in fact they are two distinct social forms. This is really an act of “cutting the feet to fit the shoes”<sup>9</sup> and the result is “chaos under Heaven caused by wrong discourses.”<sup>10</sup>

The popularity of this over-generalized concept of feudalism in China can primarily be attributed to its formation in the context of historical materialism. This concept is even revered as a historical achievement under the guidance of historical materialism. In order to clarify the mistake of over-generalizing the concept of feudalism, we must first restore the original feudal theory as set forth by Marx and Engels, the founders of historical materialism.

Engaged in this intriguing job, we first discover that Marx and Engels were far from endorsing “Western European Centrism” and the view of a single linear historical progress. In reality, they differentiated the pre-modern social forms of Western Europe from the non-Western European regions. They never called most of the pre-modern oriental countries, including China and India, “feudal society”; instead, they termed them as “the Celestial Empire,”<sup>11</sup> “the Asian-style autocracy,” “the oriental autocracy,”<sup>12</sup> “the Chinese empire,”<sup>13</sup> “the semi-civilized system,” “the world’s most ancient empire,”<sup>14</sup> “the bureaucracy,” “the patriarchal clan system,”<sup>15</sup> “the unstable Asian empire,”<sup>16</sup> or “the Chinese socioeconomic structure” that features the “combination of small-scale agriculture and cottage industries.”<sup>17</sup> Their description of the pre-modern social

9 Qian Mu, *An Outline of the History of China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1948), p. 18.

10 Hou Wailu, *A General History of Chinese Thought*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Joint Publishing, 1950), Book 1, p. 374.

11 Marx, “Revolution in China and Europe” (1853), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1972), p. 2.

12 Marx, “The British Rule in India” (1853), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 63.

13 Marx, “Russian Trade with China” (1857), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 9.

14 Engels, “Persia and China” (1857), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, pp. 16, 21.

15 Marx, “History of the Opium Trade” (1858), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 26.

16 Engels, “Russia’s Success in the Far East” (1858), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 37.

17 Marx, “Trade with China” (1859), *Selections of Marx and Engels*, Vol. 2, p. 57.

forms in China and India with “non-feudal” names is by no means accidental. Rather, it is a result of their adherence to academic norms and a paradigm of the application of historical materialism and the social form theory.

One interesting phenomenon is that some modern Chinese scholars identified feudalism in the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou (especially Western Zhou), and depicted the history from Qin to Qing in other terms: “the prime of autocratic monarchy”<sup>18</sup> according to Liang Qichao; “autocratic dynasty”<sup>19</sup> according to Yan Fu; “an authoritarian one” and “a system of prefectures and counties with one supreme ruler”<sup>20</sup> according to Zhou Gucheng; “a centralized state”<sup>21</sup> according to Qu Tongzu; and “free private land system”<sup>22</sup> according to Li Jiannong. These scholars are not Marxists and most have never read Marx’s and Engels’ articles on China, India, or other eastern countries. However, by starting from the reality of Chinese history, they made a judgment about the pre-modern social form of China very similar to Marx and Engel’s view and totally different from the modern, over-generalized view of feudalism.

### III Contradictions between “Feudalism” and the Chinese Social Forms from Qin to Qing

Although Marx never made specific observations on the Chinese social forms from Qin to Qing, based on his logic in commenting on the works of M. Kovalevskii and John Budd Phear (both an economic characteristic of tradable land and a bureaucratic regime with monarchical centralism are incompatible with feudalism), we can deduce that Marx observed the overall historical trend in China to be a weakening of the feudal system, despite intermittent fluctuations. In fact, from Qin to Qing, farmers’ personal bondage waxed and waned but the main trend was waning, so there was not a long-term dominating serfdom. Since the Warring States Period, land could be transferred and traded, with the landlord system gradually gaining prominence and

18 Liang Qichao, “Introduction to Chinese History” in *Complete Works of Liang Qichao*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Beijing Publishing House, 1999), p. 453.

19 Yan Fu, “Preface to the Translated Version of *A History of Politics*,” *Collection of Yan Fu’s Essays*, Vol. 1, p. 136.

20 Zhou Gucheng, *The Structure of Chinese Society* (Shanghai: New Life Publishing House, 1930), p. 31.

21 Qu Tongzu, *The Feudal Society of China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), p. 357.

22 Li Jiannong, *Lecture Notes on Chinese Economic History* (Shanghai: Zhongguo Publishing House), 1943, p. 17.



the feudal noble hereditary land system (or the lord-vassal system) losing its leading position. Furthermore, in comparison with India, China had a more sophisticated and powerful central monarchy with a complete bureaucracy replacing the aristocratic government, which prevented its development into a social form similar to the decentralized feudal vassal-lord system in Western Europe. All in all, naming the period from Qin to Qing “feudal society” is not only contradictory to China’s historical reality, but also to that of Western Europe, thus inconsistent with Marx and Engels’ theory on feudal society.

### 1 *The Incompatibility of Feudalism with the Landlord Economy of Tradable Land*

To enfeoff vassals was the prerequisite for feudal relations of production and for the vassals’ control over their subjects. Land and the relations thereof serve as the defining mark of feudalism. In his later years, Karl Marx made a large number of notes about the works of historians and ethnologists, such as Lewis Henry Morgan and M. Kovalevskii. These notes demonstrate that Marx paid great attention to the particularities of historical advancement in various regions and nations.

M. Kovalevskii, a Russian scholar and a young friend of Karl Marx, wrote in his book *Communal Land Ownership: The Causes, Process, and Consequences of Its Disintegration* about India’s feudalization after it was conquered by Muslims during the 13th-17th centuries. He believed that India had developed an “Indian feudalism” even before the colonialist invasion of Britain, thanks to its expanded fief system and class-based hierarchy. Marx attached great importance to Kovalevskii’s intellectual contributions and made detailed extracts of his works, but did not approve of his confusing Indian and Islamic social-economic institution with the feudal society of Europe. In his comments on *Communal Land Ownership*, he pointed out India was not characterized by serfdom and non-transferable land, so after being subjugated by Muslims and land became transferable, India was no longer a feudal society.

Since the Zhou Dynasty, China experienced the development of private land and witnessed the popularity of land trading, thus departing from the feudal lord-vassal system of nontransferable fiefdoms. If India, with tradable land after the subjugation of Muslims, was not a feudal society, China from Zhou onwards was even further from being such a society.

There is plenty of evidence to show that private land ownership was in practice in the Spring and Autumn Period. One famous record is a line from “Big Field” of “Minor Odes of the Kingdom” of *The Book of Songs*: “It rains on our public fields, and comes to our private land at the same time.” (Some scholars note the “public fields” here refer to land of the higher ranking landlords

while “private land” to that of the lower-ranking landlords. What is obvious is that there was indeed a separation of public and private land and a tendency towards the privatization of land). In fact, a private farmer could work on and gain from his “private” land as long as he paid the tax to the state. In the late Spring and Autumn Period, the State of Lu practiced “initial tax on land per-mu” (初稅畝),<sup>23</sup> and the State of Qi first enacted the “system of mutual aid” featuring “collectively cultivating the public field” and then shifted to “the sharing system” with “tax for each mu.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the State of Zheng, “Zichan of Zheng made new and stricter regulations for the taxation from the land.”<sup>25</sup> All these are examples of tax collection from private land, which proves that apart from the “public fields” of feudal lord-vassal system, the “private” land system was booming. What’s more, in the State of Jin, *yuantian* (爰田, land exchanging) was in practice. This, too, was a reflection of the privatization and transferability of land. At the time of the Warring States Period, an integral part of the reforms in many states was the encouragement of the cultivation of private land. For instance, in the Duke Wen of Wei (?-396 B.C.) era, Li Kui (455-395 B.C.) advocated “tapping the full potential of the land” in his reform. The reforms of Wu Qi (?-381 B.C.) in the Duke Dao of Chu (?-381 B.C.) era, Zou Ji in the Duke Wei of Qi (?-343 B.C.) era, and Shen Buhai (385-337 B.C.) in the Duke Zhao of Han (?-333 B.C.) era all had similar proposals. When it came to the reforms of Shang Yang (390-338 B.C.) during the reign of Duke Xiao of Qin (381-338 B.C.), private land ownership became even more common. “Encouragement of Immigration” in *The Book of Lord Shang* written by Shang Yang and his followers, records that the State of Qin attracted people from the three (former) Jin states to reclaim Qin’s land and “allowed them to cultivate as much as possible.” Consequently, Qin’s private land increased dramatically; its landlord-yeoman economy developed greatly; and it became the “unrivaled rich state under Heaven with a powerful army.”<sup>26</sup> The Qin Dynasty “asked the commoners to report their actual land” (quoting Xu Guang’s words in the *Collected Annotations to Basic Annals of Emperor Qin Shi Huang of Records of the Grand Historian*), i.e. ordering the people to report the amount of land

23 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, “The Fifteenth Year of Duke Xuan,” p. 766.

24 *Gongyang Zhuan*, “The Fifteenth Year of Duke Xuan.”

25 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, “The Fourth Year of Duke Zhao,” p. 1254.

26 Du You, “Food and Money Part I”, *Tong Dian*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988), p. 6.

they had so that the court could tax it. This means private land was allowed countrywide and officially supported by law.

Starting from “requiring the commoners to report their actual land” in Qin, later dynasties witnessed a decrease in land conferring. From early to middle Western Han, although state land conferring survived in the form of “*mingtian* system” (名田制 registering the land in one’s name), land trading also became prevalent. One prominent example is Xiao He’s (?-193 B.C.) “coercive buying of thousands of people’s land and houses.”<sup>27</sup> Land trading since then can often be found in historical records. Private land had developed to the extent that, from the time of Han Emperor Ai onwards, the *mingtian* system was abolished and the landlord system marked by private land ownership gradually became dominant.

However, it must be noted that in spite of the popularization of land privatization, it always coexisted with imperial-owned land, as was shown in *The History of Ming*: “The land of the Ming Dynasty falls into two categories: official land and people’s private land.”<sup>28</sup> Therefore, private land ownership from Qin to Qing was an incomplete and not entirely free system. An accurate description should be that China had private land ownership that was restricted by the land ownership of the ruler.

Regarding the changes in land ownership, Song Dynasty scholar Ma Duanlin concluded that during the three dynasties of Xia, Shang, and Zhou, “all the land under Heaven belonged to the government. People relied on the government for food supplies. They received land from the government to support themselves and in return had to pay taxation.” From the time of Qin, “private land was permitted in the kingdom” and this led to important social changes: “From Qin and Han onwards, the government no longer conferred land; private land possessed by commoners became the trend. Although in some periods, such as Taihe of the Wei Dynasty and Zhenguan of the Tang Dynasty, the state attempted to restore the system of the three dynasties of Xia, Shang and Zhou, it soon collapsed because without feudalism, the nine-squares system could not be re-implemented.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Ma stressed the non-feudal nature of the private land system ever since Qin and Han and pointed out the tendency towards land privatization after Qin.

27 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Xiao”, *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 52 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), p. 2018.

28 Zhang Tingyu, “Treatise on Official System Part I”, *The History of Ming*, Vol. 72 (明史 • 職官一), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), p. 1733.

29 Ma Duanlin, *Preface to General Study of Literary Records*, the Shenduzhai 慎獨齋 edition, 1521.

## 2 *The Incompatibility of Feudalism with A Centralized Monarchy*

Decentralized feudalism and centralized monarchy differ greatly not only in terms of the kind of economic system that they foster, but also the political system. Hence, they are not compatible and should not be considered as such.

Karl Marx's objection to the abuse of the word feudalism was clearly shown in his division of political power as an essential characteristic of feudalism. He explicitly argued that centralized monarchy was contrary to feudalism. This view of the incompatibility between autocracy and feudalism was revealed in his ethnological notes written in his twilight years. For instance, in his commentaries on M. Kovalevskii's *Communal Land Ownership*, Marx stated centralized monarchy existed in India, which blocked the country's evolution into the Western European-style feudalism. He cited the words in Kovalevskii's book, "In the late years of the Mongolians' empire, the so-called feudalization only appeared in some regions; while in many others, the communal and private property was still in the hands of the aboriginal people and the state affairs were handled by officials appointed by the central government." Moreover, Marx also noted that India had "no serfdom."<sup>30</sup> He quoted Kovalevskii as saying that India "did not have hereditary jurisdiction in term of civil law." Yet "serfdom" and "hereditary jurisdiction" are the hallmarks of feudalism. Without these essential elements, India was definitely not a feudal society. Marx claimed with no ambiguity that autocratic monarchy and feudalism were two distinct systems and as far as Western Europe was concerned, the former was the transitional period between feudal hierarchy and modern capitalism. Therefore, to include autocratic monarchy into feudalism is a deviation from Marx's theory. And as regards China, its centralist monarchy since the time of Qin was far more advanced than that of India, making it even less of a feudal society.

From Qin onwards, all the imperial power was marked by centralism, and this feature became increasingly evident in later dynasties. The emperor assumed the total power of legislation, jurisdiction, administration, and military command. This defined Chinese imperial politics. Starting from Emperor Qin Shi Huang, "all the affairs under Heaven, big or small, are up to the emperor to decide."<sup>31</sup> This tradition persisted till the Qing dynasty, the late period of society featuring patriarchal clan system and imperial power. Emperor Kangxi

30 Marx, Karl "Excerpts from M. Kovalevskii's *Communal Land Ownership: The Causes, Process, and Consequences of Its Disintegration*," *Marx's Notes on the History of Ancient Society*, (Beijing: People's Press, 1996), pp. 70, 78-79.

31 Sima Qian, "Basic Annals of Emperor Qin Shihuang," *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 6, p. 258.

remarked, "all the matters, regardless of their importance, are handled by myself. It is unacceptable to assign the task to others. So no matter how big or how small the thing is, I always see to it in person and make the decision on my own."<sup>32</sup> In reviewing this type of monarchical politics, Emperor Jiaqing of the Qing Dynasty said, "In our dynasty, one sagacious ruler is followed by another. They all wield absolute imperial power. During the 60-year reign of Emperor Qianlong, each imperial edict was issued in accordance with his own judgment and none of his subjects could ever intervene in state affairs. "Since I assumed the throne . . . all orders have been fulfilled and the power has never fallen into others' hands."<sup>33</sup> The form of law under monarchical centralism can be summed up as follows: "Words from the emperor's mouth reveal the heavenly constitution," where whatever the emperor dictates becomes law. In such cases, a single utterance from him could lead to the boom or the doom of the state, all determined by the emperor's momentary whims and passing judgments.

Related to the absolute monarchical power were the prime minister system and the system of Three Councils and Six Boards. It was impossible for the emperor (irrespective of how intelligent and capable he was) to single-handedly govern a country of millions of square kilometers with tens or even hundreds of millions of people. "At all times, the prosperity of a ruler depends on selecting ministers to assist him in concertedly achieving the success endowed by Heaven."<sup>34</sup> Emperors of all dynasties paid great attention to choosing virtuous and talented men to "help the Son of Heaven deal with myriad affairs,"<sup>35</sup> run the central administration, and ensure the coordinated efforts of all institutions. For the sake of ensuring an efficient government, the first and foremost consideration in "selecting ministers to assist the emperor" was to appoint a prime minister.

The post of prime minister had different names in different dynasties. In Qin, it was called *xiangguo* (相國) or *chengxiang* (丞相); in Han, *chengxiang*; in Sui, Tang and Song, *zaixiang* (宰相); and in Yuan and early Ming, again *chengxiang*. Responsible for the central administration, the prime minister occupied a key position in the monarchical regime, he was "under only one

32 *Donghua Records in the Kangxi Era (Kangxi Chao Donghua Lu)*, Vol. 91.

33 Liang Zhangju, *A Record of the Grand Council (Shuyuan Jilie 樞垣記略)*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1997), p. 8.

34 Ban Gu, "Meritorious Ministers during the reign of Gao, Hui, Gaohou and Xiaowen," *The Book of Han*, Vol. 16, p. 527.

35 Ban Gu, "Table of Nobility Ranks and Government Offices," *The Book of Han*, Vol. 19 I, p. 724.

person, and ruled over tens of thousands of others.” Originally, the position of prime minister was set as an instrument to carry out the wishes and commands of an absolute monarch, but in practice, these two positions were often found to restrict each other. The root cause for this was the selfishness and corruption inherent in monarchical power. On the one hand, the supreme ruler had to depend on the prime minister to carry out his will; and on the other, he always guarded against the prime minister’s usurping his power. A review of China’s imperial society shows that the two powers invariably maintained a delicate relationship, yet the fundamental trend was the increase of imperial power and the decrease of that of the prime minister.

In the early Western Han Dynasty, the prime minister enjoyed a wide range of power. “Looking above himself, he assists the Son of Heaven in regulating Yin and Yang and observing the rules of the four seasons. Looking below, he ensures the timely growth of all creatures, manages the four barbarian groups and various vassals, cares for and unites the ordinary people, and sees to it that all the nobles and officials perform their duties.”<sup>36</sup> Virtually everything was in the control of the prime minister, including domestic and foreign affairs, civil affairs, legislation, choosing officials, and rewards and punishments. The prime minister’s power was so great that “During the Han, nothing the prime minister proposed was not followed.”<sup>37</sup> Still, the emperor took precautions against the prime minister. When Liu Bang (247-195 B.C.) proclaimed himself ruler of the kingdom of Han, he was out of the court, fighting with Xiang Yu for quite a long time. But he never forgot to frequently send a messenger to express his appreciation to the Prime Minister Xiao He, who had stayed at court. Xiao could not figure out the intention of Liu Bang and “Bao Sheng explained to him: ‘Now the King of Han is in a tough situation. The reason why he more than once dispatched messengers to convey to you his gratitude is that he is still suspicious of you. For your sake, why not send your relatives that are good at warfare to the military camp? In this way, the emperor will surely trust you more.’”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Bao Sheng advised Xiao He to offer his relatives as hostages so as to gain the trust of Liu Bang. Even Xiao He, a person known for his prudence, could not stay clear of his lord’s suspicion, as reflected in the line “Autocracy could not tolerate Prime Minister Xiao” of the poem

36 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Chen,” *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 56, pp. 2061-2.

37 Fan Ye, “Biography of Chen Chong,” *Book of the Later Han* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965), Vol. 46, p. 1565.

38 Sima Qian, “Biography of Prime Minister Xiao,” *Records of the Grand Historian*, Vol. 53, p. 2015.



“The Chang’an City: an Ancient Theme” (*Chang’an Guyi* 長安古意) by the Tang poet Lu Zhaolin (635-689 A.D.). From this we can see the situation in which the prime ministers found themselves.

By the middle of the Western Han, the power of the prime minister was reduced in several ways. First, his own administrative power was divided into three parts, with the Grand Commandant (*Taiwei* 太尉) and the Imperial Counselor, who originally held positions lower than that of the prime minister, promoted to be on an equal footing with him. Together, the three were renamed as *Da Situ* (大司徒), *Da Sima* (大司馬) and *Da Sikong* (大司空), in charge of civil affairs, military affairs and infrastructure, respectively. Instead of being subordinate to one another, they all reported to the emperor. Second, a special oversight institution called *Yushi Tai* (御史台 the Imperial Council) was established to represent the monarch in overseeing and restricting the power of the prime minister. Third, there appeared a confrontation between the “inner court” and the “outer court”. At the time of Emperor Wu of Han, some inner court officials (including eunuchs), much lower in position than the prime minister, were selected to participate in running the government. They formed a decision-making group inside the court and were titled the “inner court” as opposed to the “outer court” administration headed by the prime minister. This was an obvious restraint of the prime minister’s power.

After the founding of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the three Dukes (*Da Situ*, *Da Sima* and *Da Sikong*) remained in the position of a prime minister, but with much less power: “The three Dukes today are more just a name than they are a reality.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the “inner court” rose in status and the *Shangshu* institution responsible for inner court paperwork was expanded and was officially named “*Shangshu Tai*” (尚書台) or Chancery, which “takes orders from the emperor, collects taxes within the four seas, enjoys huge power and shoulders great responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> Zhongchang Tong (180-220) said the prime minister “held a higher position with fewer obligations in the past; but nowadays a lower position with more obligations.”<sup>41</sup> The underlying reason for such changes was none other than the emperor’s suspicion of and constraint on the power of the prime ministers.

The central government of the Sui Dynasty set up a system of Three Councils and Six Boards. The heads of the Three Councils, namely *Shangshu* (尚書), *Menxia* (門下) and *Neishi* (內史), all acted as prime ministers and jointly ran the state affairs. The *Shangshu* Council had six branches, namely the boards of

39 Fan Ye, “Biography of Chenchong,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 46, p. 1565.

40 Fan Ye, “Biography of Li Gu,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 63, p. 2076.

41 Fan Ye, “Biography of Zhongchang Tong,” *Book of the Later Han*, Vol. 49, p. 1658.

*Li* (吏 personnel), *Min* (民 people), *Li* (禮 rites), *Bing* (兵 soldiers), *Xing* (刑 punishment), and *Gong* (工 Construction), each of which administered four sub-branches to further divide the prime minister's power.

The Tang Dynasty followed the system of Sui, but changed the *Neishi* Council into the *Zhongshu* Council (中書省). Concerned about the high ranks of the three council heads, the emperor often deliberately deprived them of their power and transferred it to deputy heads or other officials with a total of more than ten people. The intention was clear: to strengthen his own power by weakening that of the prime ministers.

The Song Dynasty used the means of “separation of power” and “inconsistency of a post with its duty” to decrease the prime minister's power and increase the emperor's strength. For example, military affairs were run by the *Shumi Yuan* (樞密院 the Privy Council), the administration by the *Zhongshu Menxia* Council (中書門下省), and finance by *San Situ* (三司徒). The head of the *Zhongshu Menxia* Council was titled *Zhongshu Menxia Pingzhangshi* (中書門下平章事), who though served as a prime minister, had no jurisdiction in military affairs or finance and had to report to the emperor for every decision, be it governing guidelines or specific measures. Clearly, the Song court continued the trend of greatly diminishing the powers of the office of prime minister.

The Yuan Dynasty abolished the *Shangshu* and *Menxia* Councils, leaving the *Zhongshu* Council as the highest administrative organization, whose head, *Zhongshu Ling* (中書令), was the crown prince. “Once a crown prince is chosen, he holds the post of *Zhongshu Ling* without exception.”<sup>42</sup> Then, directly under the *Zhongshu Ling* was the prime minister—a reflection of the emperor's strong control over the prime minister's power.

During the Ming Dynasty, monarchical centralism reached its zenith. The post of the prime minister was simply abandoned by Zhu Yuanzhang after the Hu Weiyong incident. The emperor took over the duties of the prime minister and mandated that the directors of the Six Boards should report directly to himself. He also issued a decree that “later emperors should not consider appointing a prime minister. An official who presents a memorial for this purpose should be sentenced to death.”<sup>43</sup>

The Ming and Qing dynasties established the post of “Senior Grand Secretary of Cabinet” (*Neige Daxueshi* 內閣大學士) who “though not titled as prime

42 Tao Zongyi, *Nancun Chuogeng Lu* (南村輟耕錄), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), Vol. 22, p. 269.

43 Zhang Tingyu, “Annals of Bureaucratic Establishment” I (*Zhiquan Zhi*), *The History of Ming* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), Vol. 72, p. 1733.

minister, still enjoyed the power of a prime minister". But in reality, the senior grand secretaries during this period, with only a few exceptions (for instance, Yan Song in the Jiajing era and Zhang Juzheng in the Wanli era of Ming), did not have the authority of a prime minister and were merely secretaries of the emperor. Emperor Qianlong of Qing was so suspicious of the power of a prime minister that he wrote an article to argue against it, revealing fully the extreme centralist mentality of an autocratic monarch. He argued:

Who would it be other than the emperor that appoints a prime minister? If the emperor stays reclusive to cultivate himself and hands over the governance of the empire to the prime minister and does not intervene himself, he would be lucky if he had such prime ministers as Han Qi and Fan Zhongyan. But even Han and Fan did not hesitate to debate with the emperor. Though if the emperor had the misfortune to have such prime ministers as Wang Anshi, Lü Huiqing and the like, then it would be inevitable for the empire to fall into chaos. Therefore, this should be avoided. It is totally unacceptable for a prime minister to go so far as to regard the governance of the empire as his own job with no regards for the emperor. (A Note on Cheng Yi's "On the Memorials of Preceptors," 書程頤論經筵劄子後)

In this passage, Emperor Qianlong expressed not only his discontent over such prime ministers as Han Qi who dared to "argue with the emperor," but also his resentment towards those like Wan Anshi and Lü Huiqing. He condemned the view upheld by Cheng Yi and other Confucians of the Song Dynasty that a prime minister should always work towards the realization of a better state, and if he does not have the position to do so, at least counsel the emperor to such ends. What Emperor Qianlong hoped was that the intellectuals would serve as the emperor's literary servants or bookworms with no interest in politics. The Qianjia School's preference for exegesis and textual criticism and the demise of the prime minister system (which had lasted more than one thousand years since the Qin) in Ming and Qing both were closely related to the development of extreme monarchical centralism.

Mighty as it was, China's imperial power was under the restraint of rites, conventions, laws, a bureaucratic system, noble privilege, and the authority of local gentry. Thus we cannot say that Chinese autocratic emperors had unlimited power. Nevertheless, restraints on imperial power were not codified into laws and regulations. From Qin onwards, privileges of the nobility were often restricted or even denied; meanwhile, the ritual system, the bureaucratic

system, and the local gentry's authority were all subject to the office and power of the emperor. With "His command being the institution, and his instruction being the verdict," the emperor could change a system or dismiss an official whenever he wanted. Wielding "six scepters" (life and death, riches and poverty, and respect and baseness), the Chinese imperial power was undoubtedly autocratic. It is a basic fact that starting from Qin, imperial power was enormous and highly esteemed; but it was not absolute power without limits.

Although Chinese autocratic hierarchy and the patriarchal clan system are symbiotic, the former is usually stronger. To take an example from *A Dream of the Red Mansion*, in Chapter 18, when the imperial consort Yuanchun paid a visit to her parents, "Jia She, as head of all the men of the clan, remained at the western street door, and dowager lady Jia, as head of the female relatives of the family, waited outside the principal entrance to do the honors". Upon seeing the imperial consort, the grandmother (dowager lady Jia), the uncle (Jia She), the father (Jia Cheng), and the mother (Madame Wang) either "knelt down at the side of the street" or "advanced as far as the other side of the portiere, and inquired after her health". This is the so-called "the monarch-subject propriety comes before the affection among family members," an embodiment of the highly esteemed great imperial power. It was not until the monarch-subject propriety was observed that the granddaughter (or daughter) Yuan Chun "supported the old lady Jia with one hand and Madame Wang with the other" to fulfill her filial piety, that the three generations talked about the bygone days in tears.

While the autocratic monarchy of Han, Tang and Song merely extended its power to prefectures and counties, regional administrative authority was still respected by the monarchy. However, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, this regional "second line of defense" was breached by the central government when the newly implemented "neighborhood administrative system" brought the central court's power all the way to the citizens' doorsteps. As Fei Xiaotong, a renowned contemporary sociologist, remarked, "the neighborhood administrative system laid the top-down political track right before the door of each family, and the imminent police patrolling system would even extend the track inside the family door."<sup>44</sup> Hence, in the age of recent antiquity and modern times, autocratic centralism was strengthened rather than weakened.

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44 Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006), p. 150.

#### IV The Cultural Functions of Feudalism and the Imperial System

The decentralized “feudalism” in pre-Qin dynasties and the later centralized imperial system from Qin onwards had influenced the generation and evolution of Chinese culture in different ways.

##### 1 *Feudalism Being Conducive to the Creation of Ideological and Academic Diversification*

In evaluating feudalism, both ancient and modern thinkers tend to judge it from the perspective of political structure, especially the strengths and weaknesses of the divided/united regime in governing a state. This can be called a politics-oriented study of feudalism best represented by the famous “On Feudalism” by Liu Zongyuan mentioned earlier.

Some philosophers examined “feudalism” in light of ideology and culture, whose diversity, in their view, was attributed to the decentralization of feudalism. For instance, Yuan Mei (1716-1798) of Qing pointed out that the various forms of feudal politics left enough room for different talents to live and for all schools of thought to take shape and thrive. Taking Confucius as an example, Yuan argued that the sage could not prosper under the system of prefectures and counties, nor under the system of imperial examination, both of which featured unified thinking. The spread of his teachings had a lot to do with the feudal pattern of the independent vassal states in late Zhou. He states,

Thanks to feudalism, he could be busy traveling around various states, such as Wei, Qi, Chen, Cai, Liang, Song and Teng. Wherever he travelled, vassals showed their respect and students followed, which enabled him to gain even more repute. Thousands of years later, he would still be revered as a great master. If the sage had been born in the times of the prefecture and county system and had failed the imperial examination three times, he would have been stranded in one state and would have lived as a hermit and remained a nobody. If so, how could he have possibly established himself under Heaven?<sup>45</sup>

This is indeed an incisive culture-oriented view on feudalism.

There were people in late Qing and modern times who shared this view of Yuan Mei. For example, the contemporary figure Dai Jitao stated:

45 Yuan Mei, “More Notes on Feudalism,” *Xiao Cang Shan Fang Wen Ji* (小倉山房文集), (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1998), Vol. 21, p. 1638.

The system of Zhou was feudal. The advancement of Chinese civilization had persisted for over one millennium before Zhou but it was in the Zhou Dynasty that it reached its peak. Since then, it was on the decline. The scholarship of Han featured far-fetched argumentation and analogies; that of Tang, extravagance; and Song, shallowness. The highly civilized culture in Zhou was made possible due to the absence of autocratic central governance and the presence of freedom in local areas. The thriving competition would naturally lead to improvement. Therefore, the reason why Confucius, Mencius and many other eminent figures of the “one hundred schools of thought” were all from this feudal period was not that they were born with exceptional intelligence . . . but that the times enabled them to shine.<sup>46</sup>

Dai was not a champion of feudalism, but he was aware that while “feudalism” was not conducive to national unity, it offered a relaxed environment for free ideological and academic development: “Feudalism is not an admirable system,” but due to its decentralized nature, “it is conducive to the advancement of society, of culture and of the individual’s mind.”<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, centralism “greatly hinders their advancement.” Dai concluded: “So the progress of Chinese culture is attributable to decentralization; while its retrogress to centralism.”<sup>48</sup>

Feng Youlan (1895-1990), a Chinese historian of philosophy, held views similar to Yuan Mei and Dai Jitao. Regarding the reason for the academic prosperity in the pre-Qin feudal period, he gave his explanation by quoting from ancient classics: “At that time, vassals of all states had different likes and dislikes” (“Treatise on Literature,” *The Book of Han*) and “Every one in the world did whatever he wished, and was the ruler to himself” (“On the Schools of Thought all over China,” *Zhuangzi* 莊子 • 天下). Feng went on to conclude: “Philosophy in remote ages owed its boom to the freedom of thinking and speech which itself was engendered by the emancipating transitional era.”<sup>49</sup> He noted that under the autocracy since the time of Qin, “the atmosphere of complete freedom in speech and thinking disappeared.”<sup>50</sup>

46 Dai Jitao, *Collection of Dai Jitao's Essays* (Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 1990), pp. 765-766.

47 Ibid., p. 766.

48 Ibid., p. 766.

49 Feng Youlan, “Political and Social Background of Ancient Chinese Philosophy,” *The Sansongtang Collection of Academic Essays* (*Sansongtang Xueshu Wenji*), (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1984), p. 164.

50 Ibid., p. 165.



Thanks to the liberal and diversified social conditions provided by feudalism, the pre-Qin philosophers traveled all around freely to preach their teachings. For instance, Mencius “went from one prince to another, who provided for him in return for his advice.” And on his trips, he was “accompanied by dozens of carriages and followed by several hundred men” (“Duke Wen of Teng” II of *Mencius*). As for Mozi, he “set foot upon Qi in the north, Wei in the west and Chu for several times.”<sup>51</sup> And Su Qin and Zhang Yi went to different states as lobbyists and served the lords as prime ministers.

The Warring States Period witnessed the emergence of the “Nine Schools” (Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, the School of Names, Legalism, the Yin-Yang School, the School of Agrarianism, the School of Political Strategists, and the School of Eclectics) and the “Ten Schools” (the “Nine Schools” plus the School of Story Tellers), and each school had sub-sects. Han Feizi claimed that after Confucius and Mozi, “Confucianism was divided into eight groups and Mohism into three” (“Eminent Study,” *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 • 顯學). Starting from different academic vantage points, all schools proposed colorful schemes to govern a state and bring tranquility to the whole world. They even put forward manifold cosmologies and life philosophies, presenting a picture of “Scholars indulging in ardent discussions” (“Duke Wen of Teng” II, *Mencius* 孟子 • 滕文公下).

In contrast to this, Qin and Han, with public opinion dictated by the state, and Ming and Qing with the “literary inquisition,” could by no means breed anything similar to the splendid one hundred schools of thought. Take the Han Dynasty for example, when executing Liu An, the King of Huainan, and Liu Ci, the King of Hengshan, Emperor Wu also arrested their relatives and subordinates, and consequently tens of thousands of people were implicated and died. At the same time, the court established an imperial university and “asked the whole world to recommend upright, virtuous and talented scholars and endow them with important posts.”<sup>52</sup> But the scholars could only sing paeans for the court and “salute the grand cause.” The all-inclusive pattern with “Vassals practicing different governance and one hundred schools advocating distinct theories” (“Dispelling Blindness,” *Xunzi* 荀子 • 解蔽), which existed in the feudal times, had completely disappeared.

Yuan Mei and Dai Jitao had good reasons to affirm, from the perspective of cultural history, the contribution of feudal decentralization to academic diversity. Feudalism did provide a liberal environment for all thought and learning

51 Sun Yirang, “Biography of Mozi in Postface of Mozi I,” *Collected Textual Criticism of Mozi* (*Mozi Jiangu*), (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 1986), p. 40.

52 Ban Gu, “Biography of Dongfang Shuo,” *The Book of Han*, Vol. 65, p. 2841.

to flourish, as evidenced in Mencius. The book records Mencius' criticism of the ruler of Liang: "King Hui of Liang is indeed heartless"; his criticism includes an appeal on behalf of the "people who suffered the tyranny of the ruler"; it also has arguments advocating the view that the people are the most important for a nation; the sovereign is less significant. What is more, it even includes such a statement as the killing of a tyrant does not count as an insubordinate act, but should be seen as getting rid of a "robber" or "hooligan." In the face of such incendiary remarks, the vassals only listened and dared not do anything to suppress and punish the speaker.

Apart from the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, during the several brief periods of political disunity in Chinese history, the control of culture by the autocratic monarchy was weakened and academic thoughts developed in a relatively free manner. For example, in Wei, Jin, the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the late Ming, early Qing, and at the transition from Qing to the Republican Era, diversified schools of thoughts boomed. An ancient scholar once said, "when the country suffers, the poets get lucky." Following this logic, we can also say that political turmoil and disunity present the possibility of diversified thought and culture. During the change of dynasties from Ming to Qing, the whole country was in disorder. Yet such "collapse of Heaven and Land" gave birth to the early enlightening thoughts of Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi and Wang Fuzhi. After the Revolution of 1911, with the warlords engaged in wars, the government was too busy to care about culture, thus leaving enough room for the rise of the New Cultural Movement. Of course, an ideal case would be a unified, flourishing age with a liberal atmosphere under which scholarship can advance without any obstacles. This situation once emerged in the Song Dynasty, though in a very limited form. In compliance with Emperor Taizu's posthumous order, the Song court did not kill a single scholar, and adopted quite liberal cultural policies. It was in this context that after having been demoted and promoted several times, Su Shi still maintained a good state of mind and produced even better works.

## 2 *The Stifling Effect of Centralism on Culture and Creativity*

In contrast to the decentralized feudalism, the highly centralized imperial system had a distinct impact on culture, but it was a double-edged sword. In examining this impact, let us first look at an extreme example.

The contention among the one hundred schools could only have existed in the feudal era of political pluralism. It would have been unimaginable in a centralized monarchical age. The people-oriented ideas in Mencius were disliked and even hated by autocratic monarchs. In the Warring States Period, unhappy as they might be, the vassals still listened respectfully to the teachings of

Mencius. In sharp contrast to this, Zhu Yuanzhang, the Emperor Taizu of Ming, even with all the political and military power in his grasp, could not bear the millennium-old warnings of the “second saint” (Mencius) to the sovereigns. He not only excluded Mencius from the sacrificial ceremonies at the Confucian Temple, but also expressed more than once to his intimate ministers that if the old man (Mencius) had lived in Ming, he would have been sentenced to death. Zhu Yuanzhang issued a decree to delete from Mencius the passages that the people are the most important for a nation, and the sovereign is less significant: “In the tenth month of the twenty-third year of Hongwu, an order was issued to compile *Excerpts from Mencius*, in which all that did not advocate the supremacy of the ruler should be deleted, such as “An emperor who does not listen to remonstrations should be dethroned” and “the sovereign is less significant.”<sup>53</sup>

The historian Rong Zhaozu (1897-1994) analyzed in his *Excerpts from Mencius* by Ming Taizu, the 85 pieces that had been left out in the Hongwu twenty-seventh year version of *Excerpts from Mencius* now collected in Peking Library. He classified them into different categories. They were prohibited from being included in the excerpts “due to the proposal of putting people before the emperor,” or “due to people criticizing the ruling class,” or “due to people criticizing the politics,” or “due to people’s protest against severe taxation,” or “due to protest against civil war,” or “due to the denouncement of bureaucracy,” “due to the assertion that the emperor is to blame for the degenerating customs,” and “attacking hypocrisy.”<sup>54</sup> From this, we can see the marked contrast between the idea of people-oriented governance formed in the politically diversified feudal era, and the autocracy in a centralized monarchy with unitary politics and state-sanctioned thought.

The monarchical centralism from the time of Qin was very powerful, however, in certain aspects of cultural construction. China was one of the first countries to establish a centralized regime, which was more beneficial to social stability and economic prosperity than the separatism of vassals which long existed in medieval Western Europe, thus laying the foundation for cultural development. Only a centralized monarchical system could standardize characters and units of measurement (Qin Dynasty), and launch large-scale academic compilations (Han Dynasty). From Han’s large-scale collation and compilation of the classics, Tang’s *Collection of Literature Arranged by*

53 Peng Sunyi, *Complements to the Historical Records of Ming (Mingshi Jishi Benmo Bu)*, Vol. 1, the private edition of Hanfen Library, p. 2.

54 Rong Zhaozu, “Emperor Taizu of Ming’s Excerpts from Mencius,” *Reading and Publishing*, Vol. 2, Issue 4, (Shanghai: Life Bookstore, 1947), pp. 16-21.

*Categories* (Yiwen Leiju), Song's *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (Taiping Guangji), *Imperial Readings of the Taiping Era* (Taiping Yulan and Cefu Yuangui), to Ming's unprecedented reference book *Yongle Canon* (Yongle Dadian), Qing's series of *Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (Siku Quanshu), and The *Kangxi Dictionary* (Kangxi Zidian), all of them were fruits of the centralized monarchy and government support. In addition to enabling cultural unification, centralized regimes also ensured wide-spread pragmatic rationalism and were therefore able to avoid the religious fanaticism and theological dogmatism in medieval Europe. All this demonstrates the strengths of the imperial system that contributed to the medieval civilization of China.

On the other hand, the strict control of the centralized regime over the household registry system, the restraint by the neighborhood administrative system and the patriarchal clan system, and the shackles of ethical codes and patriarchal beliefs on people's minds all contributed to the slow progress of the pre-capitalist society, the underdevelopment of the commodity economy and the citizenry. As a result, when Western European capitalism grew from the budding state into the Industrial Revolution through the accumulation of capital, China was found greatly lagging behind. The persistence of the imperial system had a great influence on modern China's backwardness and being at the mercy of other countries.

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# New Thoughts on the Social Forms of Ancient China (from the Zhou to Qing Dynasties)

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## Abstract

The entire course of ancient Chinese history has centered on state power, which dominated and shaped the basic picture of social history. The key to Chinese state power has been the state ownership of land, and based on this we can divide the social forms of ancient China into four successive periods: the period of *yishe* 邑社時代 or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period); the period of official communal system 官社時代 (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty); the period of half official communal system 半官社時代 (Han to Tang Dynasty); and the period of state vs. individual peasants 國家個體小農時代 (Song to Qing Dynasty).

## Keywords

social formation – state power – land ownership – official communal system – individual peasant

For more than half a century, most theories and methods regarding the study of ancient Chinese society have been imported. Some came directly from Western academic discourses on the basis of Euro-centrism, while some were imitations of Western academics. For example, the neat and systematic theory of “five production modes” was modeled on Stalin’s thought. Other key

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theories, including theories that reference rural communes, medieval times, middle ages, manorial systems, and the more systematic “ancient aristocratic society of the Six Dynasties reformed in the Tang and Song Dynasties,” were proposed with reference to Western academic discourses rooted in Euro-centrism.

In the 1950s, the academic field of history engaged in heated discussions over such issues as the periodization of ancient Chinese history, inchoate capitalism in China, the peasant wars, the formation of the Han ethnicity, and the system of land ownership. These discussions had such a great impact that the issues were labeled “the five golden flowers.” At its roots, the blossoming of “the five golden flowers” was no different than the practice of observing Chinese history through the single theoretical model of “five production modes.” Although during that process many empirical studies were conducted, they were not intended to discover the actual logic within Chinese history or to establish conceptions and fields of theoretical analysis in accordance with actual Chinese history. Instead, those empirical studies were conducted to obtain the expected results that would prove the pre-selected theory. As a result, they were constrained within the framework of “five production modes,” just like, as the saying goes in Chinese, someone cutting his own feet to fit into a new pair of shoes.

Although the founders of Marxism did not propose a theoretical model of periodization as clear-cut as the “five production modes,” Marx himself did raise the theoretical question of the exceptionality of Eastern societies’ histories, including China. Chinese academic circles also carried on enthusiastic discussions over this question. Yet, despite some accomplishments, they never arrived at a new theoretical conclusion in accordance with the realities and characteristics of Chinese history. Scholars were still trying to prove whether ancient China was a society based on slavery or on feudalism. The most typical example of this was the discussion of the periodization of ancient Chinese history: all the arguments between scholars were carried out within the old model of “five production modes,” which was a pre-established theoretical framework. Given this history of misguided scholarship, future research on China should try to escape the constraints of Western-centric historical ideas and the system of Western academic discourse. Instead, future research should focus on an in-depth study of the idiosyncrasies of Chinese history through expanded empirical analyses, and the establishment of a theoretical framework that is based on the realities of Chinese history.



### Section One: Envisioning a New System of Socio-Economic Forms in Chinese History: The Theory of State-Centered Power

The features of this new system are as follows: it modifies the traditional two-dimensional relationship into a three-dimensional relationship; it changes horizontal relationships into vertical relationships; and it changes social relationships into the relationship between the state and the common people. The relationship between the official government and the common people (common people being those without official government positions—lay people) will become the axis line in this system, upon which the rise and fall of the society, the nation, and the state all depend.

The traditional methodology of researching socio-economic forms in Chinese history focuses on looking for a fundamental relationship within the society, and thus takes society as the axis line of the coordinate system. We call this kind of system a two-dimensional system, which looks at the relationship between the exploiters and the exploited within social relationships. The inevitable route taken is a careful search for exploited slaves or peasants, and once this kind of relationship is found, it is used to define the superstructure and the state's nature, with the state representing the dominant class. In this way the nature of the society is defined. In this old system, the state is considered merely as a superstructure that serves as the foundation, and therefore the relationship between the state and the people, that is, between officials and the non-officials, becomes indirect and secondary. Only by looking at relationships in the non-official society can one see the nature of the state. This, however, is not in accordance with the reality of Chinese history.

The reason is that a society is three-dimensional, not two-dimensional. The traditional methodology ignored the dimension of state power, which is a most important and decisive dimension in Chinese social history. State power is paramount because it determined everything and dominated everything in Chinese history. In China, it is not that the non-official society determines the state, but that the state power and imperial will shape the overall picture of the society. Therefore, to observe, perceive, and narrate ancient Chinese history we should look at the oppositional yet integrated relationship between the state and the lay society, or simply put, between the officials and non-officials. Only through this approach can we elaborate the essential characteristics of the history of ancient Chinese society.

We must first establish the following perspective: the opposition between the officials and non-officials was the basic structure of ancient Chinese society. It was not only the basic structure of social classes in ancient China's official economic system, but also the axis line of China's social class

system for thousands of years. To put it simply, the relationship between the officials and the lay society has been as tight as an iron-barrel in Chinese society.

This relationship between the officials and lay society is not only one between the ruling and the ruled, but also an economic relationship of the exploiters and the exploited. It is a relationship of social production that was established on the basis of the state ownership of the land, the state's power, and the political rule. This kind of production relationship is a social production relationship based on the state system, or power. Compared with other kinds of production relationships within the lay society, it featured unparalleled stability, cohesiveness, vileness, and violence, and applies to the temporal as well as spatial context. Therefore, it is the fundamental gene of the history of Chinese society. For approximately three thousand years, it has been shaping Chinese society and history in different forms, and only through it can we see the true essence of ancient Chinese history.

The social production relationship based on the state system has the following characteristics.

First, this relationship and all actions generated by it were ever-present in history.

Second, this relationship exhibits widespread violence. It did not rely on pure economic law for its functioning, but instead relied on state power and administrative orders. All economic demands based on this relationship were obligatory.

Third, this relationship has the maximization of state wealth as its end, and therefore exhibits broad confiscation of wealth from the peasantry. In the system based on this relationship, the supervisors are those with state power. It then became common that people with power sought wealth. And the transformation of power into wealth has been an ever-true iron-law. An open state system thus came into existence, featuring corruption, theft, bribery, and using public power for private profit.

Because of its gigantic scale and lack of corrective mechanisms, this kind of social production relationship based on the state system was always very close to a loss of control, and any infection could lead to overall collapse. Therefore, the history witnessed cyclical overthrows.

The game between the officials and the common people in ancient China usually ended with a revolt by the people who could not bear the oppression from the officials any more. The developments and changes of relationships between the officials and the common people constitute a historic pattern. In the late Qin Dynasty, the riot of the peasants did not stem from conflicts within the lay society, but from the fact that the peasants could not long bear

the pressures from the officials. It was an inevitable end to the accumulation and intensification of conflicts between the officials and the common people. As an archetype, it also signified a fundamental and historic path of development and change for Chinese social and class conflicts across the following two thousand years.

The foundation of social forms within the state system (production relationships) is the state ownership of land. Together with the land-granting system, state ownership of land became the basis for state exploitation, gave birth to the official communal economic system, and enabled the system that allows the government to demand taxes and free labor from the people. From the levy of grain, fabric, and labor in the time of Mencius, to the basic system of land rent, military taxes, and labor levies in Qin Dynasty, a basic structure of the state exploiting the people came into existence and lasted for two thousand years. This structure in the Qin Dynasty, deriving from the official communal economic system, became the fundamental exploiting system in ancient China. Therefore, the state ownership of land can be viewed as the logical starting point to analyze the exploitative systems that existed in ancient China. The Qin Dynasty can also be taken as an example to analyze the relationships between officials and non-officials across the following two thousand years of history of China.

Within the system of land rent, military taxes, and labor levies in the Qin Dynasty, the proportion of labor levy was higher than the military tax, which was higher than the land rent. This shows that the possession and the exploitation of the people's labor bore more weight than the land. The emphasis on labor levy over land rent is a basic characteristic of state exploitation under the state ownership of land. I have to point out here again that the very basis for the exploitation system in the Qin Dynasty was the state ownership of land and the land-granting system. On one hand, we may attribute Qin's success in the beginning to a limited exploitation through a relatively rigorous system. On the other hand, for various reasons, common peasants were granted more and more barren land, and after their hard work, their harvests were exploited by the officials. When these people became more and more desperate, the state lost its source of exploitation, which resulted in the collapse of Qin.

The establishment and development of Qin's tax and levy system epitomized the basic systems of all other Chinese dynasties. In ancient China, both the central and local governments tended to add temporary tax items and then codify them as permanent ones. Exploitation of the peasants was not limited to land rent, military taxes, and labor levies. The governments would always create new taxation items whenever they saw the need, until the peasants could not take it anymore. Then the dynasty would collapse and a new dynasty

would start, only to repeat the old path. Between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Huang Zongxi very insightfully pointed out this pattern: "The people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens."<sup>1</sup>

Huang pointed out that all the tax reforms in all dynasties shared the same nature. By only changing the names instead of making real changes in taxation, those reforms resulted in the pattern where "The people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens." His conclusion that non-stop exorbitant taxation led to the collapse of all dynasties is accurate and his finding is of great worth because it touches upon the basic pattern of taxation system development in Chinese history. I argue that the items and names are merely superficial and technical problems. Behind the phenomenon that "people were always faced with ever-increasing burdens," there was an even more essential problem. Historically speaking, in all dynasties since the Qin, all the reforms in taxation systems, even some famous ones, were not meant to reduce the peasants' burdens. Instead, they all share an essential purpose, which was to ensure the highest, or actually limitless, profit of the state. To sum it in one sentence, all the power exerted in the name of state was meant to exploit peasants and seek an ultimate and limitless profit for the state. That was the essential cause of "exorbitant taxation" in different dynasties. With this intention as their principle, no matter what kinds of policies or reforms were adopted, they could only solve the deficit of the state temporarily but could never solve fundamental social problems. To make the situation worse, those who held offices never ceased rent-seeking. All these added up to the pattern elaborated by Huang Zongxi.

Looking at historical facts, one basic principle underlies all taxations systems and reforms in all dynasties: the state asks for what it needs, not what the peasants could afford. No matter how large the budget of the government became, the peasants had only one choice: feed it.

According to *Historical Records* of Sima Qian, the government in the Han Dynasty would "measure the amount of salaries for officials, estimate the official expenses, and use these as the criteria for taxation."<sup>2</sup> Without realizing the harm inherent in this principle, scholars used to applaud this method. Essentially a principle of "dividing the burden according to the budget," it became a codified law for the exploitation of peasants for thousands of years.

1 Huang Zongxi, "Land System Three" in *Ming Yi Dai Fang Lu, The Complete Works of Huang Zongxi*, Vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Classics Publishing House, 1985), p. 26.

2 Sima Qian, "Equalizing Agronomical Matters" (平準書), *Historical Records*, Vol. 30 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959), p. 1418.

Under this principle, both exorbitant taxation and the pattern described by Huang would not stop. When taxation adjustments were executed in a skillful way, there might be some short-term relief for peasants, but in the long run the peasants would always be faced with too heavy a burden. The ultimate result would be the collapse of dynasties after incessant exorbitant taxation.

The development and transformation of the conflict between the officials and the common people was a historical process. One historical fact is worth mentioning here: in the Warring States Period, there were many wars and people were drafted for labor. However, this did not lead to large-scale resistance among the people. In contrast, it was not until fourteen years after Qin unified China that the nation-wide uprising led by Chensheng and Wuguang broke out. Why? We can be sure of at least one cause: the peasants could no longer bear the exploitation of the officials. None of the three large scale peasant uprisings in the Qin and Han Dynasties was caused by civil conflicts. If we look at almost all of the large-scale peasant uprisings throughout ancient Chinese history, the common cause was that the officials pushed the people to the edge. When the disadvantaged commoners and peasants could not put up with it any more, they took the risk and embarked on the violent path of rebellion against the ruling group of nobles.

The peasant uprising at the end of Qin Dynasty was the inevitable end to the long-fermenting conflict between the officials and the common people. It foreshadowed the basic historical development and transformation of conflicts between social classes in China.

## **Section Two: Philosophical Thoughts on Land Ownership Relationships in China—The Ontology of Chinese Land Ownership**

One must pay special attention to three key concepts to do research about Chinese history: “the king’s land,” “the king’s subjects,” and “the king’s power.” These are the three guiding principles for state power in ancient China, with the king’s land being the paramount principle. These three principles are of the same nature. They collectively define the ultimate and ever-present state power, which owns, monopolizes, dominates, and dictates everything. These principles and the features of state power determined the course of ancient Chinese society.

To understand these principles, we need first to correct the meaning of “king.” The king, as in the king’s land, king’s subjects, and king’s power, is not just an individual king or emperor, but a symbol of the state power. It is a special concept of Chinese civilization, and only by understanding it can we

discuss and interpret the real meanings of different concepts in Chinese discourses that pertain to the regal or imperial rule.

"The king's subjects" stipulates the status of ancient Chinese people as subordinate. The king's subjects are those who are attached to the king's land. As is recorded in the poem "Northern Hill" from "Minor Odes of the Kingdom" (小雅 • 北山) of *The Classic of Poetry*, "Every inch of land under *tian* belongs to the King; every individual within the border is the king's subject." The same meaning was also elaborated in the *Zuo Zhuan*: "Which inch of land within the border does not belong to the king? Which individual that eats grains from the land is not the king's subject?"<sup>3</sup> Anybody who lives on the king's land, drinks the water from the land, and eats the food that grows on the land naturally becomes the king's subject, i.e. the state's subject. And a state's subject is obligated to work on the land, pay taxes, and sometimes offer free labor to the state.

"The king's power" is a symbol and an idolized version of the supreme state power. The king's power is a part of the state's power; it does not lie outside or above the state power. Therefore the king's power does not include state power, but the state power included the king's power. This is also the reason I use the notion of state power instead of the king's power in my argument.

Next I want to start a discussion about the king's land, and to do that I suggest a concept of "the ontology of Chinese land ownership."

Looking into the history of Chinese land ownership, one feels an omnipresent, irresistible being that exists all the time. I will borrow the philosophical concept of "ontological ground" to describe it. An ontological ground does not need another being for its existence—it is absolute. Its existence decides other forms of land ownership. We may also think of two concepts in traditional Chinese thoughts: the *dao* and the vessel. The *dao* is the metaphysical and the vessel is the immanent. The ontological ground of land ownership is like the *dao*, the metaphysical. Specific land ownership systems are like the vessel. Just as the *dao*, coming from *tian*, does not change, something similarly eternal exists in the Chinese history of land ownership. Therefore I am not using the concepts of "property" and "rights by ownership" as criteria to look into this history, but I will employ the ideas of "ontological ground of land ownership" and "the specific systems" to analyze China's land ownership history. This kind of analysis will separate Chinese history of land ownership into two levels: the level of ontological ground and the level of historical phenomena. It is different from other analyses because upon the fixed ontological ground there can

3 Yang Bojun, *Annotation to The Zuo Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1990), "The Seventh Year of the Duke of Zhao", p. 1284.

be changes of superficial phenomenon, or form. I believe the paradigm I suggest is more in accordance with Chinese history than previous theories and thus provides a better analytical tool.

The king's land, i.e. the notion that the state owns the land, is the ontological ground of land ownership in China. No matter when and where in history, the existence of king's land and the fact that the state owns the land never changes. Specific systems were volatile, but the concept of the king's land was stable. That is why it is somewhat transcendental and should be considered as the root of all land ownership systems in Chinese history. This is key to understanding all problems concerning China.

The key part in the king's land is the king, for there was always a king (or emperor) in any dynasty. The king represents the state and the symbol of state power, therefore the king regarded himself as equivalent to the state. The king's land is not merely a slogan or concept; it has the backing of the political state and is an instrument of state power. It shows the value and will of the state as an institution of violence. The concept becomes a reality when the state resorts to violence when necessary and dominates the social economy.

That the state owns the land is both a concept and a system. As a specific land system, it was first established in the Zhou dynasty, and it was more symbolic than real. It became solid as all real/physical land should belong to the state in the Warring States Period. By the early years of Western Han Dynasty, private ownership of land emerged as a derivative of this system. Since then Chinese history has witnessed privatization of land ownership that was closely related to the state's political system. The system was created in the Qin Dynasty and was based on state land ownership and the state land-granting system. This has supported the state exploitation system for more than two thousand years. The basic nature of the setup never changed in all those important historical moments: the establishment of state land ownership in Western Han Dynasty; various "land limits" policies in the Han and Jin Dynasties; the policy of granting land equally to peasants in the Northern, Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties; the land usurpation by the state in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties; the land system of the Heavenly Kingdom; the collective ownership of land policy in 1950s; and even the current land system. Throughout history, the concept of the King's land was always there, sometimes obvious and strong, sometimes vague and less powerful. This is why I take it as the ontological ground of land ownership in Chinese history to explain a fundamental persistence throughout historical transformations. That is indisputable.

By using the king's land as the ontological ground of land ownership, we can achieve a better understanding and explanation of China's private land ownership system, as well as Chinese property ownership systems. In certain periods,



private ownership of land was allowed within the ontological ground of the king's land. That is a historical fact we need to acknowledge. Those who do research on the history of Chinese land systems often find themselves trapped between state ownership of land and private ownership of land. This dilemma comes from the paradox of the logic and the facts of Chinese history, and those who do not do their research in a proper way might find it hard to overcome. My discovery and theoretical assumption that the king's land is the ontological ground of historical appearances may help researchers out of this dilemma. The key is that the state's ownership of land and private ownership of land are not at the same level: private ownership of land did not eliminate the state's ownership of land at a deeper level. The ontological ground is eternal, while specific political systems are changeable. Therefore I am adopting the paradigm of "ontological ground vs. specific systems," instead of "ownership vs. possession" to elaborate the land ownership relationship in China.

The ownership of land is the most important element of state power. The highly concentrated state power owes itself to the highly concentrated power of land ownership. The land is the source of people's livelihoods and thus the root of state power, therefore no dynasty ever let go of its power over the land. For nearly three thousand years, the state ownership of land has been the factor that determines and regulates basic systems and notions of Chinese land ownership and property rights, and further decides the fate and path of Chinese history.

Adopting the paradigm of "ontological ground of land ownership vs. specific systems" of land ownership, we can divide Chinese history into four periods: the period that held the King's land as a fictional concept (Western Zhou Dynasty, Spring and Autumn Period); the period when state ownership of land became reality (the Warring States Period, Qin Dynasty); the period of the decline of state land ownership (Han through Tang Dynasties); and the period of development of relatively private ownership of land (Song through Qing Dynasties).

The establishment of the notion and system of the king's land should be taken as the "Great Matter" in Chinese history. On May 13, 2010, renowned Chinese-American historian Ping-ti Ho gave a lecture at Tsinghua University entitled "Unraveling the Mystery of 'Great Matters' in Chinese History by Reestablishing Historical Facts about the Mohist School in the Qin State." In his speech, Ho mentioned that more than sixty years ago, Chen Yinke came to the following conclusion: "According to Buddhist classics, the Buddha appears when there is a 'Great Matter.' Since the Qin Dynasty, Chinese thinking has gone through many complex changes across a long time. If we condense all of that, we can see that the analogous 'Great Matter' here is the emergence and

development of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty.”<sup>4</sup> Ho commented on Chen’s argument: “When I think of what my teacher Mr. Chen has said, both his conclusions seem too absolute. It is true that the birth of Neo-Confucianism was an important matter in the history of Chinese thought; but if we look at the whole history of China, the real ‘Great Matter’ should be the establishment and passing on of the highly concentrated power system of prefectures and counties in the Qin dynasty.”<sup>5</sup>

Looking back, it is true the establishment of despotism in the Qin Dynasty was the Great Matter of all Chinese history. However, I argue that the establishment and development of the concept of the King’s land was also a Great Matter in Chinese history. Since the Zhou Dynasty, all kinds of state powers became more and more concentrated. Although various forms of power related to land ownership were reduced at certain times, this is just the other side of the coin with the new model of power concentration. Old forms of power were reduced, but at the same time the power was concentrated at a higher level. Among all forms of state power, land ownership is the core. Therefore a highly concentrated state power comes from a highly concentrated land ownership. Mencius said: “three things are precious to all lords: the land, people, and politics.”<sup>6</sup> Land, the source of people’s livelihoods and of state power, is the most precious of all. Those in power in all dynasties had to make sure of absolute power over land. *Guoyu* or *The Discourses of the States* states: “The King owns all the vast land within the boundaries, and provides all the food from the land to people; the King takes part of the harvest to feed the officials.” This expressed an idea similar to “all the land under *tian* belongs to the King.”<sup>7</sup> Lu Zhi in the Tang Dynasty also said: “the King owns the land, the peasants work on the land.”<sup>8</sup> Zhu Xi also said: “All the land under *tian* belongs to the

4 Chen Yinke, “Reader’s Report on Volume Two of Feng Youlan’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*,” *Essays of Jinmingguan II* (金明館叢稿二編), (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2001), p. 282.

5 “Unraveling the Mystery of ‘Great Matters’ in Chinese History,” *Guangming Daily* 2010-06-03, p. 11.

6 “Jinxin” (Part Two), *Mencius* (孟子 • 盡心下), see Zhu Xi, *Collected Annotations of the Four Books*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), p. 371.

7 “Chuyu” (Part Two), *Guoyu* (國語 • 楚語下), (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1978), pp. 570-571.

8 Lu Zhi, *Collected Works of Luxuangong*, Hangzhou: Zhejiang Classics Publishing House, 1988, p. 260.

King; all the people living along the river are the King's subjects."<sup>9</sup> Even in the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang still expressed such an idea: "All the land belongs to the official system, the people were granted land to work and thus do not get idle."<sup>10</sup> For almost three thousand years, the land ownership by the state has not only decided the basic system of land ownership and property rights in Chinese history, but has also decided the overall path and destiny of Chinese history.

### Section Three: A Theory of Four Periods of Social Forms in Ancient China (from Zhou to Qing Dynasty)

If we adopt a new system based on state power and the ontological ground of land ownership, we can divide ancient Chinese history into four periods.

The first period is the time of *yishe*, or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period). Looking at the history of the pre-Qin, Qin, and Han Dynasties, the historical forms of communal village society went through the following development: from relatively independent neighborhood communal societies to a communal organization under strict control of various types of state political powers. Although the upper-level political powers went through many changes, the village community was very solid, and therefore was fairly independent compared to the later official communal societies. From *The Classic of Poetry*, which is the most important historical document about society in the Western Zhou Dynasty, rather than finding any proof of slavery or feudalism, we find that village societies were in existence.

The ancient poem "July" from "Odes of Bin" (豳風 • 七月) of *The Classic of Poetry* in particular shows a typical picture of a village society. In the later time of the Spring and Autumn Period, the village societies went through drastic changes and went into decline, and were later replaced by the official communal economic society, which combined the political and communal factors. This development was in accordance with the development of the state land ownership system and state land-granting system. Although the official communal system came after the village societies, it did not develop out of village

9 Zhu Xi, "A Complaint against the Migration of Military Government," (申免移軍治狀) *A Collection of Zhu Xi*, collated by Guo Qi and Yin Bo, (Chengdu: Sichuan Education Press, 1996), p. 820.

10 Zhu Yuanzhang, "Preface to *Continuation of the Great Imperial Criminal Code*," (禦制大誥續編 • 序), see Yang Yifan, *A Study of the Great Imperial Criminal Code*, (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press, 1988), "Appendix," p. 257.

societies. Rather, it was a result of the enforcement of state power. It emerged as a brand new phenomenon, a new social-economic system after the development of state ownership of land and the adoption of a state land-granting system. With the combination of the political and the communal as its basic characteristic, the official communal system as a socio-economic system represents a certain historical social form. It combined the processes of administrative organization and land-granting. Later in history, the combination developed into more pure village official political power, while the peasants became relatively freer as they each were given a portion of land. Later the Han through Tang Dynasties witnessed the development of an economy featuring half official communal as well as private ownership by peasants. Generally speaking, the typical official communal economic system, which could be found as early as the Spring and Autumn Period, developed most in the Warring States Period and the Qin Dynasty.

The second period is the time of the official communal system (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty). The foundation of the official communal system was the high development of the actual system of state ownership of land. The key feature of this organizational form is that political power is unified with the official communal system. With basic-level administration as the system and agriculture as the root, the state policies command everything, including agricultural production, military, social, economic, and cultural aspects. The basic framework unifying state political administration was to register people and peasants and even members of the military. During this process of unification, political power was the ultimate and decisive factor. The state political administration dominated the economy and then dominated everything else. The unification of the political power and the communal system is not only the most important feature of the official communal system, it is also what makes it different from the *yishe*, or village societies.

Even in the early Han Dynasty when Empress Lü was in power, the state made laws classifying twenty different ranks to determine of the amount of land granted to peasants according to their traditional status. At the same time, with the state land ownership stratified and diminished at multiple official levels and the officials of different levels trying to usurp public land, the state land-granting system lost its balance and the privatization of land ownership became inevitable. Ever since the 31st year of Emperor Qin Shihuang, when he asked all landlords as well as peasants to report to the government the amount of land they had, all the way to the enactment of the above-mentioned law in the Han Dynasty, in spite of the state's efforts in controlling land, the private ownership of land became more developed within the larger system of

state ownership of land. There was no definite moment when the private ownership of land was announced; its development was a gradual process of separating, fixing, and differentiating state ownership from private ownership. When state then stopped controlling land owned by non-officials, the private ownership of land was established.

Private ownership was a natural derivative of the state ownership of land. When Han Emperor Wen abolished a universal land-granting law, the system of universal land-granting by the state came to an end and the private ownership of land became established.

The third period is the age of half official communal system (Han to Tang Dynasty). Why call it a half official communal system? The first reason is that Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty abolished the system of universal land-granting by the state, and thus eliminated the basis for official communal system, but the legacy of the official communal system did not vanish. The second reason is that although the state in this period still granted people some public land according to the scale of their households (for example the state adopted the policy of evenly granting some land to peasants in the Northern, Sui and Tang Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties), the land-grating by the state in this period was not as strict and adequate as in the official communal system, the regulation by the state was not as complete, and the official guarantee of social production and livelihood was not as strong.

From the pre-Qin period to the Han Dynasty, there existed a kind of village social organization called *dan* (彈). Its existence marks the difference between village societies in the Qin and Han Dynasties and village communities in later history. The villages in the Han Dynasty still shared some characteristics from earlier official communal societies, in that the villagers maintained common and close connections in social-economic and cultural life. These village communities, whether they were officially organized, non-officially organized but officially controlled, or non-official ones, all shared a strong spirit of self-governance and mutual help among members. At the same time the local officials had great power, and the government still had great control over village societies, which shows the legacy of the official communal system from earlier times.

During the Northern, Sui, and Tang dynasties, till the Five Dynasties, the state adopted the policy of equal land grants to some peasants, who would pay taxes and offer free labor to the state. As written in an imperial order in the 9th year of Tianhe period (485 A.D.) in the Northern Wei Dynasty: "When someone reaches the age to pay taxes, he or she will be granted some land;

when someone gets old or dies, he or she will have to return the land to the state.”<sup>11</sup>

In Volume 13 of *Tanglü Shuyi*, one item stipulates: “Each village head should grant villagers land according to the order, and persuade villagers to work hard on agriculture.”<sup>12</sup> Based on the equal land-granting policy, the state made new standards for taxation and labor levies, and also adopted the *fubing* system through which men were drafted into military service. This was the basic system of the state. The village heads did not just “persuade villagers to work hard”; they also supervised their work and collected taxes.

In Volume 110 of *Weishu*, the records say: “At first, each man will be granted twenty *mu* of land. They have to grow fifty mulberry trees, five date trees, and three elm trees. If they have extra land, they should grow trees accordingly. They should finish growing this land in three years. If they can not, the land that was not worked on will be confiscated back to the state. If they have more than twenty *mu*, they can grow other kinds of trees on the extra land. But on the land they have to give back to the state, they are not allowed to grow mulberry, date, and elm trees.”<sup>13</sup> These records showed that there were unified plans about planting trees. This nation-wide order for agriculture reminds one of the state universal land-granting systems in former dynasties.

The system of equal land-granting by the state also decided the establishment of *fubing* system at that time. According to *The New Book of Tang*, “The military had an official in each village to supervise villagers’ registration and persuade them to work hard on the land.”<sup>14</sup> This can be seen as the combination of agricultural and military policies under the land-granting system. The *fubing* system, in which one man was given the job of “both farming and fighting,” should be seen as a derivative of the universal levy system established on the basis of the universal land-granting system from the Warring States Period. The *fubing* system therefore should be included into the combination of “military and agriculture” based on traditional official communal system.

11 Wei Shou, “Treatise on Food and Money,” *Weishu*, Vol. 110 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), p. 2853.

12 Liu Junwen, *Annotation and Analysis of the Commentary of Criminal Law of the Tang Dynasty* (唐律疏議箋解), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1996), p. 993.

13 Wei Shu, “Treatise on Food and Money,” *Weishu*, Vol. 110, p. 2853.

14 Ouyang Xiu, Song Qi, Fan Zhen, Lü Xiaqing etc., “Treatise on Military,” *The New Book of Tang*, Vol. 50 (新唐書 • 兵志), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975), p. 1325.

During this period, there emerged owners of large pieces of land. However, this should not be seen as a sign of a manorial economy as in Europe, for there were not that many of them, and they did not gain a dominant position.

The fourth period is the age of state vs. individual peasants (Song to Qing Dynasty). After the middle of the Tang Dynasty, the equal land-granting system was abolished and the state stopped granting peasants land. At the same time, the limit on land ownership in place since Han Dynasty was also abolished, and merging lands became legal. After the Jianzhong period of the Tang Dynasty, the state also adopted the “double taxation” law. After this, the state stopped making laws concerning land, and also stopped exerting influence on the huge gaps in land ownership among the people. As a result, there was a great change in the land ownership and amount of land owned by different classes of people. The overall tendency was that private ownership became more popular, and some people started to own larger amounts of land. Also, the forms of ownership became more diverse, with some pieces of land owned by more than two owners.

During the Han and Tang dynasties, the state tried to reform the multi-ownership of land, which shows that the state still wanted to exert influence to ensure production and manage the living conditions of peasants. After the Song Dynasty, the state adopted reforms to collect taxes multiple times per year to make profit in any way they could. At the same time the state paid no attention to the land, which was the most important thing to people's livelihoods. The people became absolutely helpless before the state power, for the state only cared about collecting taxes and making profit. The state totally lost its function of, in the words of Mencius, “steering people's production,” and became a profit-collecting organization. More than ever the state power showed its parasitical and corrupt nature.

Some might see this as a sign of budding capitalism. I disagree. The economic position of large land owners was not dominant. Therefore, I argue that in this period the major social structure was the state vs. individual peasants.

Generally speaking, the course of Chinese history undoubtedly centered on state power, which dominated everything, determined the path of Chinese history, and also shaped the basic picture of social history. The key to Chinese state power has been the state ownership of land, and based on this we can divide the social forms of ancient China into four contiguous periods: the period of *yishe*, or village societies (Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period); the period of official communal system (Warring States Period to Qin Dynasty to the early Han Dynasty); the period of half official communal system (Han to Tang Dynasty); and the period of state vs. individual peasants (Song to Qing Dynasty). This division is based on the internal logic of Chinese history and thus reveals its own pattern.



# The Era of Prefectures and Counties: An Inquiry into the Power Structure and State Governance in Ancient Chinese Society

*Li Ruohui*

*Translated by Wang Keyou*

## Abstract

In spite of all the vicissitudes that Chinese society underwent from the Qin (221-206 BC) to the Qing (AD 1644-1911) dynasties, the system of social government throughout this period as a whole was markedly different from that of Zhou. While the post-Qin dynasties adopted *fa* or laws to govern the nation, it was *li* or rituals that dominated in Zhou as a norm of social control. Hence the key to a fruitful inquiry into the administrative evolution of society from Zhou through Qing, a period spanning over two thousand years, lies in the investigation of the political shift from Zhou as a kingdom to Qin as an empire. Since *li* is a system of ritual propriety representing a consensus of both the upper and lower social strata on the constitution of state power, it is fundamentally different from *fa* due to its lack of a binding or coercive force. An artificial reorganization of society by a new form of social government called for a new political system known as *junxian zhi* (郡縣制), a bureaucratic system of centrally appointed local magistrates in “prefectures and counties.” The compulsory force of the law was guaranteed by the national army, and so a system of military officialdom ensured the command and monopoly over the army by the monarch. A fluid bureaucratic system, which enabled the ruling sovereign or monarch to delegate his authority to ministers and local officials, replaced the hereditary system of power by clan lineage. This paper begins with an analysis of the differences between the Confucians’ idea of rule by *li* and the Legalists’ idea of rule by law, and ends with a discussion on the birth and characteristics of the system of prefectures and commanderies.

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### Keywords

prefectures and counties – codified law – political transformation – Zhou, Qin – shift from Kingdom to Empire

In the *Yiwenzhi* (藝文志, “Treatise of Classical and Other Literature”) of *Hanshu* (漢書, *History of the Han*), a brief mention is made of the Legalists, along with the various schools of thought (*Zhuzilue* 諸子略, “On the Philosophers”), to the following effect:

The Legalists, as a school of Chinese ideology, most likely emerged from the profession of judges known in Zhou (周) as *liguan* (理官), a general reference to officials charged with judicial functions in Zhou. These officials served to assist in or carry out the ritual system by administering rewards and penalties. This is indeed a point of credit to the Legalists. However, if they chose to enforce the law with excessive rigor and severity, there would be no room left for moral teachings and indoctrination of ethical values. And if the ruler sought to keep social order and regulate social conduct solely by penalties and legal decrees, with little regard for benevolence, humane care and kindness to win over the people's hearts, then even the best laws would be counterproductive. The eventual outcome would be for everyone to turn against everyone else, each to hurt their dearest and most beloved, and consequently destroy the fundamental relations and traditional values that underlie the human society.

The above statement is made on the grounds that *fa* (法, written law or penal code) was a professional domain where the Legalists excelled, whereas *li* (禮) was the concern of Confucianists who upheld the ritual system of traditional mores and who advocated education for ethical values and moral influence. The Confucianist assertion, that penalties and legal decrees should not be taken as the exclusive means of governance, actually implies that Legalists should not be entrusted with major functions of the state. For, according to the established Confucian doctrine, governance of a nation ought to be based on the ritual system, whereas Legalists could only be employed to play auxiliary roles.

This was certainly a widely endorsed idea held by the Confucianists. Obviously, the core tenet of the comment on Legalists is to expound the relationship between Rites and Law while taking sides with the Confucian school, who believed that the worst of government was one of absolute punitive law

leaving no space for benevolence and humanity, while the best one was to employ the law to assist in the ritual codes. An instance of the worst government in history was the despotic Qin (秦), on which Confucian scholars made persistent attack throughout the Han dynasty. The best government was the system of Han, where rites played a dominant role and law was ancillary. Then there are those forms of government that lie between the two extremes: one being that of Zhou of the Ji Royal House (姬周) who adopted a full array of rites in government, and one being the Six Warring States where law predominated and rites were supplementary.

From this commentary on the Legalists, it can be seen that the original passage from *Han Shu* sums up a path of transformation of the ritual system over a thousand years. The judicial official was originally one functionary of the bureaucracy in charge of the Zhou rites, in other words, penalties and punishments were only a part of the larger ritual system. Towards the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, the Jin and Zheng states molded bronze tripod vessels to inscribe legal provisions and promulgated the first written, or codified, law. From then on, law became independent from rites and even began encroaching on the latter, resulting in the utter abandonment of Rites by the Qin rulers. It was not until the rise of Han that Confucianism mitigated the extremism of the Legalists and paved the way for a ritual-based government with law as its supplement.

The Chinese character 輔 *fu* (to aid, assist, or supplement) occurs as a key concept in the cited passage. The word is a verb which denotes a principal-auxiliary relationship between two entities. How should we understand the relationship between two entities, or, how should we distinguish the principal from the auxiliary? We must go back to the text itself to identify the denoted objects that await differentiation, namely, the *li* (禮, “rites,” “rituals,” “ceremonies,” moral codes or rules of social conduct) and the *fa* (法, “law,” “penalty” or “punishment”). The two concepts are held in contrast with each other precisely because they share some common ground. As the modern scholar Qu Tongzu (瞿同祖) remarks on this regard, “Confucianists and Legalists both take an ideal social order as their ultimate goal. They disagree only in how they view the ideal social order and how to achieve it.”<sup>1</sup> Confucianists prefer rituals while Legalists resort to law. What is the all-important divergence, then, between *li* (rites) and *fa* (law)? Qu Tongzu makes the distinction as follows:

1 Qu Tongzu, *Zhongguo falyu yu Zhongguo shehui*, (Law and Society in Traditional China), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2003), p. 292.

The Confucianists laid emphasis on a differentiation between the noble/humble, superior/inferior, senior/junior, and kin/alien aspects of social relations. Therefore, they had to resort to the rituals as a guardian of social order, because the ritual codes govern human conduct of a heterogeneous, idiosyncratic, and individualistic nature, rather than by the law which is reductionist and monolithic. The Legalists, on the other hand, tried to govern the state with a uniform and standardized law, which aims at equality and homogeneity. That is why they advocated the rule of law as opposed to a system of rites which treated people differently according to their superior or inferior social status, noble or humble position, senior or junior age, or closeness of relation to someone else. As the Confucianists and the Legalists started out from different premises, they naturally arrived at different conclusions. Rites and law, as two approaches of state government, remain two different sets of tools for maintaining social order in their respective modes of government.<sup>2</sup>

Qu sums up the difference between *li* and *fa* in that the ritual system allows for social disparity but law emphasizes social equality. This view seems quite flawless if it is considered from a purely logical perspective. However, if it is to be examined from a historical perspective, the argument of Qu is far from convincing. The essential value of Confucianism lies in its advocate of *ren* (仁, benevolence, humane conduct, kindness), which is to be realized through abiding by the *li* (rituals). In the *Yan Yuan* Chapter of the *Analects* (論語 • 顏淵), Confucius is quoted as saying: “Control yourself so that your words and conduct will conform to the propriety of rites, and in that one attains *ren*.”

Liu Feng (劉豐) summarizes the issue by rephrasing it as “*ren* (benevolence) being internal but *li* (rites) external,” meaning that *ren* is an inner quality while rites are outwardly observable proper conduct and behaviors towards others. In the same chapter in the *Analects*, Fan Chi (樊遲) asked Confucius what was meant by *ren* or “benevolence”, “compassion”, and Confucius replied, “It is love to man”.<sup>3</sup> Since Confucianism strives for the love of *ren* by practicing the ritual *li*, then *ren'ai* (仁愛, “love and kindness”) naturally allows for some degree of inequality.<sup>4</sup> Even if this inequality were erased, the outcome would not be any-

2 Qu, *Zhongguo Falyu yu Zhongguo shehui*, p. 309.

3 Li Zehou in his *Kongzi zai pingjia* (A Reassessment of Confucius) holds that the statement points out the basis of *ren*. See Li, *Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun* (On the history of ancient Chinese thought), (Hefei: Anhui Wenyi Press, 1994), p. 22.

4 Fei Xiaotong gives the term as “chaxu geju” (hierarchical pattern) in his *Xiangtu Zhongguo* (*Rural China*), Beijing: Joint Publishing Company, 1985, pp. 21-28. [Cf. *From the Soil, the*

thing comparable to an equality before the law but what the Mohists advocated as *jian'ai* (兼愛, universal or inclusive love, impartial concern). Mo Zi (墨子) in his *Jian Ai* (*Universal Love* Vol. II) advised people to “regard the state of others as one’s own, the houses of others as one’s own, and see other people as one’s self.” In the latter chapter, *Fei Ru* (非儒下, *Anti-Confucianism* III), Mo Zi criticizes the Confucians for advocating discrimination among the near and the distant relations and among the respectable and the humble. Meanwhile, Meng Zi (孟子, Mencius) denounced Yang Zhu for his egoistic principle of “each one for himself,” which does not acknowledge the claims of the sovereign. Mencius also denounced Mo Zi for asking people “to love all equally,” which does not acknowledge the peculiar affection due to a father. But, according to Mencius, a person who does not even respect one’s own father could not have any reverence for his monarch, either, so that his conduct is no different from the behavior of beasts. (*Mengzi*, in reference to *Tengwen Gong* II)

To be sure, Mr. Qu has cited evidence for the Legalists’ egalitarian spirit of the law, as is evidenced by such statements by Hanfei Zi (韓非子) that law does not favor the powerful nor the noble, penalty does not avoid ministers, and rewards do not neglect the common people (*Hanfeizi*, in reference to *Youdu*). However, Li Jin takes the execution of law into issue. As he says, “When the Legalists boasted of legal indiscrimination, they were actually talking about the general applicability of the law, but the specific provisions of the applicable law were still discriminatory towards people of different positions.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Qu confused the concept of equality in its legislative sense with that of judiciary administration. Genuine equality in legislation means the law is formulated not for the exclusive interests and to intentions of a particular group, but for the benefit of all the members of society. Obviously, law-making by the Legalists had no equality of a legislative nature. In contrast to this, rites and the ritual codes, if interpreted in a judicial perspective, could bring justice to all, so much so that whoever violates it would invoke public condemnation. For example, in the *Shu’er Chapter* (述而) in the *Analects*, Confucius was informed of the impropriety of a prince who took for his wife a lady of the Wu State, who happened to have the same surname as his own. So even a prince would fall under attack if he had violated the ritual codes, as Confucius recognized, which demonstrates the impartial aspect of the ritual

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*Foundations of Chinese Society: A Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo*, tr. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992].

5 Li Jin, *Qin lü tong lun* (*A General Survey of the Legal System of Qin*), (Jinan: Shandong People’s Publishing House, 1985), p. 121.

system. Tong Shuye (童書業), a famous historian of the twentieth century, points out that the conception of ethics in the Spring and Autumn Period was different from later societies:

In his *Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (左氏書, or *Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan*), Zuo Qiuming (左丘明) defined the virtues like *zhong* (忠 loyalty, commitment) and *jie* (節 moral principle or integrity) in largely the same sense as used in the Spring and Autumn period and the beginning of the Warring States. Commenting on Zhao Dun (趙盾) who committed regicide, Zuo quoted from Confucius and labeled him as a good official (*Second year of Xuan*), and commended him as “loyal” (*Eighth Year of Cheng*). In the early years of the Spring and Autumn era, Duke Zhuang of Zheng (鄭莊公) and King Ping of Zhou (周平王) exchanged hostages. Zuo remarked, citing sayings from the honorable Junzi (君子, noble person of moral integrity), that if honesty and trust do not issue from one’s inner heart, the exchange of hostages is pointless. But if they were willing to deal with the matter in genuine sincerity, and befriend each other through ritual propriety, no one could sow discord between them even if they had no hostages from each other. Zuo sang full praise of Duke Zhuang of Zheng, who urged the true monarch to issue orders to his own profit, and even led an attack on the king’s troops when he shot the king with an arrow in the shoulder. An official of Chen named Xie Ye (泄冶), who accused Duke Ling of Chen (陳靈公) for “publicizing sex,” was executed by the Duke. To this Zuo cites Confucius’ observation from the *Book of Poetry*, saying, “Common people who were wont to do evil things should not try and make judgments on others. That may have been said of Xie Ye.” (Ninth Year of Xuan in his chronicle) The master was insinuating that Xie Ye had invited trouble upon himself by making a fuss of nothing. These comments reflect a great difference in ethical values between that period and of later eras. In the “Fanli” (凡例, preliminary remarks), Zuo even noted that when a monarch was killed and his name entered into historical records, it reflected a judgmental commentary on the monarch for the atrocities he had committed; whereas if the name of a lowly official was recorded for the regicide, it would indicate a fault on the part of the official. (Fourth Year of Xuan) In *The Spring and Autumn Annals* it is stated, “A court minister of Zheng named Guisheng (鄭公子歸生) had to kill his monarch Junyi (君夷, i.e., Duke Ling of Zheng),” because Guisheng was not powerful enough (to oppose the regicidal scheme). To this the Junzi says, “A person with only love and compassion but no valor or mettle can never attain the path of

Benevolence.” In the *Spring and Autumn Annals* it is also recorded, “A person of the State of Song (宋) killed his monarch Chu Jiu (杵臼),” because the monarch had been a cruel tyrant. (*Sixteenth Year of Wen*) Attitudes like that frequently occur in earlier Confucian works, but could scarcely be found in post-Mencius eras.<sup>6</sup>

Fei Xiaotong (費孝通) takes a different view on the distinction between *li* (rites) and *fa* (law):

*Li* (Ritual) is the normative rule of proper conduct acceptable to a social community. Behaviors that conform to *li* are considered correct and appropriate. If viewed purely as a code of conduct, *li* does not differ much from *fa*, which is also a normative code for human conduct. They differ from each other in the forces or coercive power that enables their normative effects. *Fa* is enforced by state power, wherein the “state” is a political force. Before modern states came into being, tribal clans had been entities of political power. In contrast to *fa*, *li* does not need such physical force as empowered by state institutions to maintain itself. The normative force by which it keeps everything in order is acquired from traditional values.<sup>7</sup>

In brief, Fei argues that the doctrine of *li* draws its strength from traditional values to maintain social order, while *fa* takes its authority from political (governmental) forces. In other words, the two are distinct from each other by the nature of their powers. However, if examined logically, Fei is merely interchanging the two terms without clearly differentiating them. So our question remains, what is the difference between a tradition and a political power? We could point out their difference concisely by saying that *li* differs from *fa* in that the former is not as coercive or compulsory as the latter is. It is generally believed that a compelling force is one in “which one party compels the other party to comply with the will on its own side. A compulsory force is essentially a one-sided act of imposing one’s own will upon others against their free will. A compulsory force manifests itself not as an inner mental drive but as an outwardly physical force.”<sup>8</sup> Compulsory force is by definition an act of subjugating

6 Tong Shuye, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Yanjiu* (A study of Zuo Qiuming’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals), revised edition, (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006), p. 245.

7 Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, p. 50.

8 Li Xiaoming, *Fei qiangzhi xingzheng lun* (On non-coercive administration), (Changchun: Jilin People’s Publishing House, 2005), p. 2.



others' will by forceful means. A prerequisite for the force of law to manifest itself is the existence of a human will that desires such compulsion to take place. It is well understood that law is employed as a normative means to keep social order by forcing itself upon someone's will. It is not so easy to understand, however, how rituals could function as a constructive social force that accord *with* people's will.

Rituals can act as an effective coercive force under the patriarchal clan system. Modern paleographer Qiu Xigui (裘錫圭) points to textual inscriptions on an excavated chime, a type of bronze musical instrument (unearthed in 1995), of the late Zhou dynasty, "Shushi ordered his household courtier named Ni to administrate his 'household affairs,'" an indication that "the clan chief had at his disposal all the property of the clan". Furthermore, Qiu points out that if we look at other texts, we discover that not only did the chief of a minor household (usually the father) and the chief of a small clan have rights of disposal over the property of their kinsfolk or clansmen, but the master of the imperial clan had rights of disposal of the whole nation. Under the patriarchal clan system, the structure of political hierarchy and of blood relations is the same. The king of Zhou (Son of Heaven) was the highest ruler of the whole clan, namely, the patriarch of the whole realm. The land as well as the population of the realm, at least in a nominal sense, all belonged to him. On the other hand, according to Qiu Xigui, the clan chief's rights over properties of the clan are radically different from the general claim of private property rights. The clan chief exercised his rights in the name of a representative to his clan. He had to "shelter" his clansmen as well as to "unite" them, which was regarded not only as a virtue but also as a duty that he must attend to.

The hierarchical nature of the Zhou rituals is revealed in two aspects of the system. One was its insistence on family inheritance of official posts. According to Qian Zongfan (錢宗範), "Families of the aristocrats could inherit office titles from their ancestors and retain the office from generation to generation. In other words, some official positions were held by the chief or patriarch of a certain clan of families perennially, and the kinsfolk of the clan could engage in occupations under the administration of their clan chief. Ancient expressions like "xue zai wang guan" (學在王宮, "learning is in the royal officials"), "guan you shigong, ze you guan zu" (官有世功, 則有官族 "If an official had ancestral exploits to his credit, then the whole family rose to officials") are instances of reference to the hereditary practice."<sup>9</sup> In *Zuo Zhuan* in reference to

9 Qian Zongfan, "Xizhou Chunqiu shidai de shilu shiguan zhidu jiqi pouhui" (The Hereditary System of Salaries and Offices in Western Zhou and its Destructive Effects)," in *Zhongguo shi yanjiu* (*Journal of Chinese Historical Studies*), Issue No. 3, 1989.

the *Tenth Year of Xianggong* (《左傳 • 襄公十年》) is recorded that when Zi Kong (子孔) came into state power, he formulated codes to regulate the order of official ranks and the system of promulgating government decrees. Kong Yingda (孔穎達), citing from Fu Qian in his *Annotation*, said that all the ministers of former Zheng had obtained their official positions by inheritance, whereby a son could take over the official title of his deceased father. Zi Kong planned to change the practice by giving promotions to heirs of the nobility only step by step, starting from the lowest rank, and allowing them to work their way up to higher positions such as a cabinet minister. If the account of Fu Qian is true, then the reforms launched by Zi Kong had already begun to affect or undermine the second and much more crucial aspect of the Zhou ritual-based bureaucracy, that the ritual system as a hierarchical order should never be altered.

Towards the end of the Zhou dynasty, however, it became increasingly harder for the whole apparatus of the ritual system to sustain itself. According to Li Feng (李峰), the relationship between the King of Zhou and the aristocracy as court officials of the central government can only be described as something like “trading benefits for loyalty.” When the court’s geographical expansion ended during the early years of Western Zhou, the central government’s prolonged policy of granting lands to aristocrats had bit by bit drained up its assets, but in the meanwhile it had enabled the feudal vassals and noble lords in the Wei River region to grow into strong powers. As land in his realm could not regenerate itself, the King of Zhou was left with little amount of land to continue with the game of “trading benefits for loyalty” since most land had already been granted to his officials. It proved to be a suicidal strategy which led to the downfall of the Zhou Dynasty. By the end of the Western Zhou dynasty, in dealing with two different but equally important social relations, one between the royal family at the central government and the fief states as local governments, and the other between the monarch and the nobilities, the king was losing his control over the country, and consequently the foundation of the existing realm began to crumble.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the Western Zhou Dynasty, King Li (厲) and King Xuan (宣) and others had attempted to turn the tide and restore the authority of the central government, as is reflected in documents of *Guoyu* (國語, *Discourse on the States*):

10 Li Feng, (tr. Xu Feng), *Xizhou de miwang (The Demise of Western Zhou)*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2007), pp. 162-63.

Since King Li of Zhou started reforming the codes of Zhou rituals, there have been 14 kings to date.

Obviously, King Li launched major reforms at his time. Unfortunately, the documents of history are never reliable, because only two incidents about him can be found in the existent literature such as the *Chronicles of Zhou* (周語, *Zhouyu*) in *Guoyu*. In *Zhouyu*, King Li is described as a monarch who monopolized resources (“zhuanli”, 專利). According to Xu Zhuoyun’s (許倬雲) study, the alleged “zhuanli” by King Li had no explicit accusations made against him in the historical documents, but we can draw such conclusions from a lexicological analysis. First, the Chinese character for *li* (利, interests or benefits) denotes natural resources which are yielded from the hundred creatures and produced by heaven and earth. Second, it can also be interpreted as “benefit,” which was meant to be available to people of both high and lower classes. Third, when the country’s natural resources were monopolized by Rongyi Gong (榮夷公, duke of Rongyi) as entrusted by King Li, the feudal dukes suspended paying tributes to the central Court. Considering the situation of the royal court of Western Zhou, which must have been hard pressed by external threats and internal rifts, it could be imagined that the revenues of the court must have fallen short of its needs. When expenditure exceeded income, the royal court had to monopolize the country’s wealth-generating resources at the sacrifice of its people. It was a circumstance that was unavoidable, thus neither King Li nor his ministers should have been blamed for it. For all our rationale of the situation, it indicates that the pyramidal distribution structure of rights and interests among the feudal lords and their king was about to fall apart.<sup>11</sup>

According to Zhao Boxiong (趙伯雄), all historical literature and metal inscriptions indicate that the King of Zhou had full sovereignty over all the realm “under heaven.” He was entitled to an absolute rule over the country, if only nominally, so that no one in the realm could deny his supreme position as the Son of Heaven. In this sense, the Western Zhou Dynasty was a state of political sovereignty. However, the central ruler of the realm could only exercise his sovereign power down to the administrative level of the feudal lords, i.e., the highest local ruler of the fief states, but could never penetrate into the bottom strata of the social structure. Part of the sovereign power was, in fact, shared among the fief rulers to whom the king had conferred his grants. The phrase “shou min shou jiangtu” (授民授疆土, “granting of population and of

11 Xu Zhuoyun, *Xizhou Shi (A History of Western Zhou)*, (Beijing: Joint Publishing Company, 1994), pp. 307-08.

territory”) refers actually to the transfer of rights from the king to his local government officials. The local fief rulers, on receiving the grants of such power, became independent rulers within their own territories. In fact, the fief rulers had become the incarnation of state sovereignty on their local fiefs. The sovereignty of the whole nation had been divided up, which may be termed as a “dispersal of sovereignty.” So, on the one hand, there was something of a supreme sovereign power over the realm, but on the other hand, the sovereignty was divided in its actual execution.<sup>12</sup> Sun Yao (孫耀) points out that the same is true among the feudal lords themselves as well as their ministers.<sup>13</sup>

As the sovereign of the Zhou Dynasty wielded his scepter as the “Son of Heaven,” then the territory under heaven, as interpreted in the view of the Clan Law (*zongfa*, 宗法), should be the common property of the whole clan, while the King alone had the supreme ruling power. In the perspective of modern property rights, an absolute right to “private property” means one can exercise the right at one’s own will to the exclusion of all others.<sup>14</sup> Evidently, the Clan Law did not endow the King of Zhou with any absolute power over everything under heaven. To the contrary, it had imposed a restriction on the absolutism of the monarch. Therefore, when King Li (厲王 “King of Severity”) sought to monopolize the country’s resources (*zhuanli* 專利), he was actually turning a collective ownership of the realm by the whole royal clan into his private ownership by depriving other nobilities of all the common and shared possession, hence subjugating all property to his disposal and him alone. In other words, King Li was the first monarch in Chinese history to have sought private ownership of national property rights. In doing so, however, the despotic king undoubtedly undermined the Zhou royal court’s claim to rule over the nation. The state of the dynasty, then, when crippled by its own counterproductive policies, was left with nothing but brutal violence. Records in *Guoyu* (《國語 • 周語》) of King Li suppressing slander actually reflect his act of imposing the royal rights over the whole nation, whom he deemed as slaves and servants. When he made the country his own property and the populace his servants, a fusion of such economic and political egotism was on the verge of creating a monarchic autocracy, but the embryo of such absolute autocracy was incompatible with the patriarchal social setup of feudal China. This finally resulted in King Li’s exile. His end shows that absolute monarchy and the

12 Zhao Boxiong, *Zhoudai guojia xingtai yanjiu* (A study of the State Modality in the Zhou Dynasty), (Changsha: Hunan Education Press, 1990), p. 94.

13 Sun Yao, *Chunqiu Shidai zhi Shizu* (Aristocratic Families of the Spring and Autumn Period). (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936), pp. 32-38.

14 Karl Marx, *On Capital* (Beijing: The People’s Press, 1975), p. 695.

patriarchal system of the feudal society had become antithetical to each other during the period.

What is the reason, then, that even a supreme ruler of the Zhou, as the Son of Heaven, failed to seize for himself the power to cope with the rising threat of aristocratic families? It is because, compared with the autocratic emperors of later dynasties, the Zhou monarch was in want of legislative power. The monarch was entitled to supreme power over the country, with much of the legislation in his control, yet under the system of hereditary officialdom, the fundamental basis of legislation, namely, the legitimacy of the law maker, was grounded in the inheritance of ancestral official positions. The ancestor of an official title, a legendary name who was both a real person and a deity, had ordained his descendants to be in charge of the same office along with the legitimacy and rationality of all the laws derived from the office. In a sense, the legislative sources of any law did not dwell in any person of the contemporary age but belonged to some ancestral or divine-like figure of ancient times. The ancestry-based official position was never to be altered, not even when the dynasty collapsed, and no ordinary monarch could individually remove the tradition. This does not deny the possibility of removing the office of individuals or noble families, but in the face of the whole system of hereditary succession, even the supreme ruler of Zhou had limits to his power.

A turning point for this situation, which led to the decline of aristocratic power and the rise of absolute monarchy, was the molding of legal inscriptions, as recorded in *Zuozhuan* in the six and twenty-ninth year of Zhaogong's reign. This event was the beginning of an era when a ruler with the highest power in the feudal state attempted to make laws on his own. Recently, researchers compared the "Zhu xing ding" to western laws, and liken it to the Twelve Tables (*Duodecim Tabulae*) in ancient Rome. In this way, they regarded the appearance of codified law as significant progress in China's history. Contrary to this prevalent opinion, however, Qiu Feng points out that it was actually a crucial step taken in the transition from a system of "classical republic of aristocracy" towards one of absolute monarchy:

In the classical regime of China, the power for the formation and interpretation of law was one that had its own origin and which was parallel to but independent from the sovereign's ruling power. The genuine sense of case law lies in that the monarch possessed the power of rule but not the rights of discovering or interpreting laws.

Instead, the law was to be maintained and interpreted by a largely inherited body of aristocracy. Since their power was independent from the monarch, the law itself could grow and develop outside the domain

of regal power. Thus the power of the monarch was limited, for it lacked the wanton freedom of issuing laws. That is the feature of constitutional government of aristocratic republics in the classical periods.

In the states of Zheng and Jin, where statute laws had been adopted, an incipient form of the system of prefectures and counties, or commanderies and counties, was taking shape. In a certain sense, feudalism differs from the prefecture/county system in the same way that a republic of aristocracy politically differs from a monarchy. A system of prefectures and counties inevitably led to infinite power enhancement of the monarch. Under the system of monarchy, the ruling monarch could seize the power of the law after he had obtained (and then expanded) the power of government. This is the fundamental definition of absolute monarchism.

It follows that statute law came into being at the same time when autocratic monarchy made its debut in China. The author (of *Rujia falü chuantong*: Legal traditions of the Confucianists) points out that there is a statement in the *Ren Fa* (任法, Relying on law) Chapter of *Guanzi* which could be drawn as theoretical support for the legality of statute law, which affirmed the monarch as the creator of law and requires his subjects to comply with it: "The ruler creates the law; the ministers abide by the law; and subjects are punished by the law. All are subject to law." Law was no longer to be preserved and interpreted by a body of legal specialists who obtained their duty and title by inheritance, but rather came in the hands of the monarch as an instrument to carry out his rule. When the rulers of Zheng and Jin came into power of their fief states and issued the first statute laws, they were in effect declaring to the people that they must respect the law of the government and only the written laws issued by the rulers were authentic laws to conform to.<sup>15</sup>

If rites are employed to integrate the upper as well as the lower strata of society into morally obligated members in the construction of state power and social control, then in what way was Law exploited for the same goal of building state (sovereign) power and controlling society?

It is generally held that the ritual *li* serves as a high-end requirement for man to be a *junzi* (君子 prince, one of noble character, gentleman, etc.) whereas *fa* is a measure at the bottom end that calls for the need of penalty for human

15 Qiu Feng, "Kongzi fandui zhu xingding de xianzheng yiyi" (The significance of Confucius' objection to molding the bronze vessel of legal codes), in Chen Ming and Zhu Hanmin eds., *Yuan Dao (On the Daoist Way)*, Vol. X, pp. 142-154 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005).

being as a species that acts out of self-interest. In the *Shixie Chapter of Hanfeizi* (韓非子 • 飾邪), it is stated that when a ruler and the ruled were in discord, the sovereign would speculate in paying and retaining his officials, and the officials would themselves calculate how to serve their monarch to their own interests. Therefore, the interaction between ruler and subjects was full of schemes and intrigues. Generally speaking, as he “looks upon everyone as an evil-doer,”<sup>16</sup> he had to employ strict laws and harsh punishments to govern the state.

Since law is by definition based on some coercive force that exerts itself against someone's will, then the coercive power logically entails the existence of a will as well as another will that goes against it, or an agent that imposes its own will upon that of others. At the same time, the imposing will must have some compulsory force at its disposal, or else it would be incapable of prevailing itself upon other wills. Under the historical circumstances of those periods, the monarch was the only agent that met the two conditions for law-making. Since the monarch held a coercive force, he gained power to implement the law. In other words, law was created to serve the will and interests of the monarch, and it is implemented for his needs. In the pre-Qin system of thought, this conception of the law is expressed as *junshengfa* (君生法 “the king creates laws”). As was just quoted from *Guanzi*, “The ruler creates the law; the ministers abide by the law; and subjects are punished by the law.” In this way, the monarch kept himself above the law that he made. In the political reality of traditional China, hardly any political force was strong enough to counter-balance the power of the monarch, which resulted in the de facto state of the monarch staying above the law.

It is recorded in the *Shangjun liezhuan* (“Collected biographies of Lord Shang”) of *Shiji* (史記 • 商君列傳), that Shang Yang found it difficult to punish the prince who had violated the law, so he turned to punish the prince's teacher instead. This is evidence that the monarch could stay away from the teeth of the law. In extreme cases, a monarch could do whatever he wished with the nation without being restrained by any other force on the assumption that the monarch is incapable of committing errors (*Shusunong liezhuan*). With this freedom, a monarch grew into an autocrat, and the political system of the state evolved from power-sharing into one of centralization.

Fei Xiaotong, as quoted above, holds the view that *li*, or ritual based on traditional values, is a normative for social order derived from natural laws. In contrast, *fa*, which is based on the compulsory force of political power, takes the monarch as its gauge-point, so that it became a set of rules artificially made

16 Guo Moruo, *Shi pipan shu* (*Ten criticisms*), (Beijing: Dongfang Press, 1996), p. 390.



for keeping social order. The essential nature of political transformation from Zhou to Qin (shift from kingdom to empire) is a replacement of *li* by *fa*, or a normative shift from natural to artificial laws. The new artificial rules for social order brought about the necessity to reorganize the structure of the whole society. The political system that rose to the occasion was the *junxianzhi* (郡縣制), a system of central government by “prefectures and counties.”

The law, which presumes a certain coercive force, must be backed by the same enforcing act to become the new norm of social order. As armed forces constitute the enforcement of the law that guarantees a monopoly and command of the state's armed forces by the monarch, the army's loyalty to the “monarch-law” is key to the establishment of a new social order. Before Shang Yang (390–338 BC) carried out his reform in Qin, the six eastern states of Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao and Wei, east of Xiaoshan, had also tried some reforms of one kind or another, but the only successful one was the Legalist Reform conducted by Shang Yang in Qin. Shang Yang owed the success of his reforms to the wholehearted support of the army. And the key was a system of assigning land and titles to soldiers based upon their military exploits.

It should be after Shang Yang began his reforms that the plebeian class really gained access to titles of nobility. Sadao Nishijima (西島定生) summed up its significance with this remark: “The system of scaled hierarchies as an honor of prestige was extended to the common folk.”<sup>17</sup> In his view, the basic relationship of the ruler and the ruled was a direct one, between the emperor and his subjects. In this case, only the emperor was conceived as the ruling sovereign, who had the right to manipulate all the people under his rule. In his capacity as top ruler in an autocratic hierarchy, the emperor was the supreme power. If we take note of this, we could make sense of the word *autocratic monarch* (tyrant, despot) as corresponding to the emperor.<sup>18</sup>

The introduction of the merit-reward system of military exploits set off a revolution in both the social and family structures. In the first place, the system rooted out the existence of traditional forces that gained their power from hereditary houses and clans. Second, it curbed the rising of new clan powers that may emerge from a long-standing tradition and become influential enough to counterbalance the emperor's authority. That is why the Qin government, since Shang Yang implemented his reforms, had never been challenged by clan factions that might pose threat to the emperor's rule. Third, the merit-reward system provided a channel of promotion for individuals of humble families and lower social origin to move up the social ladder.

17 Sadao Nishijima 西島定生, *Zhongguo gudai diguo de xingcheng yu jiegou* (*The formation and structure of ancient Chinese empires*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2004), p. 122.

18 Nishijima, *Zhongguo gudai diguo de xingcheng yu jiegou*, p. 447.

In a word, the new system of meritorious appointment left no room for any power inherited from tradition to continue its existence, with the exception of monarch itself, of course. The system brought about changes to the internal structure of noble families as well as their outward forms, leading to a disintegration of the old families and establishment of new ones. Since no family of hereditary influence was allowed in the new form of social administration, there was hardly any force to resist or rival the imperial and central government.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, individual peasants, freed from their binds as fiefs, gained huge confidence and enthusiasm on this new route of upward motion and became a dominant strength for Qin to overpower the rest of the principalities and unite the country. For that reason, we might rename the social changes caused by Shang Yang's Reform as a "fission" of social energy.

Reforms were also carried out in the six states east of Qin, though to various extents. A result of this widespread "fission of energy" was the emergence of scholars, orators, tacticians and strategists who tried to lobby and influence government power. It was imperative to put these split and atomized individuals under state control and eliminate what was called the *wudu* (five classes of "vermins" or "maggot") in *Han Feizi*. Tu Cheng-sheng (杜正勝) categorizes the reforms of Shang Yang in terms of "mapping military units onto administrative divisions" (*yi jun ling zheng* 以軍領政) and "neighborhood divisions" (*lü li shi wu* 閭裡什伍). The system was one that features an integration of regiment divisions of troops into the administrative, and applying military management to civilian society. In this way, the constituting units of the army were transferred to cells of social organization for civilian communities and neighborhoods.<sup>20</sup> However, a system of whistle-blowing, tipping-off and collective punishments based on households and neighborhoods displaced the social function of government by a regime of militarism, which led to an oppressive and ruthless society.

The modern Chinese character to refer to a county (*xian*, 縣) is actually not the same word as written for *jun xian* (郡縣), which is generally rendered into "prefectures and counties". In *Chunqiu Guliang zhuan* (春秋谷梁傳, the *Guliang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), the character was written as 寰 (*huan*, "circle" or "enclosure") in the chapter covering the first year of Duke Yin of Lu (魯隱公元年) (722 BC). The word denotes the territories surrounding the royal capital city. Modern paleographer Li Jiahao (李家浩) gives an etymological explanation:

19 Zhang Jinguang, *Qin zhi yanjiu* (A study of the Institutions of the Qin), (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2004), p. 468.

20 Tu Cheng-sheng, *Bianhu Qimin* (編戶齊民), (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 126-139.

The *xian* (縣) of the Zhou Dynasty is a word that denotes the extensive territories that surround the capital of a state or a major city. It originated from homophonous Chinese character *huan* (還 or 環, “returning” or “circle”), which appeared in ancient variants as “寰” and “寰”. As a place name, these words are associated with *yi* (邑, city or township settlement) and gave rise to another derivative 鄆. When used in this sense, however, the *xian* (縣) is a loan character.<sup>21</sup>

The character of *huan* (寰), which means “areas surrounding the state capital,” was found in inscriptions on bronze wares of Western Zhou, which was written as *huan* (還, “return”) in a text entitled *Mian Hu* (免瑚):

The King was then at Zhou, and he ordered Mian (免) to be the Situ (司徒), or head of the Civil Affairs Ministry in charge of Lin, Yu and Mu, precincts around Zheng.

An inscription on the ancient vessel entitled 師旃簋 says that the King summoned an army officer of Shi and appointed him as Dazuo in charge of both the left and right regiments of troops from the precincts around Feng.

According to Li Jiahao, *Mian* (免) mentioned in the inscription was the name of a person living in the time of King Mu (穆王, 976-922 BC or 956-918 BC), who once had Zheng (鄭) as his second capital. Therefore, both Zheng and Feng (豐) were capital cities of Zhou. The character for “*xian*” in place names like Zheng-xian (County of Zheng) and Feng-xian (County of Feng) actually denotes the surrounding precincts around the country’s capital city. This is especially noteworthy with place names.

In the *Mian Hu* inscription, proper names such as Lin, Yu and Mu are counterparts of official titles under the Situ, who was principally responsible for civil administration and social welfare, and the three titles respectively denote specific positions in charge of woods, mountains and lakes, and animal-husbandry. As Situ was an official in charge of land resources, the King of Zhou appointed Mian to manage the affairs of forests, mountains and rivers as well as animals in these places. The assignment corresponds to similar accounts in the *Rites of Zhou* (周禮 *Zhou Li*).

In the second instance, the appointment of Shi (師) was the title of an army officer. Since military units in ancient times were organized in close relation to the soldiers’ residential communities, the troops stationed at “precincts around

21 Li Jiahao, “Xianqin wenzi zhong de xian (Xian in pre-Qin texts),” in *Zhuming zhongnian yuyuanxue jia zixuan ji* (A collection of self-selected essays by renowned middle-aged linguists), (Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2002), pp. 28-29.

Feng” may have been recruited from local peasants in the suburban settlements around Feng. And as the title of Dazuo (大左) is higher in rank than Shi, the King of Zhou gave a promotion to the Shi officer as Dazuo to take charge of both the left and right regiments of Feng.

We could learn from the above that the character for *xian* (縣, a modern “county”) in textual materials pertaining to Western Zhou denotes a small district in terms of townships. However, with the Spring and Autumn period as well as the Warring States, what does the character refer to? On a bronze ware known as “Shu Gong Bo” (叔公罇) unearthed in the site of Qi of the Spring and Autumn period, there is an inscription where Duke Ling of Qi (齊靈公) offered his appointment to Shu Gong (叔公, presumably named Shu Yi 叔夷), a minister of the Duke:

“Gong,” said the Duke, “I grant to you the surrounding land of Mi Li (昧莒), in the suburb of the Capital Lai (*Lai du* 萊都), with its two hundred counties (*xian* 縣).”

According to Li Jiahao, the *du* 都 in ancient China could refer to a large district with walled cities in addition to the state capital city. As the *du* 都 in the inscription text is mentioned in contrast to *xian* 縣, the character should refer to the city or municipality of Mi Li, while the county (*xian*) should denote the vast stretches of land surrounding the municipal city. “Two hundred counties” means a district with two hundred smaller administrative divisions under its jurisdiction. Guan Zhong (管仲), who served as Prime Minister to Duke Huan of Qi (齊桓公), had made an administrative division by principalities (Guo 國) and wards (Bi 鄙), with the former including land areas adjacent to the capital, while the latter included distant fields that lay beyond the central confines. In *Guoyu’s Qi Discourses* (齊語), the Bi (鄙, “ward”) was divided into four levels of administration, namely, *shu* 屬, *xian* 縣, *xiang* 鄉, and *yi* 邑, the last being the lowest grass-roots division. When the ruler of Qi gave grants of land ownership to his officials or revoked them, the size of the grants was measured in the number of *yi*’s that it covered. As for the *yi* in the county of Mi Li mentioned in the text of the *Shu Gong Bo* inscription, it might be even smaller administrative districts, such as is defined in the *Qi Discourses*, that were composed of thirty households.<sup>22</sup>

22 Li Jiahao, “Xianqin wenzi zhong de xian,” (Xian in pre-Qin texts) in *Zhuming zhongnian yuyuanxue jia zixuan ji* (A collection of self-selected essays by renowned middle-aged linguists), (Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2002), pp. 20-32.

In *Lüshi Chunqiu* (呂氏春秋, literally “Mister Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals”, in reference to *Mengxia Ji* (孟夏紀, “Almanacs of Mengxia”) can be found the following statements:

[The King] bid the Situ to inspect his counties and wards; bid the peasants to cultivate their farmland and not to stay in the metropolis.

It can be seen that under the county/ward administrative system of *xian* (縣, “county”) and *bi* (鄙, “ward”), the farming area and agricultural population of the region were in the outer-lying counties (*xian*) and not within the central municipal districts (都). Therefore, the tax revenue and services were also collected from the rural counties rather than in the city districts. The local farmers were conscripted as soldiers in times of war. In the passage cited above from 師旃簋, which said that “He was to take charge the left and right regiments of Feng,” it can also be inferred that military service had been recruited from the counties to defend the city.

The character of *huan* (寰) refers to areas situated around the state capital, written as *ji* (畿). Analogous to that sense, all the royal estates under the capital’s jurisdiction should also be deemed as counties (*xian* 縣). Sun Yirang (孫詒讓) in his *Zhouli Zhengyi* (周禮正義, an *Exegesis of the Rites of Zhou*), specifically the *Xianshixia* section (地官·縣師下), sums up four major meanings of *xian* (縣) in the text of *Rites of Zhou*. In one sense, the character refers to the domain of administration under a county Preceptor (縣師) and a Judge (縣士). The *xian* was a general term for a royal estate at the fourth level under the central government.<sup>23</sup> Judging from the inscriptions on excavated bronze vessels, the usage of *xian* was indeed quite intricate. Apart from bronze inscriptions of the word written as *huan* (還) that we have cited in the above paragraph, the word was variably written, as 縣 (“township” or modern “county”) in Qi (齊, in present Shandong Province), as 還 or *qiong* (𨾏 “returning,” “circle,” “peripheral,” or “round-eyed stare”) in Yan (燕, Hebei Province), as 鄆 (“enclosed place”) in Sanjin (三晉, now in southern Shanxi Province),<sup>24</sup> as *xian* (縣) in Qin<sup>25</sup> and in Chu.<sup>26</sup> In comparison, the written form of *xian* as 县 for place names of Jin (晉) was well justified, for its sense is closest to what

23 Sun Yirang, *Zhouli Zhengyi*, Vol.III (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987), p. 654.

24 Cf. Li Jiahao, “Xianqin wenzi zhong de xian,” (Xian in pre-Qin texts), pp. 19-27.

25 Cf. Yuan Zhongyi, Liu Yu, *Qin wenzi leibian* (Categorized compilation of texts in Qin), (Xi’an: Shaanxi People’s Publishing House, 1993). p. 261.

26 Cf. Li Shoukui, *Chu wenzi bian* (Compiled texts of Chu), (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2003). p. 539.

is stipulated in the *Rites of Zhou*. For example, Wen (溫) was called a *xian* because it was squarely situated within the royal confines of the King of Zhou.

We have mentioned above *Zuo Zhuan* in reference to the 25th year of the reign of Duke Xi (僖公), where it is recorded that King Xiang (襄王) of Zhou granted to Duke Wen of Jin (晉文公, Duke Wen, named Chong'er, 重耳, 671-628 BC) some of his royal estates around the state capital. The King made this grant not only to show his appreciation of the Duke of Jin who had always supported him, but also to tactfully decline the Duke's request for the honor of a regal funeral on his death. Duke Wen received the places of Wen (溫, now in Jiaozuo 焦作 of Henan Province) and Yuan (原, present Jiyuan 濟源 of Henan Province) as his fiefs, and he had the name written as 鄭. So one would wonder if the special writing betrays a secret wish of the Duke to retain some of the original status of the central, royal estate. In *Zuo Zhuan* it is thus stated:

The Marquis of Jin asked a domestic servant named Bo Di (勃鞞) about the prospective candidate to be the magistrate of Yuan, and Bo Di answered, "In former years, Zhao Cui [趙衰 ?-622 B.C.], had followed you all along with a flask of food. Even he was traveling alone in hunger, he did not try to eat any of the food."

Masubuchi Tatsuo (増淵龍夫), based on this evidence, argues that the Duke of Wen "did not seem to assign the two of his fiefs to Zhao Cui (趙衰) and Hu Qin (狐秦) as private fiefs,"<sup>27</sup> and it was precisely for his intention to make the two counties part of the royal estates (*gongyi* 公邑) that he had to consider the degree of loyalty of the prospective magistrates. As the Chinese character for *shou* (守, "magistrate") stands for "guard" or "defense", it is obvious that the magistrate was to serve as the guardian of Yuan for the monarch. Based on such reasoning, Masubuchi Tatsuo draws two conclusions: "First, among the *yi*'s (邑) that belonged to the monarch, some could be named as *xian* but others not. Second, of all the places that were called *xian*, some were directly affiliated to the royal estates of the monarch while others were not."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, through the central appointment of officials to govern these places, the ancient hereditary system finally came to an end and was replaced by a system of centrally assigned, mobile- or fluid-bureaucracy (流官制).

27 Masubuchi Tatsuo, "*Shuo chungqiu de xian* (On the *xian* of the Spring and Autumn period)," in *Riben xuezhe yanjiu zhongguo shi lunzhu xuanyi*, in *Selected Translations of Works by Japanese Scholars on Chinese History*, Vol. III (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1993), p. 194.

28 Masubuchi Tatsuo, "*Shuo chungqiu de xian*," p. 196.



A conclusion can be drawn from the discussions above, that the Prefecture/County system, as a uniformly centralized jurisdiction over all parts of the empire, put an end to the feudal pattern of government with autonomous kingdoms or principalities. It enabled an absolute central control of the land and labor resources in the empire to realize more efficient use of the two essential factors for agricultural production.

To put the whole nation under control of the state apparatus, Qin Shi Huang managed to monopolize the rights of land property, and utilized every means to tie the nation's population to their native land, so that the state power could exert direct authority over individual nationals in an atomized society. With the establishment of centralized official-appointment system and a recruitment system of civil service examinations, the tentacles of state power could reach well into the inner core of noble families and influential clans, forcing these feudal powers to submit themselves to the imperial power of the central government if they wished to maintain their prestige. On the other hand, the armed forces, comprising ordinary peasants in times of peace, and which were at the command of the central government, ensured equality of rights with everyone under the central government of a despotic power. In this way, all the intermediate forces or middle social strata in between the supreme ruler at the top and his individual subjects at the bottom were wiped out. This gave rise to a social structure with an all-mighty sovereign at one extreme and an entirely flattened or shrunken society at the other, with the latter being common herds composed of silenced individuals.

It was the administrative system of prefectures and counties that enabled the creation of a society of the three characteristics. In other words, the prefecture/county system constituted the fundamental social relations for two thousand years of imperial Chinese society from Qin through Qing. In pre-Qin feudal China, blood-relationships were the basis for social organization among the common citizenry as well as state power, whereas throughout the imperial history from Qin to Qing, the social administration of both personal relationship and state power was characterized by *junxianzhi*, a geo-politically based division of regional and local units administered by appointees of the central government. In the modern era, however, a new orientation of social development is on the rise, one that aims to break up the power-dominated social control and resorts to a cultural organization of social relations to reflect the human nature of society.



# Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Course of History Since Middle Antiquity

*Li Zhī'an*

*Translated by Kathryn Henderson*

## Abstract

Two periods in Chinese history can be characterized as constituting a North/South polarization: the period commonly known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420AD-589AD), and the Southern Song, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties (1115AD-1368AD). Both of these periods exhibited sharp contrasts between the North and South that can be seen in their respective political and economic institutions. The North/South parity in both of these periods had a great impact on the course of Chinese history. Both before and after the much studied Tang-Song transformation, Chinese history evolved as a conjoining of previously separate North/South institutions. Once the country achieved unification under the Sui Dynasty and early part of the Tang, the trend was to carry on the Northern institutions in the form of political and economic administration. Later in the Tang Dynasty the Northern institutions and practices gave way to the increasing implementation of the Southern institutions across the country. During the Song Dynasty, the Song court initially inherited this "Southernization" trend while the minority kingdoms of Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan primarily inherited the Northern practices. After coexisting for a time, the Yuan Dynasty and early Ming saw the eventual dominance of the Southern institutions, while in middle to late Ming the Northern practices reasserted themselves and became the norm. An analysis of these two periods of North/South disparity will demonstrate how these differences came about and how this constant divergence-convergence influenced Chinese history.

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## Keywords

Northern and Southern Dynasties – North South disparity – divergence and convergence of historical trends

In the last decade, quite a lot of Chinese scholars have become increasingly interested in the reforms of the Tang and Song Dynasties. While discussions on this subject have proliferated in Mainland China, American scholars have devoted their attention to the investigation of the “Song-Yuan-Ming Transition.” The thesis put forward in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, a collection of essays edited by Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, is that the Tang-Song period of reforms and the Qing Dynasty’s flourishing era were in fact connected by a transition interval—the so-called ‘Song-Yuan-Ming Transition’—that had previously been overlooked by historians.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Xiao Qiqing (蕭啟慶) and Wang Ruilai (王瑞來) have successively written about North/South disparities during the Southern Song and Jin-Yuan period (1115-1368), as well as about the reforms of the Song and Yuan Dynasties.<sup>2</sup> All of these works have considerably helped to push forward our knowledge of Chinese history from Middle Antiquity onward. However, I came to perceive concepts such as the ‘Tang-Song period of reforms’ or the ‘Song-Yuan-Ming transition’ as having been considerably influenced by regional differences brought about during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. It appears to me that the trends of Chinese history since Middle Antiquity have usually been rather complex, and that we cannot consider them as evolving in one direction only. I herein expose my reflections on the importance of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in shaping the course of history since Middle Antiquity.

1 Smith, Paul and Richard von Glahn. *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

2 Xiao Qiqing. “Differences and Similarities in the Northern and Southern Dynasties’ Development in Pre-Modern China—Focus on the Southern Song, Jin and Yuan Dynasties’ Economic Society Culture”. *Tsinghua History Lectures: Book 1*. Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2007; Wang Ruilai. “History of the Imperial Examination System’s Abolition: Based on Research on the Yuan Dynasty”. *The End of the Imperial Examination System and the Rise of Study on Imperial Examination*. Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 2006.

## 1 The First Northern and Southern Dynasties and the “Southernization” of the Sui and Tang Dynasties

In 1945, Chen Yinke (陳寅恪) published *A Brief Introduction to the Origins of the Systems and Institutions in the Sui and Tang Dynasties* in which he systematically and thoroughly explored the origins of the Sui and Tang’s institutions.<sup>3</sup> His contribution consisted not only in revealing how those institutions most probably originated from the Northern Dynasties, but also in clarifying the properties and development of those institutions. Here are some of the illuminating conclusions we can draw from his work: the Sui and Tang Dynasty systems originated primarily from the Northern Dynasties, and although they mainly proceeded and were developed in accordance with the Northern Wei and Northern Qi systems, they have to some extent also been influenced by the Southern Dynasties.

During the last decade of the 20th century, Tang Changru (唐長孺), in his book *Three Essays on the Wei, Jin, Sui and Tang Dynasties*, pointed out that “the economy, politics, military affairs as well as various cultural aspects all significantly progressed during the Tang Dynasty [...]. The most important part of those changes was the legacy of the Eastern Jin and Southern Dynasties, an inheritance process that we can describe for the time being as ‘the southernization’ of dynasties.”<sup>4</sup> Through his insightful understanding of the Tang’s institutions’ essence and trends of development, Tang Changru thus succeeded in recognizing what other scholars had previously failed to notice. His work also stirred up debate among historians, such as Yan Buke (閻步克), Hu Baoguo (胡寶國), and Chen Shuang (陳爽), on the issue of whether the development of subsequent dynasties had been more influenced by the Northern or Southern Dynasties’ model. According to the proponents of the ‘southernization’ theory, the Southern Dynasties’ legacy lasted for more than three hundred years, from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty. The South’s dominant influence may also be traced back as far as the period anterior to the sinicization reforms issued by Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei (471-499). In contrast, those supporting the ‘northernization’ theory pointed out that “Both the Sui and Tang Dynasties have been established on the foundation laid by the Northern Dynasties,” and that “the Northern societies were far more developed than those in the South. They were able to solve

3 Chen Yinke. *A Brief Introduction to the Origins of the Systems and Institutions in the Sui and Tang Dynasties*. Beijing: Joint Publishing House, 2004, p. 3.

4 Tang Changru. *Three Essays on the Wei, Jin, Sui and Tang Dynasties*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1992, p. 486.

problems that were left unresolved in the South. For these reasons, history proceeded following the course initiated by the Northern Dynasties.”<sup>5</sup>

While these two theories contradict each other, they are also both based on a rational appreciation of historical data. However, it appears difficult to elucidate the complexity of this historical period while only adhering to one of those theories. I therefore advance a new proposition: the ‘Northern and Southern dynastic trends’ concurrently guided the development of history from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Tang Dynasty. Moreover, both of those ‘dynastic trends’ find their existence and practicability in their corresponding regions, which is to say that through their parallel development, the North and South also mutually influenced each other.

Since Antiquity, Chinese territory has been similar in size to Europe; similarly, its northern and southern regions were markedly different. Differences in their institutions or in the course of their development emerged from 300 years of constant separation and unification. Events such as the Wu Hu uprising (304-316), which initiated the period of fragmentation leading to the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, considerably widened the gap between the two regions. The ‘southern dynastic trend’ mainly refers to the Eastern Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen Dynasties, which all inherited their organization structure from the Han, the Wei, and the Eastern Jin dynasties. The “northern dynastic trend” principally refers to the Northern Wei, Northern Qi, Western Wei, and Northern Zhou Dynasties. Yan Buke has claimed that “both the Sui and Tang Dynasties have been established on the foundation laid by the Northern Dynasties.” Accordingly, the institutions implemented during the Sui and the Early Tang basically belonged to the ‘northern trend.’ The Sui and Tang Dynasties later both sought to merge the northern and southern dynastic trends on a national level. Once this integration was achieved after the Mid-Tang period, the whole country embarked on a ‘southernization’ transition. Three arguments support my proposition, and they derive precisely from the three dominant institutions that prevailed from the Northern Dynasties to the Early Tang.

5 Mou Fasong, “On the ‘Northernization’ Tendency of the Tang Dynasty”. *Journal of Chinese Historical Studies* No. 2, 1996; Yan Buke, Hu Baoguo and Chen Shuang, “Discussion on ‘Southernization’”. <http://www.xiangyata.net>. Jun 2nd, 2003; Yan Buke, “The Different Paths and Historical Trends of the Northern and Southern Dynasties”. *Collected Essays on Chinese Classics*. <http://bbs.guoxue.com>. Aug 24th, 2004; Jiang Wutong, “On the question of ‘Southernization’”. *Back and Forth: Miscellany of Chinese History*. <http://www.wangf.net>. Apr 14th, 2006; Jie Hu, “The ‘Theoretical Path’ of the ‘Historical Path Theory’”. <http://www.mzyi.cn>. March 2007.

*The Equal-Field System's (均田制) Implementation in the North, and Its Disintegration during the Mid-Tang*

The equal-field system was the land system in use from the Northern Wei to the Mid-Tang Dynasties. It first evolved from the land system used by the Northern Wei Dynasty in the modern day Hebei area, according to which land was allocated to a family based on the number of family members. In contrast, the equal-field system introduced by the Northern Wei distributed land in accordance with the number of male adults per household. The land allocated comprised mostly fields used for grain cultivation, which were rendered back to the state after death (*koufentian* 口分田), and mulberry fields, which were indefinitely held by their families (*yonggyetian* 永業田). The aristocrats and bureaucratic landlords, for their part, could receive land according to their rank or the amount of cattle they owned.<sup>6</sup> Former privately-owned lands were not subject to the equal-field system, and only the unclaimed and undeveloped lands were actually distributed. Situations in which the peasants did not receive the amount of land they were due or did not return land to the government were also quite common. Two important points need to be mentioned. First, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, the equal-field system was only implemented in the Northern Dynasties, while the Southern states preserved the system inherited from the Wei and Jin era, which would allow for a handful of citizens to own vast estates. Following the unification by the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the Land-Equalization Decree was promulgated nationwide, including in the southern areas where it had for the most part not yet been implemented. Second, following the reign of Emperor Gaozong of Tang, the equal-field system was gradually undermined. The allocation and return of land was already difficult to manage under Emperor Xuanzong, and the system ultimately fell into disuse during the reign of Emperor Dezong. It was then replaced to some extent by a tenancy system controlled by a small number of landlords. This resulted in the ascension of both the long-established private landowners of the South, and the emerging landholders in the North. Ultimately, this transition towards a tenancy system was based not only on the Southern Dynasties' model of large land holding by powerful magnates; it was also the first step towards the "southernization" of the land system.

6 "Records of Agriculture and Commerce". *Book of Wei*. vol. 110; "Records of Agriculture and Commerce". *Book of Sui*. vol. 24; "Records of Agriculture and Commerce I". *Old Book of Tang*. vol. 48.

*The Implementation of the Grain-Labor-Cloth Tax System  
(租庸調製) in the North and Its Collapse during  
the Mid-Tang Period*

When the Northern Wei established the equal-land system, they correspondingly stipulated that each peasant family receiving land had to deliver one *pi* (匹) of silk and two *dan* (石) of grain to the government (the equivalent of about 4.3 decafeet and twenty pecks). This annual contribution was known either as the household tax (*hudiao* 戶調) or the land tax (*zudiao* 租調). The Sui and Tang later implemented the grain-labor-cloth tax system, allowing male adults to pay a fixed amount of cloth in exchange for reducing the 20 days of forced labor they had to serve every year. In contrast, the Song, Qi, Liang and Chen Dynasties in the South all perpetuated the use of the Eastern Jin's tax system by which a family had to pay land taxes according to the number of male adults in the family, regardless of their wealth or the amount of land they owned. As for the amount of taxes paid in cloth by each household, the Song and Qi levied uniformly every household, while the Liang and Chen still collected according to the number of adults.<sup>7</sup> On the surface, the Northern Dynasties' and the Southern Dynasties' tax systems may appear similar, since they generally all tended to levy taxes based on adult members. The grain-labor-cloth tax system was also implemented on a national level by the Sui and Tang Dynasties. It thus appeared to be adaptable on a large-scale. However, the South and the North's backgrounds were different: the equal-land system of the Northern Dynasties allowed for a large number of peasants to own lands, whereas the Southern Dynasties were relying for the most part on a tenancy system dominated by a handful of landowners. The fact that southern regimes would collect taxes from individual adults, rather than households, suggests that they sought to curb the protection of tenant peasants by influential clan and dynasties.

The collapse of the equal-land system during the reign of Tang Emperor Dezong signified that the government could not levy the grain-labor-cloth tax anymore. This led the government to combine the land and household taxes through the two-tax system (*liangshuifa* 兩稅法), under which households were levied based on their wealth. The introduction of the two-tax system enabled the government to adjust itself to the transformation in the area of landholding that was already occurring nationwide; it was also the result of integrating the Northern and Southern tax systems. Chen Yinke mentions that "even though the new financial system of the Tang Dynasty first appeared to

7 "Records of Agriculture and Commerce". *Book of Wei*. vol. 110; "Records of Agriculture and Commerce". *Book of Sui*. vol. 24; "Records of Agriculture and Commerce I". *Old Book of Tang*. vol. 48.

have been an original invention conceived by only a few individuals of the imperial court, it had in reality its origins in the Southern Dynasties' old system." Since the Southern Dynasties already allowed for the household tax to be paid proportionally with money or cloth, Chen Yinke considers the stipulation allowing southern households to substitute cloth for the payment of land taxes during the Kaiyuan era (713-741) of Emperor Xuanzong to be an indication of "the 'southernization' of the Tang system. In other words, it was the conversion of the Tang Dynasty to the southern dynastic model."<sup>8</sup> Although the two-tax system did not exactly replicate the Southern Dynasties' system, it was still in essence a reflection of the old system's principles, which ultimately superseded the Northern Dynasties' grain-labor-cloth tax system. The two-tax system can thus be considered the continuation of the Southern dynasties' financial and tax system after the mid-Tang period, or in other words, the 'southernization' of the Tang system.

*The Fubing System (府兵制) Implemented in the North and Its Collapse during the Mid-Tang Period*

The *fubing* system, also known as the militia garrison system, was first established by the Western Wei and the Northern Zhou Dynasties. Based on the tribal system, it selected recruits among the young relatives of Xianbei and Han government officials, or from the powerful clans of the Guanlong region (關隴). The Sui and Tang Dynasties perpetuated the original *fubing* system of the Western Wei and Northern Zhou. They trained soldiers to be mobilized during wartime, but had them work among peasants otherwise. Some peasants were also selected from the equal-land system to form the cavalry (also known as the soaring hawk garrison *yingyangfu* 鷹揚府) or the assault-resisting garrisons (*zhechongfu* 折衝府). The *fubing* system went in fact hand in hand with the equal-field system. It also goes without saying that under the Eastern Wei and Northern Zhou, the *fubing* system was mainly implemented in the North. The Sui and Tang Dynasties, for their part, possessed more than 600 garrisons, principally located in the Guanzhong (關中), Henan (河南), and Hedong (河東) regions, all in the North. They had however only a small number of garrisons in the South.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the *fubing* system, like the equal-field system and the grain-labor-cloth tax system, was mainly implemented in the North of China.

8 Chen Yinke. *A Brief Introduction to the Origins of the Systems and Institutions of the Sui and Tang Dynasties* Part 7, "Finance". Beijing: Joint Publishing House, 2004. 156-160.

9 Gu Jiguang. *Research and Interpretation on the Fubing System*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1962.



Although the system of hereditary conscription (*shibingzhi* 世兵制) was still prevailing among the Southern Dynasties, from the end of the Eastern Jin onwards, elite troops that could compare to the northern garrisons and militia were composed of enlisted recruits. The collapse of the *fubing* system ensued from the disintegration of the equal-field system, which left no more soldiers to be enlisted in the assault-resisting garrisons. The emergence of recruited troops, such as the Army of Inspired Strategy (*shencejun* 神策軍) and the military commissioners (*fanzhenbing* 藩鎮兵) after the Mid-Tang period can thus be traced back to the Southern Dynasties. In other words, the military had been 'southernized.'

The equal-field, grain-labor-cloth tax, and *fubing* systems were the three main pillars of the nation-building project undertaken by the Sui and Tang Dynasties. They also all happened to be mainly implemented in the North, and they all collapsed successively during the Mid-Tang period. On the contrary, the institutions that superseded them, namely the tenancy system dominated by powerful landholders, the two-tax system, and the mercenary system (*mubingzhi* 募兵制) all bore resemblance to the Southern Dynasties' institutions. This demonstrates that, from the Northern and Southern Dynasties to the Early Tang, history followed two concurrent threads of development.

During the Sui and the Early Tang periods, institutions derived mainly from the Northern Dynasties' model. However, they existed, especially in the South, alongside forces that had persisted since the Southern Dynasties. For practical purposes, both the Sui and Tang Dynasties attempted to harmonize those two dynastic trends on a national level. Through the integration of Northern and Southern institutions, they also sought to homogenize the whole country by attenuating regional differences.

By the Mid-Tang period, this integration process was finally completed. The southern dynastic trend, or the southern model, became predominant. The emergence of the tenancy system, the two-tax system and the mercenary system precisely indicates the advent of a trend of development based on the southern model. From that period onward, the whole country embarked on a transition period in which dynasties would bear more and more resemblance to the Southern Dynasties. This endeavor of the Sui and Tang to unite the North and South regions, and the Tang's gradual inclination towards the southern model, is also what set in motion the 'Tang-Song period of reforms' discussed later in this article.

We still need to admit that the institutions borrowed from the Northern Dynasties were not outdated altogether. In reality, the Southern Dynasties of the Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen were corrupted in many aspects. To talk about 'the southernization of dynasties' does not signify that the Song, Qi,

Liao, and Chen institutions were indiscriminately replicated. On the contrary, it implies that those institutions were refined. The Tang and Song Dynasties incorporated them to the institutional framework inherited from the Han and Jin Dynasties, a framework which had already been enhanced by the dynamism and innovative systems of the Northern Dynasties. For example, since the Southern Dynasties' tenancy system was based on private retainers working the lands of powerful magnates, it differs greatly from the tenancy system introduced during the Mid-Tang Dynasty. It is precisely by reintroducing the practice of registering the masses, an essential feature of the equal-field system, that the Northern Dynasties struck a severe blow to the already declining influential clans and their system of retaining peasants, thereby paving the way for the establishment of the new tenancy system. Moreover, although some soldiers were being recruited at the end of the Eastern Jin, troops were predominantly composed of hereditary soldiers (*shibing* 世兵) and private troops (*sibingzhi* 私兵制). It is again precisely the Northern Dynasties' *fubing* system, which brought troops under the control of the state and offered them good remuneration, which tremendously weakened the old systems of the Southern Dynasties. The *fubing* system therefore produced the conditions necessary for the establishment of a military system recruiting regular mercenaries. Finally, the imperial examination system (*kejuzhi* 科舉制) that replaced the nine-ranks system (*jiupin zhongzheng zhi* 九品中正制) was established by the Sui Dynasty once more in reference to Northern Dynasties' nation-building strategies. Since it brought to an end the arrogation of political privileges by influential families, it could hardly have emerged directly from the Southern Dynasties. The nobility's ascension led in fact to the corruption of the Southern Dynasties' officialdom, compelling Southern rulers to appoint only officials of humble status to important positions.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 The 'Tang-Song Period of Reforms' Theory, or the Second Occurrence of Northern and Southern Dynasties and Their Trend of Development

In 1921, Japanese scholar Naitō Konan published "A General View on the Times of the Tang and Song Dynasties", in which he advanced the Tang-Song reforms theory. Two major contributions can be drawn from his systematic analysis:

10 Zhao Yi. "How the Southern Dynasties Let Poor but Talented Scholars Occupy Important Positions". *Notes on Twenty-two Histories*. vol. 8. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984, p. 172.

first, the innovative conclusions he came to by analyzing Chinese history from its internal logic; second, his division of ancient Chinese history into important phases: the Remotes Ages, the Middle Antiquity (3rd to 9th century), and the Recent Antiquity.

Why did the Tang-Song reforms, which occurred under the rule of the Liao, Jin, Eastern Xia and the early part of the Yuan Dynasties, happen once again to be divided along north/south geopolitical lines? How did those regimes, governed by northern minorities, influence the Tang-Song reforms? What explains the fact that the institutions developed by the Yuan and Ming Dynasties were different from those established after the mid-Tang and the Song period? How come the late-Ming's institutions were, on the contrary, quite similar to those of the Southern Song?

If we accept this hypothesis of a second "Northern and Southern Dynasties" era in Chinese history, these are certainly some of the more difficult questions that need our attention. Even though the Tang-Song reforms theory can inform us on the tremendous social changes of the Tang-Song era, and provides us with a general idea of the ensuing historical developments, it still leaves some important features of the post-Mid-Tang period unexplored. Even though the theory of the Tang-Song reforms remains highly informative and valuable, it still needs to be further developed. Three aspects in particular ought to be more carefully investigated: first, the situation in the North under the rule of the Liao, Jin, East Xia and Early Yuan Dynasties; second, the systemic differences between North and South from the 10th to the 13th century and the far-reaching ramifications of the implementation of a 'northern' system after the Yuan Dynasty's unification. And third, the possible existence of different systemic factors apart from the Tang-Song reforms which could have significantly influenced Chinese society at the time.

I will now focus my analysis on the feasibility of using the above mentioned Tang-Song reforms theory on the Yuan Dynasty.

### *The Occupation-Based Census and the Whole Population's Mobilization for Forced Labor*

During the period following the Qin and Han Dynasties, two new institutions successively took root in Chinese society: the regular census of the population, and a hierarchical class order dividing people into four categories, namely, scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants. Among them, the census was by far the most important. By making possible the imposition of taxes and forced labor on a national level, it strengthened the centralization of state power. The ranking of the 'four occupations' order also reflects the government's preference for officials and peasants, and its will to restrain the artisans, craftsmen,

and merchants' influence. Following the Tang-Song reforms, this hierarchical order proved to be more flexible. As a result, the official class enjoyed more mobility on a geographical and inter-generational level since one's status did not only depend on his ancestry anymore. The merchants' situation also started to improve, and the relation between peasants and the state also changed a lot. During the Song Period, landowners' and tenants' households were compiled under a centralized registration system, thus bringing relations between landlords and tenants under the control of the state. Under this system, taxes and rotational state service were requisitioned from the landowners only. The Yuan Dynasty introduced an occupation-based registration system, in which the masses were classified according to professions as various as farmers, soldiers, messengers, salt producers, craftsmen, hunters, Nestorians priests, Buddhist monks, Taoist priests, Muslims clerics, Confucian scholars, and medical practitioners. The nature and amount of time of service requisitioned from those citizens depended on their classification in the registration system.<sup>11</sup> This system obviously diverged from the Song's, which divided the masses only in four categories, and controlled the relationship between landlords and tenants. He Ziquan (何茲全) points out that the Yuan Dynasty's decision to requisition the whole population for rotational service was quite a big change. The masses were not only registered, they were also under obligation to serve. Xiao Qiqing also tells us that "the Yuan government established an occupation-based hereditary system going hand in hand with a 'conscription' system in order to mobilize manpower and material resources." It was also intended "to hamper the natural mobility of the social classes." Xiao Qiqing finally considers it an "adverse current" in the development of Chinese history.<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt that the reintroduction of the old system enlisting the whole population for forced labor resulted in the deterioration once more of the relationship between the government and its subjects.

### *The Nobility's Right to Enfeoffment and the Slavery System*

By the time of the Tang and Song Dynasties, the imperial clan's system of enfeoffment by which the noble families bequeathed their properties to their descendants had virtually disappeared. There are many instances however of the revival of the enfeoffment system during the Yuan Dynasty including

11 Huang Ching-lien. "The Division of Registered Households and their Respective Political and Economic Status in the Yuan Dynasty". *Journal of Department of History* No. 2. National Taiwan University, 1975.

12 He Ziquan. "The History of China' Social Development: the Yuan Society". *Journal of Beijing Normal University* No. 5. 1992; Xiao Qiqing, 2007.

the feudal practices of the grasslands' feudal states, the resurgence of fiefs in the central plains (including Henan, western Shandong, southern Shanxi and Hebei), and the appearance of fief holders taking over the administration of previous land grants. Many commanding generals from the Jin Dynasty's nobility also enslaved the captured population. Slaves and maidservants working at the service of the nobility were then referred as *qukou* (驅口). As Xiao Qiqing said, "the restoration of slavery by the Jin Dynasty is an example of society going backward."<sup>13</sup> The practice of capturing the population to serve the nobility was still prevalent when the Jin and Southern Song Dynasties were conquered by the Yuan. These *qukou* were mainly used for work in the house. According to the law, they belonged to the lowest class of society—their masters were entitled to sell them and had the right to arrange their marriage.<sup>14</sup> Even though, drawing near to the unification by the Yuan, the enfeoffment and slavery system were partially remodelled, they still endured until the Ming Dynasty. These two systems were completely at odds with the Tang-Song reforms which "liberated peasants from the yoke of the nobility and the state," and initiated "the decline of bondage relations at a private and public level."

### *The Government-Run Handicraft Industry's Renewed Prosperity*

The Warring States period terminated the government's monopoly on commerce and the handicraft industry. The Qin and Han Dynasties witnessed the rapid development of private handicraft industries which proliferated for a while. During the Wei-Jin period, the handicraft industry was once more managed by the state. From the mid-Tang onward, and especially during the Song Dynasty, private industries were no longer restrained by the state, and they proliferated rapidly. However, as early as Genghis Khan's invasion of China, the Yuan began to bring the industries back under the control of the state. The Yuan government attempted to develop a large-scale industry, and retained a lot of craftsmen through the requisitioned service system. The apparatus of the state was made of overlapping and multifarious structures, and the administration was quite ineffective. Private industries still managed to survive in some instances, such as the case of Hangzhou's silk-weaving industry that appeared to promote wage labor.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, those enterprises were inevitably constrained by the government. The nationalization of the handicraft

13 Xiao Qiqing, 2007.

14 "Records on Military Affairs". *Book of Jin*. Vol 44; Tao Zongyi, "Slaves" Chapter from *Retirement to the Countryside* Vol. 17. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 208.

15 Zheng Tianting. "About Xu Yikui's 'Zhigongdui' ". *Historical Research* No. 1, 1958.

industry undeniably hampered the normal development of private industries and commodity economy. Looking at the general tendency of the Yuan period, we can also confirm that it constituted a regression from the commodity and monetary systems established by the Tang-Song reforms.

*Differences between the North and the South's Agricultural Economy and Financial Systems*

The displacement of economic centers from the North to the South during the Tang-Song period, coupled with the chaos created from repeated invasions by the Jurchens and Mongols in the central plains, resulted in the North lagging far behind the developed economies of its southern neighbours. Having preserved the model inherited from the Tang-Song reforms, areas south of the Yangtze had prosperous and developed economies. Based on preliminary data, during the Yuan period, the three southern provinces Jiangzhe (江浙), Huguang (湖廣), and Jiangxi (江西) had an annual levy in grains that was equivalent to 2.86 times the amount collected in the central plains' inland regions, and their annual government income from business taxation was 25% higher than in the inland region.<sup>16</sup> The government was thus relying more than ever on the Southeast.

The northern and southern economies also differed greatly in their taxation methods. Southern regions were still following the Southern Song's tenancy system, in which landlords owned large estates. In the North, a large proportion of the land was held by peasants or divided into small or middle-sized estates owned by landlords. The use of private slaves for manual labor was still prevalent to some extent. In the South, the taxation on agricultural products was also conducted according to the 'two-tax' system inherited from the Southern Song Dynasty. Both the poll and land taxes were still unevenly enforced in the North. Levies were collected using silk or silver in the North; payments were made with silver and paper notes in the South. The taxation principle of levying all households uniformly may have differed in name, but it is still reminiscent of the "grain-labor-cloth tax system" abrogated during the Tang dynasty. This is a clear indication of how the North's agricultural economy and financial system diverged greatly from the course set by the Tang-Song reforms.

16 "Records of Food and Commodities I". *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* vol. 93; "Records of Food and Commodities II". *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* vol. 94. The annual amount of business tax collected from the northern inland regions included that collected in Dadu (capital city of the Yuan Dynasty) and Shangdu (Xanadu, the former capital of the Yuan Dynasty).

*The Gradual Marginalization of Scholars and the Transformation of the Ruler-Subject Relationship to a Master-Slave One*

Following the introduction of the imperial examination in the Tang-Song era, a class of officials gradually appeared, weakening the traditional ruler-subject bonds. The advent of Neo-Confucianism (理学) meant that officials were now pursuing both the ideals of the *dao* (道) and the *li* (理). Officials still claimed loyalty to the sovereign, but they also emphasized the precedence of Confucian orthodoxy (道統) over “the rule of the prince” (君統), which meant that even the ruler was subjected to Confucian precepts.<sup>17</sup>

The Yuan rulers opted quite early for the preservation of Confucianism. By adopting Han customs, they enabled Confucianism and Confucian scholars to gain prominence. They also promoted the idealist school of Neo-Confucianism as the state orthodoxy to be taught in all official schools. However, Mongol rulers never completely embraced Confucianism themselves, and always disregarded it as culturally inferior. Confucianism was no more revered as the supreme orthodoxy, and Confucian scholars gradually started to be marginalized. They could still enjoy special treatment such as exemption from requisitioned service as explicitly stipulated in the census regulations, and were still nominated to serve as instructors in the public systems, or as minor officials. However, the imperial examination system on which Confucian scholars relied to advance their career since the Tang-Song period, had not yet been reinstated. Therefore, the majority of scholars reached a dead end when trying to follow the Confucian precept affirming that “officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars.” Even though some historians positively assess the impact of the imperial examinations’ abolishment,<sup>18</sup> it is still widely recognized that Confucian scholars endured an unfavourable fate, and were gradually deprived of their prestige during the Yuan Dynasty. Their marginalized status is revealed notably by the saying “scholars take precedence only over beggars,” which became prevalent under the reign of Kublai Khan, as well as in the poetry of Wang Yishan (王義山) when he lamented the unenviable position of scholars appointed to tedious and onerous tasks: “the lonely and desolated official should endure the coldest nights.”<sup>19</sup>

17 Liu Zehua. *History of Ancient Chinese Political Thought*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 1992. p. 487, 551; Zhang Fentian. *The Concept of Chinese Emperors*. Beijing: China People's University Press, 2004, p. 566.

18 Wang Ruilai. “History of the Imperial Examination System's Abolition: Based on Research on the Yuan Dynasty”. *The End of the Imperial Examination System and the Rise of Study on Imperial Examination*. Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 2006.

19 “General Introduction”. *Collected Works by Zheng Sixiao*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1991, p. 186; Wang Yishan “Sending Yu Zhongqian Off to Jiangzhou for Teaching”. *Jiacun Leigao* Vol. 1.



Some emperors of the Song Dynasty declared that “the country shall be governed hand in hand with the officials.”<sup>20</sup> An unwritten rule also protected officials from incurring the death penalty. Under the Yuan however, Kublai Khan and his successors’ conception of the ruler-subject relationship was influenced by the master-servant relationship still customary in the grasslands. Officials could be beaten or executed, depending solely on the emperor’s will. Kublai Khan notably issued an imperial decree stating that “officials who do not serve diligently, no matter Han or Hui, will be killed and their family executed.”<sup>21</sup> The first Yuan dynasty emperor considered all officials as servants, regardless of their rank. Only by showing dedication and loyalty could one be considered a competent official, and thus whoever did not abide by those rules was automatically considered deserving the death penalty. Such was the fate of high officials and prime ministers Wang Wentong (王文統), Lu Shirong (盧世榮), Sengge (桑哥), Guo You (郭佑), and Yang Jukuan (楊居寬). It has also been said that Yuan Emperor Toghon Temür (Shundi) trod in his predecessors’ footsteps by sentencing more than 500 first-rank ministers to capital punishment.<sup>22</sup> That kind of practice contrasts sharply with the 300 years of the Song Dynasty, during which the enforcement of the death penalty was not extended to officials.

***Military Conquest as the Ultimate Objective of the State:  
The Introduction of the Provincial System and the Incorporation  
of the Borderlands Under a Centralized System of Administration***

Shortly after the reunification of the country by Kublai Khan, the territory was divided in eleven provinces, known as *xingsheng* (行省): Shaanxi, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi (江西), Huguang (湖廣), Henan, Liaoyang (遼陽), Lingbei (岭北), and Zhengdong (征東). The provincial system was primarily intended for establishing military dominance and for quelling possible rebellions. Provinces also played a pivotal role in coordination relations

20 Zhang Qifan. “Brief Introduction to the Northern Song Dynasty’s ‘Emperor and Scholars Co-governance’”. *Research on the Politics of the Early Song*. Guangzhou: Jinan University Press, 1995.

21 “Records of Emperor Shizu”. *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* Vol. 10. Up to September, the 16th year of the Yuan Dynasty.

22 Ren Chongyue. *Unofficial History of the Gengshen Emperor* Vol. 2. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 1991, p. 156; Yao Dali. “Discussion of the Imperial Power of the Yuan Dynasty”. *Collection of Academic Works* Vol. 15. Shanghai Far East Press, 1999, p. 305; Qu Wenjun. “On the Master-and-Slave Oriented Development of the Relationship between the Emperors and his Ministers in the Yuan Dynasty”. *Jianghai Academic Journal* No. 1, 2004.

between the central government and the regions, since they served as transfer stations for the collection of taxes and the enforcement of administrative policies. The system had been conceived based on the Jin Dynasty's Branch Department of State Affairs (*xingshangshusheng* 行尚書省) and the Mongols' Three Great Judges (*xingduanshiguan* 行斷事官). During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, power relations between the center and the regions were thus integrated into a new hierarchical structure, which deeply influenced the Ming and Qing Dynasties, as well as modern China.<sup>23</sup>

In order to administer the borderlands, dynasties belonging to the Han ethnic group, such as the Tang and Song, had all implemented a 'subordinated prefecture' policy (*jimi zhengce* 羈縻政策). The subordinated prefectures (*jimizhou* 羈縻州) were in fact a subdivision of prefectures in name only: they generally did not have to submit any census report, and did not pay any tribute.<sup>24</sup> The Yuan government, for its part, created a position for Local Officials (*tuguan* 土官), in accordance with the local customs. It enforced the household census and set up a postal system in those areas, and also subjected them to tax payments and military service.<sup>25</sup> Kublai Khan specifically declared in an imperial decree: "examining and verifying the population is the duty and responsibility of the local officials; since it is applied in all the other areas of the nation, there should be no exception for the border areas."<sup>26</sup> In the eyes of the Mongol rulers, the minorities were not considered barbarians; they were only meant to be subjugated, and so were the Han Chinese. They dismissed the *jimi* policy altogether, and instead undertook to bring all military, political, and financial matters under the direct jurisdiction of the state. This kind of endeavour ultimately stemmed from military thinking, the Mongol rulers being mostly concerned with the idea of military conquest.

Some of the changes described above (the *qukou* slaves, the fief holders taking over land grants, policies regarding agriculture, finances and taxes, etc.) had been inherited from dynasties set by northern minorities, namely the

23 Li Zhi'an. *Research on the Xingsheng System*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2000.

24 Ma Dazheng. *History of the Governance of the Border Areas in Ancient China*. Vol. 4&5. Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2000.

25 Fang Tie. *General History of the Southwest China*. Vol. 6 Chapter 3. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2003.

26 "Records of Emperor Shizu XIV". *The History of the Yuan Dynasty*, Vol. 17. Up to January, Bing-chen (丙辰) the 29th year of the Yuan Dynasty; "Records of Geography VI". *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* Vol. 63. Up to December, Ding-hai (丁亥) the 3rd year of Zhizhi during the reign of Emperor Yingzong of the Yuan Dynasty; "Records of the Emperor Taiding I". *The History of the Yuan Dynasty* Vol. 29. Up to January, Wu-shen (戊申) the first year of Emperor Taiding's reign.

Liao, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties. On the other hand, some changes had principally been imported from the Mongol nobility. Such was the case of the census based on occupation, the enrollment of the whole population for forced labor, the revival of the enfeoffment system, the nationalization of the handicraft industry, the marginalization of Confucian scholars, the returned predominance of the ruler-subject relationship, and the incorporation of the borderlands under a centralized system of administration. In comparison with the Tang-Song reforms described by Naitō Konan, the changes brought about during the Yuan Dynasty appear quite different. They formed the foundations for the Northern Dynasties' institutions, and for the corresponding 'northern dynastic' developmental trend in that area.

Concerning the above variations and changes, American historian Mark Elvin once pointed out that the scientific, technological, and economic stagnation that ensued from the Mongolian invasion brought about a dark period of regression that lasted through the Yuan Dynasty to the Early Ming. This period created a break in the history of China, severing the trends that had until then been predominant. In contrast, the new cycle of economic development that started during the Late Ming period was a direct continuation of the achievements realized during the Tang-Song's scientific and technological revolution. It also constituted a further advance in the economic integration of the whole country.

On the other hand, according to the 'Song-Yuan-Ming transition' theory advanced by Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn, while the North was afflicted by the numerous armed uprisings that erupted during the Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties, the South and its peripheral regions escaped the massive destruction occurring in the North. As such, progress remained uninterrupted in the South, and southern economies and societies continued to develop. According to this view, the Song-Yuan-Ming period does not constitute "a break in the history of China," but rather a 'transition' situated between the Tang-Song reforms, and the prosperous period of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>27</sup>

Xiao Qiqing, who generally agrees with the 'transition' theory, made a brilliant exposition of the tremendous economic, social and cultural differences between the Northern Jin and the Southern Song Dynasties. He also explained the processes by which the North and South had been integrated during the

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27 Smith, Paul and Richard von Glahn, 2003.

Yuan Dynasty. He finally pointed out the 'transition' theory's main limitation, which is that it overlooked the transformations occurring in the North.<sup>28</sup>

The changes described above occurred through a complex series of twists and turns, which makes their analysis quite difficult. I consider them, for my part, as resulting from factors inherent in the second occurrence of Northern and Southern Dynasties, namely the predominance of ethnic minority rulers during the Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan northern dynasties, and regional differences between the North and South. Since both regions were either in confrontation or isolated from each other for more than three centuries, the achievements of the Tang-Song reforms were for the most part preserved by the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties. During the Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties, Northern rulers deviated from the previous trajectory of development and the whole structure of northern society underwent radical transformations. The northern dynastic trend thus arose from this period, whereas the southern dynastic trend was revealed during the Tang-Song period of reforms. In other words, this second division of China in Northern and Southern Dynasties did not proceed only according to the trend set by the Tang-Song reforms. On the contrary, during this period, both dynastic trends tend to intertwine. The southern dynastic trend that traversed the Tang-Song reforms and the northern dynastic trend of the Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan, thus evolved concurrently from 960 to 1276 (the 317 years of the Song reign), and finally merged during the 93 years that followed the reunification of China by the Yuan (in 1276). This fusion bears unmistakable resemblance to the circumstances following the unification by the Sui and Tang Dynasties.

Elvin's rupture theory may be relatively too sweeping and lacking in precision, but Smith and von Glahn's transition theory is definitively one-sided. Their analysis is indeed limited to the southern regions' sustained development, and completely ignores changes occurring in the North. In reality, due to the Yuan's reunification and the unique policies promoted by Zhu Yuanzhang, (Emperor Hongwu) and his son (see below), the 'northern dynastic trend' gained in importance from the 13th to the 16th century, and was even dominant for a while. In the mid-1500s, the integration of southern institutions into the northern system was finally accomplished; both trends of development were thus reconciled, and merged. A hybrid structure ultimately emerged, featuring the economic structures of the South, and the political system of the North.

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28 Xiao Qiqing, 2007.

Proponents of the 'transition theory' also divided history after the Mid-Tang period in three parts: the Mid-Tang and Northern Song period; the Southern Song, Yuan, and Early Ming period; and the Late Ming and Qing period. This classification may be summarized by the Recent Antiquity period (or Modern Times), which encompasses history from the Mid-Tang to the Qing Dynasty. The model established by the Tang-Song reforms was indeed perpetuated throughout this entire period of time. The complex circumstances from the 13th to the 16th century were only a manifestation of the confrontation of Northern and Southern regimes, and of regional differences. This understanding of the developmental trends' merging, as elaborated above, precisely derives from a comprehensive study of this historical period, which investigates both the North and South's situations. It finally answers some of the questions left unexplored by the rupture and transition theories.

### 3 The Early Ming's Adoption of Yuan Institutions and the Merging of the Northern and Southern Trends

After the reunification of China, differences between the North and South still persisted throughout both the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. Those regimes' political and cultural inertia allowed for the North and South to remain in the state of confrontation and isolation they had already endured for 317 years. This antagonistic pattern was mostly noticeable in the important regional and ethnic differences still existing between southerners and northerners. It is also well-known that the Yuan established a new hierarchical order, which accorded predominance to the Mongols. The second caste consisted of *Semu* people (色目), a term which literally signifies 'colored eyed,' but was meant to refer to an 'assorted category' of people. The *Semu* people thus included various minorities that had pledged allegiance to the Yuan. They were followed in rank by Chinese people from the Han majority, and Southern people were relegated to the lowest rank. Although this stratification system was one of the Mongol rulers' policies to segregate and oppress some ethnic minorities, it also reflected to some extent the real political and cultural differences existing among those four castes. A poem composed by Wang Yuanliang (汪元量), from the Southern Song Dynasty, notably illustrates the division between northerners and southerners after the Yuan army captured Hangzhou:

Sun goes down over the mountains at the western frontier  
Rain falls nonstop beyond the gate of the northern border  
People in the North laugh, and southerners shed their tears

Some will always cherish the memory of a past emperor  
Just as Du Fu bows in salute to Cukoo

During the final years of the Yuan, the scholar Ye Ziqi (葉子奇) also declared: "Since the reunification, the North has been placed above the other areas, and the northerners have been considered superior to the southerners."<sup>29</sup> Under the Yuan, the use of the term 'southerners' remained relatively stable, since it referred most commonly to people who had originally been part of the Southern Song empire. The term 'northerners' however had both a narrow and broader meaning: the first one referred only to the Mongols and the *Semu* people, while the second one also encompassed the Han Chinese leaving in the North. Wang Yuanliang and Ye Ziqi most probably referred to 'northerners' in the broader sense. Those writings either meant to contrast the joy or grief felt by both sides after the capture of Hangzhou, or to denounce the imperial court's munificence towards northerners, which discriminated against the southerners. Still, those two interpretations both evenly reveal how this severe lack of understanding between northerners and southerners persisted during the entire duration of the Yuan Dynasty. As early Qing historian Tan Qian (談遷) put it, confrontation between the North and South only ended during the Ming Dynasty (see below for further details).

It is true that the political changes brought about by the Yuan Dynasty, such as the reunification of the country, transformed the northern and southern 'dynastic' trends into trends that were merely aligned on regional differences. Furthermore, it did not take long before those two trends, or differences, started to merge. According to Xiao Qiqing, the main achievements realized through this process were as follows: the establishment of a nationwide transport and postal network; the creation of an official currency and a national weights and measures system, which allowed for the emergence of a market economy; the coordination of the South and North's economies achieved by the booming market; the cultural blending of the northern and southern cultures, as reflected by the spread of Neo-Confucianism to the North; and the introduction of the opera to the South. On the other hand, the differences in development between the two regions kept expanding—while southern economies

29 Tao Zongyi, "Wang Shuiyun". *Retirement to the countryside* Vol. 5. p. 56; Wang Yuanliang, "On Music Master Mao Minzhong's North-bound Journey" *Zengding Hushan Leigao* Vol. 1. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984, p. 24; Ye Ziqi, "Restraint & Caution". *Cao mu zi* Vol. 3 Part I. p. 55, 49.

flourished, the North's kept lagging behind, and finally both regions failed to integrate efficiently.<sup>30</sup>

Northern factors usually prevailed during the first stage of this integration process, due to the predominant influence of the northern dynastic trend in the Yuan regime. Many features described above, such as the national census, the requisitioned service, the nobility's right of enfeoffment, the revival of slavery, the nationalization of the handicraft industry, the reinforcement of the ruler-subject relation, the provincial system, and the integration of the borderlands, all infiltrated southern societies to a different degree. This integration pattern was not significantly altered during the Early Ming, but it was certainly poles apart from the path chosen by later regimes.

Even though the Ming Dynasty established its capital in Nanjing, the "Southern Capital", it still maintained a lot of institutions that had been established by the northern Yuan. This explains Emperor Zhu Di's decision to move the capital to Yanjing (nowadays Beijing), as well as the distinct northern or southern policies promulgated by the founder of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, and his son Zhu Di. Most of Zhu Yuanzhang's old subordinates were from the barren areas west of the Huai River. They lived along the Hao (濠), Si (泗), Ru (汝), and Ying (潁) Rivers, and in the cities of Shouchun and Dingyuan (壽春, and 定遠, both in Anhui Province), which stretched across the Huai River. They were "used to toil, had no desire for luxurious life, and were not like those southerners who had been indulged in pleasure."<sup>31</sup> The past Song and Jin's borderlands had been located in this exact region, and it is also where the Song Dynasty and the Mongol Empire had met. In the late years of Kublai Khan, it had been incorporated into the Henan (河南) and Jiangbei (江北) provinces, and it was thus distinguished from the three southern provinces.

Those regions bordering the North and South of China were the first to witness Zhu Yuanzhang's and his old subordinates' rise to power during the Yuan and Ming period. However, the emperor and his old generals all belonged to the northern people in customs and origins, and could not possibly identify with southerners. Furthermore, since most of the Susong (蘇松) officials (nowadays Jiangsu) allied themselves with Zhu Yuanzhang's long-time foes, Zhang Shicheng (張士誠) and Chen Youliang (陳友諒), the emperor never

30 Xiao Qiqing. "Differences and Similarities in the Northern and Southern Dynasties' Development in Pre-Modern China—Focus on the Southern Song, Jin and Yuan Dynasties' Economic Society Culture". *Tsinghua History Lectures—Preliminary Edition*. Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2007.

31 *Discussions about the [Ming] State* Vol. 2. p. 342.



considered southerners to be on his side. On the contrary, he always considered confrontation, rather than cooperation, to be the best strategy when dealing with southern people, to the point of promulgating stern policies intended to oppress wealthy families and officials from Susong. In contrast, the emperor tended to show a lot of concern for northern natives, and sentenced to death southern examiners, such as Bai Xindao (白信蹈), for having showed favoritism towards southern officials. Following this event, which was known as the “North-South Civil List Case” (“南北榜”, 1398), Zhu Yuanzhang personally directed the imperial examination and nominated 61 northerners to the post of officials.<sup>32</sup>

Emperor Jianwen, for his part, appointed southern natives, such as Qi Tai (齊泰), Huang Zicheng (黃子澄), and Fang Xiaoru (方孝孺), to important positions. He advocated clemency and equal taxation of both the north and south provinces. He finally refused to adopt Zhu Yuanzhang’s oppressive strategies and severe penal law, as well as the heavy taxation of the Susong region. The southern-oriented policies of Emperor Jianwen were in fact completely opposite to his grandfather’s.

However, when Zhu Di launched the “Jingnan Campaigns” (靖難之役 1399-1402) and invaded Yanjing, he recruited the Yuan generals Zhang Yu (張玉), the Mongol Huo Zhen (火真), as well as the brave and bellicose Mongol Duoyan Guards (朵顏三衛). The North Zhili Province (北直隸, nowadays Beijing, Tianjin, Henan, part of Hebei and Shandong) proved to be a reliable rear base for Zhu Di, and it provided him with both military recruits and government income. Zhu Di’s greatest campaigns were also set in Yanjing and the Gobi desert. After having vanquished Emperor Jianwen, Zhu Di finally moved the capital to Yanjing, and ruthlessly repressed those who had supported his predecessor, among whom were many southern officials. His policies were without a doubt even more northern-oriented than those pursued by Zhu Yuanzhang.

According to research by Zheng Kesheng (鄭克晟) and Danjo Hiroshi, Zhu Di’s policies following the Jingnan Campaigns, Zhu Yuanzhang’s “North-South Civil List Case,” Zhu Gaochi’s “North-South examination papers”<sup>33</sup> (*nanbeijuan* 南北卷), and a series of cases that occurred during Zhu Yuanzhang’s reign, such as the “Blank Seal Case” (*kongyinan* 空印案 1382), the “Hu Weiyong Case” (胡惟庸之獄 from 1380 to 1392), the “Guo Huan Case” (郭桓案 1385),

32 “Biography of Liu Sanwu”. *The History of the Ming Dynasty* Vol. 137; “Records of Election II”. *The History of the Ming Dynasty* Vol. 70; Danjo Hiroshi. *The Historical Structure of the Ming Dynasty’s Autocratic Rule*. Part 1 Chapter 4. Tokyo, 1995.

33 A system according to which 60% of the officials had to be selected from the southern regions.

the “Li Shanchang Case” (李善長之獄), and the “Lan Yu Case” (藍玉之獄), were all aimed to crush the landlords of the South, to eradicate the ‘southern regime’ that had risen during the Early Ming, and to establish a unified dynasty. The antagonistic pattern between North and South, which was produced by the ambivalent orientations of the Early Ming emperors, was quite similar to the Yuan Dynasty’s own political pattern. As Tan Qian puts it, “the land is divided into North and South, so are the people into northerners and southerners. . . . and they have always been in conflict. Governmental affairs all depend of who is the chancellor in charge.”<sup>34</sup>

“The Biography of Wang Ao” in *The History of the Ming Dynasty* records: “The Emperor (Zhu Di) wanted to set the capital in Beijing, because he wanted to employ northern officials.” It was said that the Grand Secretary Jiao Fang (焦芳), an official under Emperor Wuzong, from Qinyang (沁陽) (Henan), “loathed southerners and would feel delighted once a southern official was dismissed from the government. When he talked about ancestors, he would slander those from the South and praise those from the North. He always suggested to Liu Jin (劉瑾, a eunuch) that southern officials could not hold major positions in the government.”<sup>35</sup> Zheng Kesheng had it right when he advanced that from the beginning to the end of the Ming dynasty, the government policies reflected conflicts between the Northern and Southern landlords.<sup>36</sup>

To sum up, the moving of the capital to Yanjing and the Ming’s north-oriented policies did not only perpetuate the Yuan’s antagonistic pattern, it also created a situation in which Ming institutions were bearing more and more resemblance to the Yuan’s. The Yuan reforms enumerated earlier, which differed slightly from the Tang and Song’s, deeply influenced the Early Ming’s rulers. Many features of the Ming Dynasty’s are reminiscent of the Yuan period: the life-long military service system, the household-based requisitioned service, the government-run handicraft industry, the registration of craftsmen, the issue of banknotes, the long-enduring contrast between political economies of the North and South, the incorporation of the three provincial offices to the provincial system, imperial clan enfeoffment, and the decimation of meritorious ministers and scholar-officials. The northern dynastic trend, that traversed the period of China’s second North-South division, tenaciously lingered during the Early Ming Dynasty, and was even dominant for a while.

34 *Discussions about the [Ming] State* Vol. 19, p. 4913.

35 “Story of the Eunuch Faction”. *The History of the Ming Dynasty* Vol. 360.

36 Zheng Kesheng *On the Origins of the Political Struggles of the Ming Dynasty*. Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 1988, p. 81. Also refer to the book’s first edition.

The transfer of the capital to Yanjing by Zhu Di was a decisive moment in Chinese history. If Emperor Jianwen had not been vanquished, or again if Zhu Di would not have moved the capital to the North, the historical phase during which China followed two different trends of development would have been much shorter, and the merging of those two trends, allowing for the South to be predominant again, would certainly have happened earlier, and China would have southernized more quickly. It is indeed unfortunate that history did not occur like this, but rather followed the path initiated by Zhu Di when he moved the capital to Yanjing. Contingent factors, such as Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di's personal backgrounds and preferences, influenced considerably the trajectory of the northern dynastic trends during the Early Ming, and ultimately granted predominance to the northern institutions. Therefore, we can divide the merging of the northern and southern trends into two phases: the early stage, during which northern systems prevailed, and the middle phase during which southern institutions were revered again. It thus appears that the merging of both developmental trends was ultimately delayed for almost 200 years. If we add the 242 years of the Southern Song-Jin-Yuan period, this second occurrence of two trends of development originating in northern and southern dynasties and persisting through regional differences afterwards, lasted more than four and a half centuries. This considerably long period of time in China's history, which occurred after the Tang-Song reforms, deserves more attention from historians. It is also the reason why this article has mainly focused on the second division of China between North and South.

There were obvious differences between the early and middle periods of the Ming Dynasty. During the Mid-Ming, southern institutions became predominant, and replaced northern institutions such as the life-long military service system, the household-based requisitioned service, the government-run handicraft industry, and the registration of craftsmen. As a result, the southern dynastic trend that had been inaugurated by the Tang-Song reforms gradually became the dominating trend of development.

### *From the Life-Long Military Service System to the Mercenary System*

When the Ming came to power, they adapted the Yuan military system made of Battalions (*qianhu* 千戶) and Imperial Guardsmen (侍衛親軍), by setting up guarding garrisons (*weisuo* 衛所). They also kept using the Yuan life-long military system, according to which, soldiers were registered in a separate category, and were subordinated to the Commissioner-in-chief (*dudufu* 都督府), whereas the common people were still administered by the Ministry of Revenue (*hubu* 戶部). This 'soldier status' was hereditary, and therefore the enlisting of one man into the army signified that all of his descendants would

have to follow this path as well. This was not an enviable fate, since the social, legal, and economic status of soldiers was quite low. The drafted often tended to associate with soldiers who had been banished, and often sought to escape the army. During the reign of Emperor Hongzhi, deserting soldiers already accounted for 60 to 70 percent of the guarding garrisons. At the beginning of his reign, Emperor Yingzong sent officials all over the country, entrusting them with the mission to recruit soldiers, who were then supported financially by the regime. At first, the enlisting of recruits aimed to replenish troops in the capital and defense areas along the northern border. Later, in the struggle against the Japanese pirates' invasion, voluntary soldiers were also enlisted to form the Qi's Army (戚家軍) and the Yu's Army (俞家軍).<sup>37</sup> After the reintroduction of a recruiting system, military service was perceived as a vocation, rather than a plight, and soldiers were practically cast from the same mold as the Tang's Army of Inspired Strategy, or the Song's Imperial Guards. This transition from the life-long military system to a mercenary system ended up mirroring many of the southern institutions established by the Tang-Song reforms.

*From the Household-Based Requisitioned Service to the "Single Whip" Tax System (yitiaobianfa 一條鞭法)*

The Ming first adopted the Yuan household-based requisitioned service, which divided the entire population into specific categories determining the nature and amount of work they were expected to serve. More than eighty professions were identified under this registration system; they included oil producers, wine producers, sheep herders, cattle farmers, horse farmers, fruit growers, vegetable growers, musicians, doctors, gold producers, silver producers, boatmen, fishermen, and so on. A life-long and mandatory service was required from all—different households would provide different service at different working fields, and each household had to provide a certain number of laborers. The Early Ming allowed people to provide less labor if they paid more taxes, however taxes and forced labor were the exact same, as people had to work the land they were allocated anyway, either to pay their taxes, or to accomplish requisitioned time. This whole system was based on the idea that the emperor had dominion over the whole country's territory and population. The land belonged to the emperor, so did the people, and every person, regardless of his

37 "Records of Military Affairs II: The Guardians". *The History of the Ming Dynasty* Vol. 90; "Records of Military Affairs II: Cleaning up the military". *The History of the Ming Dynasty* Vol. 92; Xiao Lijun. "On mid & late-Ming Dynasty's Military System" (Doctoral Thesis). Nankai University, 2005. See chapter III, Section 3: "The Development of the Ming Dynasty's Mercenary System".

or her occupation, had to fulfill the service allotted to them according to the registration system.<sup>38</sup> This system virtually replicated the Yuan system.

During Emperor Zhengtong's first reign (1436-1449), this system was gradually relaxed by allowing payment in currency, and by gradually reforming the requisitioned service system. The payment of taxes in currency was actually common practice in certain areas since Emperor Xuande's reign (1425-1435). During that period, the government undertook a reform of the tax and requisitioned service system. He attempted to coordinate provincial administrations in order to end the unequal collection of taxes that had been a burden for many farmers in previous years. Moreover, the amount of requisitioned service asked from citizens was thereupon fixed, and rotational time also decreased. According to those reforms, service and tax were more and more paid in silver, grain tax was collected based on the number of laborers, and rules were revised regularly. Those reforms were later adjusted and integrated into the 'Ten-Sections Code' (十段冊法). Under Emperor Wanli's reign (1572-1620), Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng ultimately complemented those reforms by introducing the "Single Whip" tax system. This system aimed to commute all tax payments and labor obligations into a single silver payment. It reestablished the Tang Dynasty's "Double Tax System," but with some innovations. The Late Ming Dynasty therefore bore more and more resemblance to the Tang-Song reform period, a resemblance which further reveals the growing predominance of the southern trend in the development of Chinese history from the Mid-Ming onwards.

*From the Government-Run Handicraft Industry and the Registration of Craftsmen to Private Tax-Paying Businesses*

During the Early Ming, the handicraft industry consisted mostly of government-run businesses, as had been the case during the Yuan Dynasty. The Ming also carried on the registration of craftsmen for a while, which defined craftsmanship as a hereditary profession. According to this system, rotating and permanent craftsmen were appointed to provide unremunerated service in the government-run industries. After the middle period of the Ming Dynasty, many changes were brought to this system. First, during the short-lived reign of Emperor Jingtai (1449-1457), the original five-shift system was changed into a four-year duty system in order to alleviate the craftsmen's burden. Second, under Emperor Chenghua (1464-1487), rotating craftsmen could be exempted

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38 Wang Yuquan. "The Ming Dynasty's Forced Labor Based Household Registration and Taxation System". *Study of Chinese History* No. 1, 1991.

from service by paying a certain amount of silver.<sup>39</sup> The craftsmen registration system was eventually undermined by those reforms, and free labor gradually developed, enabling craftsmen to emancipate themselves from the government's fetters. Hence, in the Late Ming period, privately-run businesses came to outgrow the government-run ones, and tax-paying industries began to play a decisive role in the new tax system.

To sum up, the life-long military service system, the household-based requisitioned, and the craftsmen registration all revealed the merging of the northern and southern trends, whereas the reforms introduced during the Late Ming period all featured elements pertaining to the southern dynastic trend originating from the Tang-Song reforms. To make a comprehensive survey of 500 years of history is indeed a laborious task, and the intricate patterns that emerged during this period may often leave us perplexed. Nevertheless, the period following the reign of Emperor Wanli, should not be mistaken as the 'diachronic continuation' of the Southern Song policies. It is a manifestation of the Northern and Southern trends that concurrently traversed China's history. We have unravelled above how those trends progressively merged and recurred one after the other.

It has to be said that some aspects inherited from the Yuan and other northern dynasties have remained until modern times. The appointment of ethnic leaders as commanders in chief during the Early Ming, and favorable pay and provisions for members of imperial clans during the Late Ming, were the legacy of the Yuan Dynasty's enfeoffment system.<sup>40</sup> The Yuan's authoritarian regime designed a centralized model of governance, by dividing the country into provinces and dispatching troops in all of them. This model was afterwards adapted by creating the Three Provincial Offices and the General Governors and Governors' position. Discrepancies between the South and North's political economies also remained, as well as the despotic nature of the government, and the officials' subordination. In this regard especially, the Ming Dynasty surpassed the Yuan Dynasty.

Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang stated clearly in the *Ming Dynasty Imperial Mandates*<sup>41</sup> that "scholars in the country who do not serve the emperor are

39 Fang Ji. "The Trends of the Ming Dynasty's Handicraft Industry's Development". *History Teaching and Research* No. 4, 1958; Chen Shiqi. "Research on the Ming Dynasty's Handicraft Industry". Wuhan: Hubei People's Press, 1958.

40 Li Zhian. *Research on Enfeoffment in the Yuan Dynasty*. Tianjin: Tianjin Ancient Books Publishing House, 1992; Wu Jihua. "On Vassals and Transfer of Military Power in the Ming Dynasty". *The Continent Magazine* Vol. 34. No. 7 & 8, 1967.

41 *Dagao* 大诰, also known as "The Ming Dynasty's Great Admonitions".



unfaithful. They should be killed and their family executed.”<sup>42</sup> This mirrors Kublai Khan’s imperial decree: “officials who do not serve diligently, no matter Han or Hui, will be killed and their family executed.” Moreover, Zhu Yuanzhang would directly vilify the Song’s Neo-Confucianism philosophers who elevated the Confucian orthodoxy above the ‘rule of the Prince.’ He deliberately distorted the Confucian logic by claiming that the emperor was the ultimate holder of the Confucian ethical code, using this as justification for the repression and mass execution of officials. As a result, the ‘ruler-subject relation’ as defined by the Yuan emperors prevailed through the Ming Dynasty, and China entered into the darkest period of its history.

Before the Yuan Dynasty, Confucian officials would usually follow the tenet stating that “taking a post or resigning from office should always follow the *dao*.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, officials would only take office if they considered the Emperor to be virtuous, and they otherwise would retire and withdraw from society. Emperors from past dynasties had all been confronted with many of their officials leaving office and going to live in seclusion. Their decision to seclude themselves would depend on whether or not they could abide by the etiquette principles (*li* 禮) while serving the emperor. As such, it was an important indication of how virtuous the Emperor was considered to be.

However, after Zhu Yuanzhang published the *Ming Dynasty Imperial Mandates*, the officials were deprived of their right to retire and live in seclusion. Whoever dared to go live in seclusion was considered unwilling to serve the emperor, the worst offense one could possibly commit, thus condemning him and his family to death. This is certainly the worst manifestation of cultural despotism designed to repress officials, and it went completely against the Song’s precept that “the country shall be governed hand in hand with the officials.” It was even more absurd than the Qing Dynasty’s literary inquisition, and its influence on subsequent generations of scholars was long and pernicious. No wonder that out of the twelve people recorded in the chapter “*Biography of The Hermits*,” in *The History of the Ming Dynasty*, seven were originally Yuan officials that continued to serve the Ming. The rest, like Liu Min (劉閔), had to present their will to resign to the prefecture’s magistrate, and could only legally live in seclusion once their request was sanctioned by the imperial court. This situation resulted from the tyrannical implementation of the imperial mandate to punish any official who was suspected of not serving the emperor.

42 “The Scholars of Suzhou XIII”. *Ming Dynasty Imperial Mandates III*.

43 “Reply to Dong Zhongcheng’s Letter”. *Collections of Works by Yuan Scholars III: Collection of Works by Wu Wenzheng* Vol 7. Taipei: Taiwan Xinwenfeng Company, 1985, p. 171.



When Zhu Yuanzhang arbitrarily executed meritorious officials, and any officials who could not serve him, he may have been reproducing the style of the first Han Emperor, Liu Bang, but he was also perpetuating the Yuan Dynasty's system. Once Zhu Di had defeated Emperor Jianwen, he focused his energies on suppressing officials led by Fang Xiaoru, who had remained faithful to the dethroned emperor. Even though imperial schools proliferated during the Ming Dynasty, the officials never really recovered the status they had enjoyed during the Song Dynasty. On the contrary, they kept being repressed by the emperor, and were caught in a servile relationship, suffering the emperor's despotism. The flogging of officials (*tingzhang* 廷杖) was a common practice till the end of the Ming Dynasty, and in fact represents the quintessence of this dynasty's political culture.

The use of the term *jinshen* (縉紳) to designate officials gradually came to supersede the term *shidafu* (士大夫), which certainly conveyed more reverence (it literally translates as *scholar and grand master*). Such a change might have occurred because officials came to work more and more in regional offices rather than in the imperial court. It could also have been because they often suffered flogging punishment by the imperial court, a practice contradicting the ancient precept instructing that "penalties [should] not extend to high officials." Wang Yangming's (王陽明) Idealistic School also transformed the nature of Neo-Confucianism, by advocating principles which contradicted the former rationalist school. It notably emphasized the notion of 'innate knowing' and principles such as "the mind is the source of reason" (心即理) and "the extension of innate knowledge" (致良知). It no longer stressed the importance of the *dao* and Confucian orthodoxy. The officials who adopted this school of thought did not dare to question the morality of the emperor, or to confront him with Confucian teachings anymore. Their role in the country's administration thus considerably differed from that of scholars who had been valuable advisors to the Song Dynasties' emperor.

Under the Ming emperors' despotic regime, officials who still believed in the Confucian principle instructing them to "lead the emperor to the Way (or *dao*)" (致君行道) had to resign themselves to bend in front of the emperor, and risk death penalty for holding their belief.<sup>44</sup> As one can easily see, this political culture, based on the authoritarian rule of the emperor and the enslavement of officials that took root during the Yuan and the Early Ming Dynasties, meant that the golden age of emperor and officials working hand in hand was forever gone.

44 Luo Zongqiang, *Research on the Mentality of late-Ming Scholars*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2006. Chapter I.

Officials of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties certainly did not have the courageous spirit of their Song predecessors, who abided by the principles of the *dao*. Their sense of being active participants in governmental affairs distinctly deteriorated, and it is only in the tragic fate of exceptional and marginal characters such as Fang Xiaoru Xie Jin (解縉), and Li Zhi (李贄) that we can still perceive a spirit evocative of the Song Dynasty's philosophers and a certain kind of resistance against despotism. A lot of historians who paid attention to the Ming and Qing's authoritarian regimes found them to be quite deplorable. In theory, their despotic policies were predicated on the decline of the nobility. Nevertheless, once the nobility had lost most of its influence on the bureaucracy, the emperor's authoritarianism was reinforced to the detriment of the officials.

Even though the emperor's authority was reinforced during the Song Dynasty, this consolidation still followed the spirit of the Tang-Song reforms, which called for the creation of an authoritarian government by the mutual reinforcement of both the emperor and the ministers' power. The cruel enslavement of officials that occurred during the second northern and southern dynasties was carried on by the Yuan and Ming regimes. It was also perpetuated to some extent during the Qing Dynasty, and therefore authoritarianism dominated Chinese history to an unprecedented level despite the nobility's decline. This persistence should not be attributed to Zhu Yuanzhang and his descendants' ruthless and imperious policies, as much as to their regimes' political and cultural inertia. This inertia was brought about by the import of the old northern system's master-servant relationship, which in turn played an important role in fostering authoritarianism during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties. Finally, more attention should be paid to the question of whether or not such circumstances altered the way we conceive the 'ruler-subject relation' and the officials' relation to the state.

### Conclusion

The above analysis demonstrates that the course of Chinese history since Middle Antiquity has been directly influenced by the differences between the northern and southern regions. This differentiation occurred during the two periods of northern and southern dynasties. It therefore appears that the Tang-Song period of reforms was not traversed by a single trend of development, but was determined by the complex interaction of both northern and southern trends. This complexity ought to be further considered by historians who seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of Chinese Middle and Recent Antiquity.

The first Northern and Southern Dynasties, as well as the Sui and Early Tang Dynasties, evolved following the two concurrent northern and southern dynastic trends. The Sui and Tang Dynasties mostly implemented institutions modelled on those of the previous Northern Dynasties. They also carried out the integration of the northern and southern dynastic models on a national level. Following the Mid-Tang period, both trends merged and the whole country started to southernize.

The second occurrence of northern and southern dynasties and their respective concurrent trends was equally important. The Southern Song perpetuated the achievements of the Tang-Song reforms, and mainly followed the southern dynastic trend, whereas the Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan Dynasties followed the northern dynastic trend. Those two trends coexisted and blended, and were merged in three distinct phases: the Yuan period, the Early Ming period, and the Mid-Ming period. While the northern trend was predominant during the two early phases, the southern trend became increasingly influential during the Mid-Ming. Those two trends were finally merged under the Late Ming regime.

The Tang-Song reforms were in fact decisive, since they were the connecting link between the two periods of northern and southern dynasties. They resulted from the integration under the Tang of the two dynastic trends, and as such, the second northern and southern trends developed from this period. Moreover, the second southern trend stemmed mainly from those reforms.

The opinions formulated in this article regarding the first occurrence of the northern and southern dynastic trends were drawn upon Chen Yinke's and Tang Changru's 'southernization' theory, as well as from related arguments by Yan Buke, Hu Baoguo, and Chen Shuang. However, my propositions regarding the second occurrence of those trends could more easily stir debates. *The Differences and Integration of the Development of the South and North in the Early Modern China*, which was recently published by Xiao Qiqing, brilliantly exposes the economic, social, and cultural differences that existed between the North and South during the Northern Jin and Southern Song division, and that persisted after the Yuan's unification of China.<sup>45</sup> Xiao Qiqing's arguments happen to corroborate many of my own findings. However, he only admits that the gap between the North and South widened during the Jin-Yuan period, and never mentions any of the developmental

45 Xiao Qiqing. "Differences and Similarities in the Northern and Southern Dynasties' Development in Pre-Modern China—Focus on the Southern Song, Jin and Yuan Dynasties' Economic Society Culture". *Tsinghua History Lectures—Preliminary Edition*. Beijing: Joint Publishing, 2007.

trends that ensued from that period onward. If only those differences between the North and South had been limited to the 242 years of the Southern Song-Jin-Yuan period, I would certainly have cautiously limited myself to a differential approach, and supported a point of view quite similar to Xiao Qiqing's. However, there remains the issue of Zhu Yuanzhang and Zhu Di's contingent role in extending the dominance of the northern trend, and ultimately delaying the southern trend's return to predominance until the Late Ming period. As a result, two trends of development persisted in China for an additional 200 years, which, counting the above mentioned 242 years, had made the whole duration nearly four and a half centuries long. Northern and southern differences obviously evolved during this considerably long period of time. The existence of northern and southern trends during the Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan was also confirmed by Masaaki Chikusa.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, I consider that the propositions offered in this article are based on a fair appreciation of historical facts.

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46 Masaaki Chikusa. *Dynasties of Conquest in China History*. Tokyo: Kodansha Publishing House, 1977.

# The Heavens are High and the Emperor is Near: An Imperial Power System that is Open to the People

*The Interaction and Representation of the Complicated Relationship  
between the Emperors and the People in Qin and Han Dynasties*

Lei Ge<sup>1</sup>

*Translated by Wang Jingqiong and Josh Mason*

## Abstract

When we say that “the Emperor is near,” we are referring not to his nearness to the officials below him but rather to the people. It has always been an indispensable element of the emperor’s authority that he is able to establish a clear relationship with the populace and allow them to directly feel his presence in their everyday lives—both materially and morally—and even more importantly, feel the emperor’s concern for the people on a regular basis. Fostering the people’s sense of coexistence with the emperor is essential to solidifying the emperor’s position and maintaining the emperor’s almost holy image. The development of the imperial power structure through the Qin and Han Dynasties can thus be seen as the continuous development of the relationship between the emperor and his subjects. The main agents in the imperial society can be defined as the emperor, his officials, and the people; it can not be limited simply to the political dynamics between the emperor and the officials. Through his autocratic rule, the emperor has the ability to build a personal, transcendent connection with the people. Imperial rule is by definition autocratic, but the entire imperial power structure necessarily includes the people and his personal relationship with them. By citing multiple historical examples, we can begin to see how the emperors established such personal relationships with the people and why they were important to his rule.

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## Keywords

Qin Dynasty – Han Dynasty – imperial power – autocracy – relationship between emperor and populace

### I The Logic Behind the Ideas of Valuing the People and Endearing Oneself to the People in the Politics of Imperial Power

Since the pre-Qin era, the mainstream attitude towards the people has been quite clear. As early as the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Duke of Zhou raised a systematic political guiding principle of “respect the heavens (*tian*) and protect the people (*min*).”<sup>2</sup> In the Spring and Autumn Period, the people were given a more prominent position in the ruling ideas. The people were connected with the heavens in that the heavens follow the will of the people and “the heavens love the people dearly.”<sup>3</sup> The people were connected with the divine in that “the people are the lords of the divine.”<sup>4</sup> The people were also connected with the state in that “a state in rising comforts its people like treating wounds on its own body, for that is where its fortune lies; a state in decline sees its people as nothing, and that is where its crisis lies.”<sup>5</sup> By the time of the Warring States Period, Mencius further theorized the idea of valuing the people. His notion that “the people are more important than the King and the state,”<sup>6</sup> signifies the high point of the idea of “people as the root” in Chinese classical times. Compared with Mencius’ highly theorized idea of “people as the root,” some more specific and policy-oriented measures and propositions also showed the ideas of valuing the people and endearing oneself to the people. For example, the legalists advocated training certain peasants as soldiers in times of conflict, the Mohists proposed exalting the virtuous, and the Confucians proposed ruling by benevolence. In summary, both the regimes of the Eastern and Western Zhou Dynasties emphasized the importance of the people. Whether for strategic motives like having resources for war, or for promoting ethics, or for the solidarity of the political foundation, both the regimes and the ruled acknowledged the ever-increasing importance of the people.

2 Records in *Shangshu* show that this had become the political consensus among the Western Zhou kings, especially in the chapters of *Zicai* and *Kanggao*.

3 See 14th year of *Xianggong* in *Zuozhuan*.

4 See 6th year of *Huangong* in *Zuozhuan*.

5 See 1st year of *Aigong* in *Zuozhuan*.

6 *Jinxinzhangjuxia* chapter of *Mencius*.

However, when applied within a political system, both the kingly power and monarchical power lacked specific conceptions and practices in the following aspects: how to properly regulate and confirm the identities of the people, and how the monarch or the king connects with people in their daily lives so as to earn their trust. The factors can be many, but I argue that a key cause might be that both kingship and monarchy as political systems lacked a self-conscious and mature systematic design.<sup>7</sup> As for this matter, the later emperorship undoubtedly worked better. I propose that, based on the ideas of valuing the people and endearing oneself to the people, the later emperorship created a unique conception, social institutions, rituals, and discourse through the idea that “the heavens are high and the emperor is near.”<sup>8</sup> Given this, I argue that the notions of “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away” and “the heavens are high and the emperor is near” are two different conceptions of political relations in the long course of ancient Chinese despotism.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that “the heavens are high and the emperor is near,” does not mean that the emperor is close to the officials, but rather is close the people. Since the people are always at the lowest level of a society and thus the farthest from the emperor, an emperor who is near the people can be seen as with the people. Of course, in this process the possibility of nearness and the will to come close lie with the emperor. Therefore, it became imperative for the expansion of imperial power that the emperor endear himself to the people, to let the people know that the emperor is with them, and to let the people experience the emperor’s care and the divinity of his imperial benevolence. The expansion of the imperial power in the Qin and Han Dynasties followed this idea of connecting the emperor and the people,<sup>10</sup> which resulted in the establishment of an imperial power system.

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7 Undoubtedly, the reason for this was that the kingly power existed in the earlier phase of Chinese history while the political mind was still shallow; the monarchical power was in the Warring State Period when all the princes were too busy fighting wars to think otherwise.

8 Translator’s note: The title of this article is a play on words using the often quoted expression 天高皇帝遠, meaning the heavens are high and the emperor is far away.

9 If I can borrow the western terminology, we might say that “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away” is like Deism, while “the heavens are high and the emperor is near” is like Pantheism.

10 If we subdivide, there should be another idea which is the integration of the individuals and the state. Therefore, the construct of the imperial power system actually includes two models of integration: the emperor and the people, and the individuals and the state. If the post-Warring States era started when Qin Shi Huang established a direct relation between the emperor and the people, then the new-empire era that started with Wu



From the perspective of social regulation in an imperial power political system, the “registration of commoner households” was a stable and effective measure for control.<sup>11</sup> However, every wise ruler understands that controlling people’s hearts is different from controlling them physically. The imperial regime’s understanding of the people only became deeper and more mature after the theoretical enlightenment which was the result of the contention of the hundred schools of thought and almost a thousand years of kingly and monarchical power politics. The highly effective administrative skills developed by the bureaucracy also enabled the imperial court to closely connect the people with the land. Even though in earlier times there were kings ruling vassal states, people of that time generally thought that “these kings only

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emperor of Han Dynasty established a direct connection between the individuals and the state. Theoretically speaking, each individual became somewhat related to the state once the state came into existence. However, what I’m emphasizing here is that an individual only started to gain initiative and activity after the establishment of the imperial power system based on “the heavens are high and the emperor is near.” Or in other words, an individual gains more space between him/herself and the state and shoulders more state responsibility only after the establishment of a conceptual reciprocity between the emperor and the people. Therefore, the relation between the emperor and the people in an imperial power system was the prerequisite for the relation between the individuals and the state.

- 11 “Registration of commoner households” was to weave everybody into the huge web of the imperial power system, which would then become a new social-political order that omitted nobody. The imperial power then naturally became self-evident. New order, new identities, and new conceptions became the cultivated new system. This could be seen as a systematic construction: “registration of households just means to put every household in documented order” (*Hanshu. Gaodijixia*). It could also be seen as a symbol of people: “To equalize means there is no superior and inferior. All common people are equal people” (*Hanshu. Shihuo zhixia*). Generally speaking, “registration of commoner households” had two features. On one hand, from the perspective of ruling form, the dictatorial blade already divided the whole country into individual households, each becoming the direct object of dictatorial rule. On the other hand, the imperial power ideology emphasized the reciprocity between the emperor and every person. It made the historical trend of equal punishment and etiquette for the nobles and the lower classes a reality. From then on, Chinese history entered the “equal household and each person era” (Chao Fulin, *Study on Pre-Qin Social Situations*, 59, Beijing Normal University Publishing Group). Personal relations became collective instead of private. No longer was there any private human relation that was absolutely outside of the control of the state. Instead, every individual belonged to the state and thus belonged to the emperor. Therefore, the equalization of all social members was also the enslavement of all people under the imperial system.

possess the land but not the people.”<sup>12</sup> In the imperial era, all the people were the emperor’s people.

When it comes to regulating and controlling the people, although in Chinese history the notion of “the emperor and officials rule together” existed, this does not deny that the emperor shouldered the ultimate responsibility for the people’s welfare and education. This conviction was viewed as a higher truth with sufficient classic references.<sup>13</sup> As derivative from the imperial power, the power of officials was not independent. Since officials were appointed by the emperor, they could only represent the orders of the emperor, but not the will of the people. It was a taboo and also a crime for an official to arbitrarily act on

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12 *Houhanshu*. Biography of Dourong.

13 For example, during the time of Emperor Wu, “Academician Xu Yan as an envoy went to inspect customs and civility of outside commanderies. He asked the people in Jiaodong and Lu commanderies to cast iron and evaporate brine, falsely claiming that was the emperor’s order. After returning to the capital city, he reported what he did and was transferred to the position of Assistant to the Minister of Ceremonies. The Imperial Counselor Zhang Tang impeached Xu for falsely claiming the court’s order when he was acting as an envoy. Zhang called Xu a great harm to the state and said that Xu should be sentenced to death, according to the law. Xu Yan argued that according the great ideas in the *Chunqiu*, when an envoy is out of the frontier, he can make decisions himself when he see opportunities to pacify the people and benefit the state.” Zhong Jun then argued against every point Xu made. Zhong’s counter-argument had two key points. First, “in the older time, all the kingdoms had different customs and rarely communicated with each other, therefore the envoy was empowered to make decisions if he sees crises and knows how to solve the problem. However, now it is different. Unlike the Spring and Autumn period, now the whole country is one unified state and every place belongs to the emperor, how can you say you were outside of the frontier?” Zhong Jun thus pointed out the biggest difference between the imperial system and the enfeoffment system. This difference was highly valued by the Han people, and therefore Zhong Jun was very sharp to point at that difference as a foundation. Second, “Xu had already suggested three times to the emperor that people in those areas should be allowed to cast iron and evaporate brine, but the emperor did not reply to him. If an official wants something but does not get an approval from the emperor, then falsely claims an imperial order to give what the people want so that he can get the reputation, a wise emperor must punish and kill such an official” (*Hanshu*. Biography of Zhong Jun). Here Zhong Jun pointed out the nature of the imperial bureaucracy. In front of the people the officials can represent the emperor, but in front of the emperor the officials can’t claim they represent the people’s will. If an official follows the people’s will without having the emperor’s order, by doing so he affronts the emperor and should be punished severely. Therefore, we can see that the so-called people’s heart and people’s will are all just excuses by the emperor, who has the real power to compose and interpret the content. If an official thinks of himself as representing the people’s will, he is challenging the emperor’s power.

the people's behalf without asking for the approval from the emperor first. This shows that within the imperial power system, the relation between the officials and the people was subordinate to the relation between the emperor and the officials, which itself was in turn subordinate to the relation between the emperor and the people. An official is first the emperor's subject, and only then is he empowered to represent the emperor to rule the people. If he self-assertively speaks for the people, he violates not only the harmonious relationship between the emperor and the people, but also the trust that the people hold for the emperor. By doing so, he puts himself in opposition to the emperor.

Therefore, in the imperial social political conception, the main political body contains three parts—the emperor, the officials, and the people—rather than just the emperor and the officials. The imperial power system left a position for the people, although the location, value, and function of this position need re-evaluation. People tend to emphasize the relationship between the emperor and the officials over the relationship between the officials and the people, and also tend to ignore the relation between the emperor and the people. The key factor that differentiates the imperial power from kingly and monarchical power is this three-pronged structure. Among the three parts, it seems the relationship between the emperor and the people is more indicative of the dictatorial nature of the imperial power. In other words, the dictatorial nature lies not only in that the emperor is immune from bureaucratic restrictions, but also in that the emperor transcends the bureaucratic group and shoulders responsibility for the people's welfare and education. Given this, the imperial power seems to possess a natural tendency towards transcendence. It always wanted to establish a kind of transcendent relationship with the people, and it is also where the transcending characteristic of the emperor is shown. As the son of heaven, the emperor can communicate with the divine beings; at the same time, as the emperor, he also communicates with the people on the earth. These are the two surfaces that show the transcendent feature of the imperial power. However, as a system that is designed to be open to the people, what is more important to the imperial system is to connect the emperor and the people. The necessary conclusion is that the transcendence of the connection between the emperor and the people, and the dictatorial nature of the emperor are not in opposition to each other. It is fair to say the emperor becomes transcendent because of his dictatorial nature; it is equally fair to say that emperor can be a dictator because of his transcendence. These two factors are mutually supportive. The emperor relies on his dictatorial power to realize his transcendent connection with the people; he also gains stronger support for his dictatorship because of his transcendent connection with the people. Seen in this light, a dictatorial emperor was always in

need of and eager to show his intimacy with the people. It is necessary that the imperial dictatorship be concerned with the people and represent the people. The more dictatorial an emperor is, the more he wants recognition from the people, and the more he hopes to strengthen his connection with the people.

Following this logic, a wise ruler has to be a dictator, for if he is not, he is not fulfilling his duty. This means the widely-applauded Chinese ideal of a wise ruler is actually based on the prerequisite of a dictatorship. At the same time, a wise ruler needs to be virtuous, for without virtue he becomes tyrannical. The Chinese define a tyrant as one that lacks virtue, not one that is a dictator. That is to say, lack of virtue leads to tyranny, but dictatorship does not. On the contrary, dictatorship enables an emperor to do his job and fulfill his duty, and thus become a good emperor.<sup>14</sup> Imperial power does not exclude dictatorship but emphasizes virtue, because a dictatorship combined with virtue can directly connect the emperor and the people, and enable the emperor to spread his favor and kindness among the people. This is the ideological basis of an imperial system that pays special attention to connecting with the people, listening to the people's will, and trying all sorts of ways to shorten the distance between the emperor and the people. It also gave birth to the conception and practices of "the heavens are high and the emperor is near," which constructed an imperial power system that was open to the people. Looking at the history of Chinese dictatorship, "the heavens are high and the emperor is near" is the rational construct of the imperial power system that ran through and dominated the whole of Chinese history since the Qin and Han Dynasties.<sup>15</sup>

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14 A dictator should follow the rules of the system but he can also transcend the system. Theoretically speaking, no matter what a dictator does, he won't face disapproval from the dictatorial system. No matter what he does, the system will support him and provide him sufficient systematic guarantee. That means that since the dictatorial system provided a dictator the ultimate power and freedom, there is no actual difference between a dictator and a tyrant in terms of the system. Although a dictatorial system does not necessary like a tyrant, it is not designed to prevent tyrants from existing, for in that case both the dictator and the system will lose legitimacy. To make this clearer, a dictatorial system has two prerequisite conditions: First, this system is designed solely for the sake of the dictator; second, all the power of the system belongs only and absolutely to the dictator. That means it is totally legitimate for a dictator to use the power to seek benefits for himself. And people have no legitimate reasons to accuse a dictator for enslaving the whole country and squandering social wealth for his own pleasure. Therefore, legitimacy could not be used as a foundation for people to denounce a dictator's misconduct or to deny him of his power.

15 See Lei Ge, *Suowei lishi*, pp. 265-266, Xi'an Publishing House, 2013.

## II Visiting the People and Returning to the People

### i *Tours of Inspection*

In the 15th year of the Qin Dynasty, the emperor made 6 tours of inspection. As a ceremonial and political ritual, tours of inspection were meant to establish a new kind of direct relationship between the emperor and the people. On his frequent tours of inspection, the emperor needed to show the people his ultimate authority and power, and also his reciprocal relationship with the people. The reciprocal relationship means that the emperor is the only legitimate ruler of the people and also the spokesman for their interests. The achievements of the emperor were widely acknowledged by the people in the process of building the connection between them.

The real purpose for emperors to take tours of inspection was not to regulate the emperor-officials relation in a narrow sense, but to establish the emperor-officials relation in a wide sense. For this reason, we do not see records of emperors meeting with local officials during tours of inspection in historical documents, but we can find records of emperors meeting the people, which seems like a kind of institution. For example, the first emperor of Qin Dynasty (Qin Shi Huang) “visited Kuaiji and crossed the Zhe River. Both Xiang Liang and Xiang Ji went to see him.”<sup>16</sup> It seems that anybody could go and see the emperor. The Tang Dynasty commentator Yan Shigu explained that when Liu Bang “freely went to see the emperor,” in this sense, “Free means indulging. When the emperor is on tour, the people are indulged and encouraged to watch.”<sup>17</sup> This shows that Qin Shi Huang took tours of inspection to initiate connections with the people, and try to get a close-up interaction with the people in many places. The real purpose was to subtly create a political environment in which the emperor gets close to the people and even fits in among the people.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the adage “the heavens are high and the emperor is far away,” is not absolutely true. It is possible for an energetic emperor to develop intimate relationships with the people.<sup>19</sup> The far-away emperor therefore can be nearby. “Qin Shi Huang made frequent tours of inspection. Wherever he went, his image of ‘being a high, exalted ruler who is just an arm’s length

16 *Shiji. Xiangxu Benji.*

17 *Hanshu. Gaodiji Shang.*

18 Lei Ge, *Qinhan zhiji de zhengzhi sixiang yu huanqan zhuyi*, pp. 436-439, Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2006.

19 Yang Liansheng, *Guoshi tanwei*, p. 151, Liaoning Education Publishing House, 1998.

away' became established within the hearts of the masses."<sup>20</sup> It is not hard to imagine that for the people who were there with the "amiable and approachable" emperor, it must have been unspeakably visually striking and mentally shocking.

Theoretically speaking, once the emperor steps out of the palace, he is with the society and the people. The emperor then becomes the center of attention and also a political entity with tremendous access. The common people who stood along the streets for thousands of miles became the free audience for the emperor's dignified manner. Among all the emperors in the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu was the most enthusiastic about tours of inspection. "He went as far north as Shuofang, went to the east and offered sacrifices on Mount Tai, went on the sea, and returned from the north."<sup>21</sup> Emperor Wu went to more places than any other Han emperor. "Emperor Wu went to forty-nine counties for tours of inspection."<sup>22</sup>

The emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty made more frequent tours of inspection all over the empire. "Emperor Suzong started to cultivate the ancient ritual and took tours of inspection around the empire."<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that only until the time of Emperor Zhang (Suzong) were there formal tours of inspection, but that Emperor Zhang followed the classics and made further revisions to the ritual, so it became more normalized and authentic. This means Emperor Zhang, compared to Emperor Wu and Emperor Ming, assumed a more serious attitude towards tours of inspection. If seen in this way, it is fair to say that tours of inspection in accordance with classic rituals started with Emperor Zhang. Therefore, the so-called east, west, south, and north tours of inspection were endowed with authentic classic meaning in the Zhongxing era.

Emperor Zhang made an authoritative statement and clarification about the purpose of tours of inspection in a directive to several ministers. Among the six purposes that Emperor Zhang mentioned, the most important was to publicize the imperial kindness and eliminate people's complaints. Two other purposes were also about the people: one was to offer sacrifices to ancestors and gods and pray for the people, and the other was to learn about the society by getting in touch with the people, or what was called "visiting the elders."<sup>24</sup>

20 Xing Yitian, *Zhongguo huangdi zhidu de jianli yu fazhan; Tianxia yijia: huangdi, guangliao yu shehui*, Zhonghua Book Company, 2011.

21 *Hanshu. Shihuozi Xia.*

22 *Hanshu. Xia Housheng Zhuan.*

23 *Houhanshu. Cui Yinlie Zhuan.*

24 *Houhanshu. Suzong Xiaozhangdi Ji.*

With this in mind, the encounter between Emperor Huan and the nameless elder man from Jiangyin during the emperor's tour of inspection has profound meaning. The story goes like this:

During the regnal year of Yanxi, Emperor Huan took a tour of inspection and arrived in Jingling. He crossed Yunmeng Lakes and arrived at the bank of Mian River. All the local people went to watch the emperor, except one old man. He just kept doing agricultural work. Zhang Wen, an imperial secretary who comes originally from Nanyang, felt it very strange and sent a person to ask the old man: 'Everybody else went to see the emperor, but you don't stop working. Why?' The old man smiled but didn't answer. Zhang Wen stepped into the field to talk with the old man in person, and the old man said to him: 'I'm not an educated man, and don't understand big words. May I ask you, does the emperor exist in a chaotic world or an orderly one? Does the emperor exist to take care of the people or is it the case that he just makes the people to support him? In the old days, the sagely kings lived in houses made of straws and twigs and all the people enjoyed a stable and peaceful life. Now this emperor disturbs the people and travels around with no scruples. I feel shame for him on your behalf, how come you still want everybody to go and watch him?' Zhang felt very ashamed and asked the old man his name, but the old man left without saying one more word.<sup>25</sup>

This story reveals several very interesting points. First, the message that the emperor was going on a tour of inspection was widely spread; many people knew it and went to watch. Second, some of the people were not interested. Third, officials and even the emperor himself hoped that more people would come to watch. Fourth, the accompanying officials were paying attention to people's attitude toward the emperor's tour. Fifth, common people along the way could and dared to directly express their opinion of the emperor to officials. Sixth, the emperor's tour of inspection did not only receive compliments, but sometimes it received criticism from the people. Seventh, officials were very tolerant of the people's criticism. All these happened during the emperor's tour and it is hard to imagine that similar scenes could appear in other occasions. But we can be sure that this is only a small example of similar scenes that happened during the emperor's nearly one hundred tours of inspection. During all these long tours, on one hand, the emperor learned about the people and society far more than what he could learn from his ministers' reports

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25     *Houhanshu. Yimin Liezhuan.*



or official documents; on the other hand, although the direct contact between the emperor and the people helps to cultivate the emperor's image in people's heart, it is not automatic.

## ii *Returning to the Hometown*

In the 12th year of his reign, Han Emperor Gaozu, Liu Bang, "passed by Pei, booked tables in Pei Palace, and invited his hometown people to come and drink with him."<sup>26</sup> By returning to his hometown, the emperor became directly connected with the people. A common person became the son of heaven, and then returned to the common people. This made people feel that while the emperor is so far away from them, the emperor is also right beside them. It is a key characteristic of imperial power ideology to emphasize the connection between the emperor and the people, instead of the connection between the emperor and the heavens. In the kingship political ideology, the King reaches the heavens but does not get close to the people; in the monarchial political ideology, the monarch does not reach the heavens and does he connect with the people; and in the imperial political ideology, the emperor not only reaches the heavens but also connects with the people.

"He (Liu Bang) then recruited 120 young kids from the town, and taught them to sing. Getting drunk, he hit the lute and started singing: 'A big wind blows and the clouds fly, I come back to my hometown now that the world is under my sway, where are the brave men to help me guard the four frontiers?' He asked all the kids to learn and sing with him."<sup>27</sup> This song was Liu Bang's improvisational performance, and it became Liu's most famous poem. Liu's political and military rival Xiang Yu once commented that a man who won the world but did not go back to his hometown is like a person who wears fancy clothes in the darkness of night.<sup>28</sup> Liu not only returned to his hometown, but also made the visit a big scene that would be remembered for thousands of years. He was both a director and also an actor. This dual role satisfied his emotional needs. He made the return to his hometown a perfect drama, with "elder people drinking and laughing and talking about old times," and he himself "feeling so touched and sentimental, tears were rolling down on his face." All these showed his homesickness and sadness like a travelling son who was away from his hometown. "A travelling son always feels sad when thinking of his hometown. Although I am now the emperor in the capital city, after ten

<sup>26</sup> *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji xia.*

<sup>27</sup> *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji xia.*

<sup>28</sup> *Shiji. Xiangyu Benji.*

thousand year my soul will still be thinking of Pei, my hometown.”<sup>29</sup> As the son of heaven, the emperor still felt like a travelling son away from home. The son of heaven travels all over the country, but in his heart he still misses his hometown. This natural expression of human emotion reveals two layers of meaning: the reciprocity between the hometown and the capital city, and between the travelling son and the son of heaven. This kind of reciprocity is based on an intertwining structure between the government and the people. It shows the unity of the relationship between the emperor and the people, which means that the emperor has the absolute power over all people, but also means that the people absolutely need an emperor to protect their interests.<sup>30</sup>

If Liu Bang returned to his hometown with a single purpose—a homesick man returning home—when Liu Xiu returned to his hometown he had a two-fold purpose: to offer sacrifices to his ancestors and to show his closeness with the people. Since Emperor Guangwu, emperors of Zhongxing era started to return to their hometowns multiple times to offer sacrifices and enjoy time together with local people. In the 3rd year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu “arrived in Chongling, offered sacrifices in the ancestors’ hall, set up a feast and invited local people to enjoy together with him.”<sup>31</sup> By inviting officials and local people to his family house and having a good time together, and by offering sacrifices to his father, Emperor Guangwu thus cultivated his hometown as a sanctum of ceremonial rituals. From then on, a new ritual of national sacrifice came into being, and emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty after Guangwu often went back to their hometowns to offer sacrifices to ancestors.<sup>32</sup>

Undoubtedly, this pulled the emperor and the people closer to a large extent and established a direct connection between them. In the 19th year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu

arrived in Nandun County of Runan Province. He invited local officials and people to a feast, and also offered to exempt Nandun County from a year’s agriculture taxation. The people all kowtowed to thank the emperor and said: ‘your highness’s father lived here for a long time, and you are familiar with all the government buildings here. Every time you come here, you offer us gracious favors. Please exempt us from 10 year’s

29 *Hanshu. Gaodi Ji Xia.*

30 Lei Ge, *Qinhan zhiji de zhengzhi sixiang yu huangquan zhuyi*, pp. 474-476, Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 2006.

31 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 8, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

32 See biographies of the emperors in *Houhanshu*.

taxation.' The emperor replied: 'I'm in constant fear of being incapable of shouldering my great power. One day passes after another, how can I have such wild wishes that I still have ten years of power?' The officials and people there said: 'Your highness simply does not want to exempt our taxation, what is the need to talk so humbly to us?' The emperor laughed at their reply and added another year of exemption.<sup>33</sup>

On this kind of occasion, the emperor's political needs and the people's wishes were in a harmonious relationship, and the emperor would unconsciously reveal his governing ideas. In the 17th year of Jianwu, Emperor Guangwu,

arrived in Zhangling. He repaired the ancestor's hall, offered sacrifice in the old family house, visited the country fields, set up a feast, and offered favors to locals. His aunts, enjoying the time and feeling a bit drunk, said to each other: 'when he was young, his highness was very serious and scrupulous. He never treated people softly, but was a straightforward man. Now look at him!' Hearing that, the emperor laughed hard and replied: 'I'm in charge of the world now, and I want to do it in a soft way.'<sup>34</sup>

When returning to his hometown, an emperor was able to offer his thoughts to ancestors and enjoy family time, get close to learn about grassroots politics and watch how local officials work, and also temporarily relieve himself from governmental work. In the 3rd year of Yongping, Emperor Ming

arrived in Zhangling of Nanyang. He visited old houses and summoned two old friends Yin and Deng. He then met with local officials in his own place, announced their bestowment, then walked instead of taking his carriage to watch the local military array. He spent the first half of the night reading books, and the second half sleeping. He got up before the fifth watch before dawn. This is how he usually spent his day there.<sup>35</sup>

This record also showed a harmonious scene between the emperor and his officials. In the 10th year of Yongping, Emperor Ming "arrived in Nanyang and offered sacrifices to ancestors. On the day of summer solstice, he went to the old family residence and offered sacrifice again. After the ceremony, he

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33 *Houhanshu. Guangwudi ji xia.*

34 *Houhanshu. Guangwudi ji xia.*

35 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 57, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

summoned a group of soldiers to play the melody of Luming. The emperor also played instruments to amuse the audience.”<sup>36</sup> With the emperors’ frequent appearance at old family residences and offering performances, the old residences were endowed with a sacred meaning. By returning to the hometown frequently to offer sacrifices and treat local people with feasts, the emperors of the Eastern Han Dynasty consciously made their return a grand ceremony to celebrate the fact that the emperor was with the people and having a good time together with the people. Both the emperor and his ancestors thus became the object of people’s respect and worship. For this reason, the emperors in the Eastern Han Dynasty became more and more inclined to expand the scope of the national sacrifice ceremony. Geographically, this expansion came to include sacrificial ceremonies being held at all the small counties where Emperor Guangwu’s father, Liu Qin, had ever held office,<sup>37</sup> and also made more ancestors the recipient of the sacrifices, which included all of Emperor Guangwu’s ancestors since Liu Fa.<sup>38</sup>

### III The Multiple Forms of Interaction between the Emperor and the People

Before the emergence of an emperor, it was unimaginable for a ruler to have direct contact with the people, although there had been such fantasies.<sup>39</sup> The feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty placed the son of heaven far above the common people. These rulers had no chance to get in touch with people from the lower social classes. Even in the Warring States Period, the kings did not have much chance to interact with common people. While there was occasional contact, they should not be counted as real interaction. The kings in the Warring States were not the son of heaven; they were just princes of individual states. Therefore, only after the imperial system was established did the son of heaven start to get in touch with the common people. This is a key difference between the imperial system and the kingship and monarchical systems. The integration between the emperor and the people was the general basis of

36 Wu Shuping, *Dongguan hanji jiaozhu*, p. 57, Zhongzhou Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987.

37 *Houhanshu. Xiaoandi ji.*

38 *Houhanshu. Xiaoandi ji.*

39 For example, there is a description in *Guoyu* about spectacular scenes when the King summoned people from all classes and listened to their opinions. However, such description was just a political fantasy.

the imperial power system. The diversity and extensiveness of the integration between the emperor and the people became a key factor for the long-term stability under the rule of imperial power.

The emperor's love of the people was clearly shown in the ritual of offering sacrifices to the sky and earth and mountains and rivers. For example, one of the major reasons the emperors frequently offered such sacrifices was to pray for the people. "I humbled and purified myself. I offered sacrifices to pray for good luck and a fruitful harvest for the common people."<sup>40</sup> "(I ordered) revision of the temples of the Taiyi God, the five emperors and Houtu Goddess to pray for the welfare of the people."<sup>41</sup> These show a political idea that integrated the destinies of the emperor and the people. Since the people are the emperor's subjects, it became the emperor's natural duty to pray for their fortune. Therefore, we can see that the Feng Shan ceremony in which the emperor offered sacrifices to the heavens and the earth at Mount Tai was different from other ceremonies of offering sacrifices. The Feng Shan ceremony at Mount Tai was a grand ceremony to tell the world about the emperor's great achievements, while other ceremonies of offering sacrifices were more ordinary rituals in which the emperor acted as the son of heaven and prayed for the fortune of the people. "The emperor went to the outskirts. He bowed to the sun in the morning and to the moon in the evening. His imperial command read: 'The people are suffering hunger and coldness, therefore I'm here to offer sacrifice to Houtu Goddess to pray for a year of harvest. I'm very concerned that this year the people haven't harvested much, so I ritually prepare myself for the sacrifice and will humbly offer the sacrifice in the outskirt at the hour of *dingyou*.'"<sup>42</sup> "There was a flood and the harvest was severely affected, therefore the emperor offered sacrifices to Houtu Goddess to pray for a harvest for the people."<sup>43</sup> Praying for harvests showed that the emperor was in fact pleading on the people's behalf when offering sacrifices to the gods. "All the oceans, big rivers, and mountains have temples. The officials in charge of sacrifices are ordered to offer sacrifices to all these rivers and mountains on a yearly basis and pray for harvest years." This shows that offering sacrifices to mountains and rivers was also meant as a prayer for the people. "Therefore, it became a ritual that the five mountains and four rivers are offered sacrifices."<sup>44</sup> This means

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<sup>40</sup> *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi xia.*

<sup>41</sup> *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

<sup>42</sup> *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

<sup>43</sup> *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi Shang.*

<sup>44</sup> *Hanshu. Jiaosizhi xia.*

that the emperor sent people every year to offer sacrifices to the big mountains and rivers to pray for good weather and a good harvest for the people.

As a matter of fact, the emperor's interaction with people was not just a completely symbolic gesture, but included many specific regulative measures. For example, in years of famine emperors usually would issue an edict of apology and announce that he would stop hunting, going to theater, listing to singing, wearing new clothing, and he would even eat less meat to share the people's suffering and to get through the hard time together with them. "This year produces a bad harvest, I have sent a messenger to help relieve the suffering. I have also ordered Taiguan (the official in charge of the emperor's diet) to reduce the meat in my meals, and the music bureau to hire fewer musicians, so they can return to agricultural work."<sup>45</sup> "The North China Plain has suffered a series of natural disasters. People are suffering hunger and coldness and epidemic, dying at early ages. The emperor ordered Taiguan not to kill animals everyday and prepare only half of the food compared what his highness used to have. He also would not take his carriage except for serious matters. And he also gave up several kinds of entertainment."<sup>46</sup> Another example is that when the emperor took tours of inspection, he usually would give some substantive favors to people along the way. "(The emperor) exempted the local people from taxation."<sup>47</sup> "(The emperor) endowed every local household along the way five thousand coins; he also gave the old and the single ones a bolt of silk." "During the tour (the emperor) went to several places including Bo, Fenggao, Sheqiu, Licheng; he offered exemption to the locals who owed tax. He also endowed those older than 70 each two bolts of silk." Sometimes the emperor would also "bestow all people a level one title and wine and cows to a hundred households with women."<sup>48</sup> These all show the concreteness of the interaction between the emperor and the common people. Therefore, the notion that the heavens are high and the emperor is near is not just a conception and self-image of the imperial power ideology, but is also embedded in the social life and daily experience under the imperial power system. The direct contact between the emperor and the people can be summarized in the following fourteen forms.<sup>49</sup>

First, the emperor invited the people into his palace. For example, Wei Bo, the minister of Prince Qi, was from a poor family and his father "went to see

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45 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

46 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

47 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

48 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

49 There should be 16 forms if including the tours of the whole country and returning to hometown to offer sacrifices to ancestors.

the Qin Emperor because he was good at playing music.”<sup>50</sup> “Four hermits from Shang Mountain” went to the palace and persuaded Liu Bang to give up the idea of abolishing the crown prince.<sup>51</sup> Another example is the story of Wang Sheng, who was a hermit “good at talking about Laozi’s ideas” in the Han Dynasty. “He used to be called to the court,” as an “old and vulgar” man and helped the chief judge Zhang Shizhi in front of other ministers.<sup>52</sup>

Second, the emperor and the people enjoyed entertainment together. During the era of Yuanfeng, Emperor Wu twice announced edicts to invite common people to come to the capital city to enjoy all sorts of entertainment performances together. The first time was in the spring of the 3rd year. People from a radius of three hundred *li* came to the capital city to watch performances. “A performance of fighting was put up, and people within 300 *li* all came to watch.”<sup>53</sup> The second time was in the summer of the 6th year of the Yuanfeng era, when Emperor Wu invited people living in the capital city to come to his royal garden to watch wrestling. “People living in the capital city arrived in the Pingle hall in the palace to watch wrestling.”<sup>54</sup>

Third, the emperor met with representatives recommended by local officials from different places. Emperor Wu once issued an edict which said “The Sanlao officials should be filial and fraternal and behave as a teacher for the people; they should also recommend people of virtue to meet with the emperor.”<sup>55</sup> This means no matter where the emperor is, whether he is in the palace or out for tours of inspection, he can always meet with people’s representatives recommended by local officials. In the time of Emperor Zhao, “(The emperor) summoned Han Fu because of his outstanding virtue, and gave him an official position and a bolt of silk when he returned to his hometown.” After that the emperor issued a special edict: “I endowed you with this position; please cultivate reverence and fraternity so you can educate the local people.” The emperor then asked the officials along the way to offer him “residence, wine, meat, and riding horses.” The emperor then specially asked commandery administrators and county prefects to show concern towards these national moral leaders. “The county official showed concern and gave gifts of a lamb

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50 *Hanshu. Gaowuwang zhuan.*

51 *Shiji. Liuhou shiji.*

52 *Hanshu. Zhangshizhi zhuan.*

53 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

54 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

55 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*



and two bottles of wine. If someone dies, his family will be given higher-level quilts and offered a sacrifice.”<sup>56</sup>

Forth, the emperor issued edicts to praise the common people. A man named Bu Shi made a fortune as a shepherd. He heard that the kingdom of Nanyue wanted to subvert the emperor and then, “wrote to the emperor saying that he is willing to die for the emperor. The emperor issued an edict to praise him to the whole world.”<sup>57</sup> Another time, “all the rich people were trying to hide their fortune, but only Bu was especially willing to help the government. The emperor praised his loyalty, gave him the position of Zhonglang, gave him ten *mu* of land, and praised him to the whole world so that people can learn from him.”<sup>58</sup> Bu was thus established as a moral example who was rich and generous, loyal, and concerned with the country. Another example is that Emperor Xuan once issued an edict which read: “of the officials in Yingchuan, those who act upon propriety will be given a title. The people will be given the second rank, and those who work in the fields will be given the first rank.”<sup>59</sup>

Fifth, the emperor bestowed titles on the common people. Occasions like royal weddings, royal festivals, national ceremonies, and auspicious signs from the gods could all become reasons for bestowing titles to common people. For example, “when the rain finally came, the emperor bestowed a second rank to every official and a first rank to every commoner.” “(The emperor) bestowed a first rank to people.” “Every man was bestowed a first rank title.”<sup>60</sup> According to statistics, the emperors of the two Han Dynasties bestowed titles ninety times, which means it happened once every four or five years. So if a man of that time lived to sixty years old, he normally would have ten chances of getting a new ranked title.

Sixth, the emperor used titles as a reward for rich people who helped the poor. For example, “those who helped feeding the poor and donated to the government to help relief work were rewarded. A person who donated more than a million will be rewarded with the 14th rank of Yougeng, and if he wants to hold an official position of county head, he needs to donate another 300 *dan* of food. If a person is already an official and donates a million, his official level will be raised two levels. If a person donates more than 300,000, he will be rewarded with the 9th rank of Wudafu. If he wants an official position, he can be given the position of Guanlang. If he is already an official and donates

56 *Hanshu. Gong Sheng Zhuan.*

57 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

58 *Hanshu. Bu Shi Zhuan.*

59 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

60 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

300,000, his official level will be raised two levels. If a person donates 100,000, he will be exempt from paying tax for three years. If he donates 10,000, he will be exempt from tax for one year.”<sup>61</sup>

Seventh, the emperor directly granted rewards to the people. The Yuan emperor once issued an edict: “To the elders: the filial will be granted five bolts of silk; the younger brothers who are fraternal and those who work hard in the field will be granted three bolts of silk; the elders with no children and the single persons will be granted two bolts of silk.”<sup>62</sup> Emperor Wu’s edict was even more obviously concerned for the people. “To the elders of the county: the filial will be granted five bolts of silk; the younger and fraternal men will be granted three bolts of silk; the people older than ninety and the childless and the single will be granted two bolts of silk and three kilos of cotton; those older than eighty will be granted three *dan* of rice.” Emperor Wu also thought that the rural part was remote and people could not gather together easily. He commanded the local officials to “visit the places and do not ask the people to gather,” which means the officials needed to visit the people’s households to give away the emperor’s grants. “Just go where they live and give them the gifts, do not have them gather.”<sup>63</sup> The emperor meant to free the people from inconvenience, to prevent them from traveling too much, and more importantly to show that he cared very deeply about the people.

Eighth, the emperor sent officials to visit the countryside to learn about people’s life and to comfort the poor. Emperor Xuan specially asked the heads of commanderies to supervise local officials to take care of the poor people’s lives. “The childless elders, the widows and widowers, and the poor are whom I have sympathy for. I already issued an edict to lend such people land and goods and food. The childless and the widows and widowers and the old should also be granted silk. Local officials should treat this as a regular job and should not fail to fulfill this duty.”<sup>64</sup> Emperor Yuan from the time he took the throne asked twelve ministers, including even the Imperial Minister of State, to “travel around the country and learn about how the childless, the widows and widowers, the old, the poor, and the jobless are doing, recruit the talented and virtuous, and enhance the social atmosphere.”<sup>65</sup>

Ninth, after a natural disaster, the emperor sent officials to affected areas to comfort the victims, reduce taxation, and convey the emperor’s care.

61 *Hanshu. Chengdiji.*

62 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

63 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

64 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

65 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

For example, in the time of Emperor Ai, many counties had earthquakes and Henan and Yingchuan had floods. "The people were killed and houses were damaged." Emperor Ai sent "the Imperial Minister of State to visit the victims. He would give money for coffins for the dead and the survivors three thousand coins. In all the places that were affected by the flood, the local households with assets no more than 100,000 will be exempted from the year's taxation."<sup>66</sup>

Tenth, the emperor sent envoys to inform and pacify the people. When the government decided to launch a large-scale military operation, or implement new economic policies, or launch large-scale hydraulic engineering projects or social projects, it was highly possible that the people would not be happy with such decisions, sometimes resulting in mass unrest. Therefore, at such times, not only did the local officials have to pay extra attention to people's feelings and reaction, but the imperial court was also extra attentive by sending envoys to different places to look into the local situations and pacify the people. For example, when Sima Xiangru was the imperial envoy to the Bashu area, he made good use of his talent as a poet and wrote articles and poems so that "people knew the intention of the emperor well."<sup>67</sup> When a local official offended people with tyrannical behaviors and caused mass disturbances, the emperor had to send a special envoy to warn the local official and pacify the local people. Although the envoy was supposedly warning the misbehaving official, his real purpose was to contact the people. The envoy first made clear the official's bad conduct had nothing to do with the emperor, and then he would reprimand the people for not fulfilling their duty as the emperor's subjects. Finally the envoy would represent the emperor and ask that "those living around the county should come to hear the imperial message; those who live afar should receive official documents with the imperial message." The envoy thus made wide contact with local people and spread the imperial grace on behalf of the emperor. For the people who lived in remote mountain areas, the local official would be delegated the responsibility to send them the written message. Whether an oral or a written message, it was meant to make an impression of the imperial grace in the people's heart. Obviously, in this process the "close-to-people" county officials were given the important responsibility of spreading the message, and they would be responsible if "people living far way in the mountains and valleys did not learn about the imperial message."<sup>68</sup> Therefore, spreading the imperial messages became the county official's important responsibility.

66 *Hanshu. Aidiji.*

67 *Hanshu. Sima Xiangru zhuan xia.*

68 *Hanshu. Sima Xiangru zhuan xia.*

Eleventh, the emperor asked officials from central to local levels to recommend “people-loving model officials.” For example, “the Imperial Chancellor, Marquises, generals, governors, and commandery administrators each should recommend one filial and righteous model who knows about politics and cares about the people.”<sup>69</sup> And, “(the emperor) asked each province to recommend moral and people-loving officials.”<sup>70</sup> This shows that the emperor wanted to create an emperor-loving-the-people atmosphere thorough this system of recommending people-loving models. The message here is that because the emperor loved the people in the first place, he encouraged such recommendations and praised those officials who also loved the people like their own family.

Twelfth, the emperor visited the soldiers in person, which is also a people-loving demonstration of the emperor. In the sixth year of Emperor Wen (158 B.C.), the Xiongnu tribe invaded the frontier. The emperor visited the soldiers in person to check their combat readiness. He visited three military defenses in Bashang, Jimen and Xiliu.<sup>71</sup>

Thirteenth, the people could write directly to the emperor to relay their feelings and needs. The common people who wrote to the emperors came from a diverse background, even including soldiers. In the time of Emperor Yuan, a low-ranking soldier named Zun from Changan wrote a letter to the emperor praising the achievements of the convicted minister Bingji and pleading for his son.<sup>72</sup> The most famous such story was that of Tiying. In the time of Emperor Wen, “Chunyu from Shangdong who used to be in charge of looking after the imperial barn was convicted and sentenced. He was put into prison in Changan.” His youngest child, Tiying, followed him to Changan and wrote to Emperor Wen pleading for her father. “I’m willing to become a slave to redeem my father’s conviction. Please give him a chance to re-start a life.” Emperor Wen “was touched by her sincerity,” and ordered that “corporate punishment should be cancelled and replaced by other kinds of punishment. Those convicted and imprisoned should be released after a set number of years according to the severity of their crimes.”<sup>73</sup> Following the emperor’s order, the Imperial Chancellor Zhang Cang and Imperial Counselor Feng Jing drew up a systematic plan of legal reforms. This story shows that a direct dialogue between the emperor and the people was quite extensive. In this case,

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69 *Hanshu. Aidiji.*

70 *Hanshu. Xuandiji.*

71 *Hanshu. Zhou Bo zhuan.*

72 *Hanshu. Bing Ji zhuan.*

73 *Hanshu. Xingfa zhi.*

a common girl's letter to the emperor led to the reform of criminal punishment system. That a commoner or even a criminal's daughter could write to the emperor so easily reveals that the connection between the emperor and the common people was quite close. The important thing here is that this kind connection came from a rational and systematic design. For example, the imperial government encouraged people to express their ideas or even criticize the government when erratic natural phenomenon or disasters happened. During the era of Xuanzhao, it was very popular for people to write to the emperor, and some of the writers even received an official position because of it. For example, in the time of Emperor Xuan, Xu Fu from Maoling County did not like that "the Huo family lived a luxurious life." He wrote to the emperor and warned that, "The Huo family is enjoying prosperity and wealth. If your highness does care about them, you should ask them to refrain from living so luxuriously so that they won't go into decline." Xu "sent the letter three times and finally heard back from the emperor." Later, the Huo family was convicted and all sentenced to death. Everyone who complained about them was rewarded, except Xu. Some people felt that was unfair and wrote to the emperor about it. The story ended when "Xu was granted ten bolts of lucky silk and later was appointed the position of Gentlemen Cadet."<sup>74</sup> Sometimes some people even wrote in false names just to get a position or reward. Since writing to the emperor became such a common phenomenon in the Han dynasty, "numerous people all over the country took great efforts to write to the emperor expecting rewards of money or titles."<sup>75</sup>

Fourteenth, people's representatives wrote to the emperor. The county officials titled Sanlao seemed to keep an unusually close contact with the emperors. Sanlao officials represented the local people's will. Although they themselves were not commoners, they were seen as the representatives of people's will because they were in charge of educating and edifying people. For the same reason, the emperors would pay special attention to the Sanlao officials' opinions. For example, the Prefect of Xiaohuang County, Jiao Gan, "cared for and treated his officers and local people very well, and Xiaohuang County was a moral and amiable place. Since Jiao did such a good job, he received very high reviews and was appointed for a promotion. The Sanlao of the county wrote to the emperor and said he would like Jiao to stay. The emperor then issued an edict asking Jiao to remain the Prefect of Xiaohuang County with a raised salary."<sup>76</sup> Here are another two examples to prove that the special connection

74 *Hanshu. Huo Guang zhuan.*

75 *Hanshu. Mei Fu zhuan.*

76 *Hanshu. Jing Fang zhuan.*

between the emperor and common people was embedded in a systematic structure. First, Emperor Wu was misled by Jiang Chong, who made wrongful accusation about the Crown Prince Li. The pressure on Li was so great that he started a military revolt. Linghu Mao, the Sanlao from Huguann County, wrote to the imperial court pleading for the Crown Prince. His letter was so well written and well argued that Emperor Wu finally changed his attitude towards the Crown Prince Li.<sup>77</sup> Second, local grassroots officials sometimes wrote directly to the emperor to praise good officials, and thus changed the emperor's decision about demoting a good official. The Sanlao of Hu County were the most famous. They wrote to the emperor pleading for the accused capital city mayor Wang Zun. The letter was such a well supported argument it could be seen as an excellent defense for Wang Zun. "The Sanlao of Hu County wrote an excellent letter praising Zun's achievements in the capital city."<sup>78</sup> This was a big case at the time, and whether an important official like Wang could be given a fair ruling was an important matter. This case revealed the following political messages: first, that the county level Sanlao could write directly to the imperial court shows that grassroots officials had open access to communicate with the emperor; second, the content of the letter shows that local grassroots officials knew very well about big cases in the capital city; third, that the local officials dared to express opinions about important cases concerning much higher officials shows that the communication system from bottom up to the top was working very well.

#### IV Between Words and Actions: The True Relationship between the Emperor and the People

It should be acknowledged that at the level of words and conversations, the emperors of the Han Dynasty showed praiseworthy kindness and humanitarianism. The emperors' edicts all showed an urgent heart that loved the people like family. Whenever there was a natural disaster, the emperor's first thought of was the people's welfare. "Now the flood has moved to the southern area, and the winter is getting close, I am worried that people won't live through such hunger and coldness."<sup>79</sup> "During this period the *yin* and *yang* lost the balance, and the five phases lost the order, and the people suffered hunger."<sup>80</sup>

77 *Hanshu. Wu wuzi zhuan.*

78 *Hanshu. Wang Zun zhuan.*

79 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

80 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

Although the emperors all spoke with a condescending tone, it was not meant to be arrogant. The edicts of the Han emperors had a humble and humane style. "(I) feel nervous day and night, for I'm afraid I can't fulfill this great responsibility."<sup>81</sup> "I have been very cautious and diligent, and I never dare to take it easy; I'm aware of my lack of virtue and intelligence."<sup>82</sup> "So unwise am I that I don't recognize the wise."<sup>83</sup>

Besides this, some key words like "given nature," "ethical relationships," and "edification of the people," frequently appeared in the Han emperors' edicts. From the perspective of rhetoric, texts made of these key words and phrases have a certain style and send the same messages. They try to tell the people all over the country that the emperor cares and worries about them, and also expects and demands much of them. The form of the edicts embodies such a style and emphasizes the wise emperor's kindness, sympathy, and strong sense of responsibility. Therefore, when the imperial edicts were promulgated among the masses, they were imparting the emperor's values and concern.<sup>84</sup> The direct result was that more common people could hear the emperor's voice.

However, even if the people could hear from the emperor every day, what good did it do? Could that really change the people's lives or help solve their difficulties? That is why we think the connection between the emperor and the people was just a lasting process of the construct of the imperial power system. Its nature was the subtle integration of the dictatorial power and transcendence of the imperial power. It did not exclude the other forms of imperial power. For example, imperial power politics suppressed and enslaved the people politically, exploited the people economically, controlled or fooled the people ideologically, distrusted and discriminated against the people legally, and set boundaries and limits for the people in their daily lives. The people of the Han Dynasty themselves claimed:

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81 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

82 *Hanshu. Yuandiji.*

83 *Hanshu. Wudiji.*

84 Although we do not have direct evidence to prove that the common people could obtain and possess edicts, we can find examples of officials collecting edicts. The minister of Wei "liked to read stories and edicts of emperors," and collected "23 such documents," which included "old stories of the Han Dynasty, and words by famous ministers like Jia Yi, Chao Cuo, and Dong Zhongshu" (*Hanshu. Weixiangzhuan*). These documents are like "collection of cases and policies" of today.



The common people will flee and become homeless for seven causes: first, flood and draught out of imbalance of *yin* and *yang*; second, severe taxation from the county officials; third, corrupted officials incessantly asking for profit; fourth, local powerful households insatiably preying on the poorer ones; fifth, bad harvest and heavy taxation and labor levies; sixth, the tribal alarms ringing for thieves, so the men and women have to run away all the time; seventh, the robbers taking hold of people's property. These are the seven causes for fleeing. Furthermore, there still are seven causes of death for common people: first, cruel officials beating a person to death; second, the officials giving severe sentences at trials; third, innocent people being wrongly accused and killed; forth, robbers everywhere; fifth, those who hold animosity killing each other; sixth, hunger in bad years; seventh, uncontrollable epidemics. These are the seven causes of common people's death.<sup>85</sup>

Compared to the emperor's stylish edicts, maybe this describes more accurately the reality of people's life. Therefore, we can see that the imperial power system is actually a system of absolute oppression and exploitation of the people.

For the exactly same reason, it was impossible for the imperial power system to be completely open to the people. The so-called access to power for common people had its internal and specific logic. For example, in the policy of "promoting the worthy men to official positions," where do the worthy men come from? Of course they come from the common people. Thus the political idea of valuing the worthy is embedded in the logic of valuing the people. In a large sense, different policies and programs like promoting the worthy and recommending the reputable gentlemen to official positions can be seen as an important part of the people's access to the imperial power. Even more so was the imperial examination system. In fact, so long as the bureaucratic system is not based on blood but on individual capability or knowledge or virtue, then most officials could come from the common people. However, this should not be seen simply as the imperial power trusting the people or recognizing their capability. It would be naïve to think that selecting officials from the common people is equal to the power being open and accessible to common people.<sup>86</sup>

85 *Hanshu. Baoxuan zhuan.*

86 Qian Mu held this opinion, that all the officials of the imperial court used to be common people: "the government and the common people therefore were a unified one, and the government's opinion was the people's opinion." This is what Qian called "the unification of the government and the people" and "the direct power of the people" (see *Zhengxue*

The reason is very simple: the imperial power will not be imperial power once it is completely open and accessible. The idea here is that the imperial power was never open to the people, but the structure of the imperial power system would leave some positions for the people. The imperial power forbade the people to share the power, but the system gave the people opportunities to file complaints and cry for justice.<sup>87</sup> While the imperial power was the form of the power operation, the system of the imperial power was the operational space for power. The more space, the more effective the power.<sup>88</sup> In that sense, the imperial power system absolutely did not exclude the people but embraced the people. The more people included, the more effective and dominant the imperial power.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the closed aspect of the imperial power and the openness of the power system are not contradictory, but are in fact complementary.

The monopolizing imperial power surely is a sign of dictatorship. The seemingly accessible power system is also a sign of dictatorship, although in a transcendent way. Transcendence and dictatorship are two sides of the same coin of imperial power. We need to not only recognize the charming discourse, values, and practical effectiveness of the transcendence of the imperial power, but also need to make an accurate judgment as to the essential connection between the transcendence construct and the dictatorial nature of the imperial power. Needless to say, a denial of either would be a severe misunderstanding of early Chinese history.

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*siyan*, p. 9, Jiuzhou Press, 2010). Put in simple words, it means that the government was made of common people and therefore was a government of commoners. Qian failed to realize that the essence of politics is power, and the essence of power was the division and limits of power, therefore he often made absurd arguments about history and politics.

- 87 For example, the administrator of Huaiyang, Tian Zhongyun, arbitrarily sentenced people to death and caused great anger among local people. "Local officers and people all went to the imperial palace to ask for justice" (*Hanshu. Kuli zhuan*). This might be the only example of people in the Western Han dynasty being forced to appeal to the emperor so that a cruel local official would be punished.
- 88 From the Qin and Han Dynasties to Ming and Qing Dynasties, it seems people were given more and more space or access to the imperial power system; but at the same time, the control of people from the imperial power also became more and more tight.
- 89 The more powerful the emperor becomes, the more depressed the people become. Therefore in designing its system the imperial power paid special attention to making the people feel satisfied with the status-quo.

# Creativity in Song *Daoxue* 道學: Explication and Elaboration in Zhu Xi's and Chen Chun's Philosophy

*John Berthrong*

## Abstract

This essay explores one hermeneutical method on the general features of the typology of Zhu Xi's and Chen Chun's axiological *daoxue* cosmology. While there are myriad ways to read Zhu's *daoxue*, one fruitful approach is to analyze *daoxue* cosmology in terms of four domains or fields of focus, namely (1) patterns and coherent principles [form]; (2) dynamic functions and processes [dynamics]; (3) harmonizing cultural outcomes [unification]; and (4) axiological values and virtues [outcomes]. The study then proceeds to sample how important *daoxue* concepts such as li 理 as patterns and coherent principles and qi 氣 as generative energy are mapped onto the fourfold typology.

## Keywords

axiological cosmology – hermeneutics – *daoxue* – form – dynamics – unification – outcomes – values and virtues – Zhu Xi – Chen Chun – li – qi

The teaching 述而不作 *shu er buzuo* “to transmit but not create [i.e., innovate]” (*Lunyu* 7.1) has bedeviled Confucian philosophers because it seemingly stifles or negates the creative efforts of any scholar deeply committed to the Confucian Way<sup>1</sup> *rudao* 儒道 to trespass beyond the passive transmission of

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1 Rosenlee (2006) has an introductory chapter in her book about Confucianism and women that superbly outlines the debates about how to understand the history of *ru* 儒 as what is called Confucianism in English. As scholars of comparative philosophy and Chinese intellectual history know, this is not a simple question of translation.

the wisdom of the past. Of course, regardless of what Kongzi might have meant or thought about his teaching, and even if he believed that he was sincerely transmitting and not creating a new *dao*, the effect of his attempt to preserve the legacy of the early Zhou paragons turned out to be one of the most profoundly creative acts of any scholar, not just for Chinese but for all humanity.<sup>2</sup> Of course, even this view has to take account of the tradition that Master Kong did indeed add a layer of creative commentary in his subtle editing of the Spring and Autumn Annals and in his commentaries on the *Yijing*. Many Confucians believe that Kongzi incorporated, almost via a code, praise and blame in his version of what seems to be a dry as dust account of the actions of the states during the Spring and Autumn period. Kongzi's purported ten commentaries helped to change the *Yijing* into the *Zhouyi* of later times (Hon 2005).

Along with piety towards the writings of the classical authorities, one of the greatest problems of identifying creativity in later Confucian discourse also arises from what we can call the sedimentation of genres. The complex of different genres and sources of Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200)'s vast corpus is a perfect example of why it is sometimes difficult to tease out the full scope of the immensely innovative contributions of Song *daoxue* 道學, Zhu's preferred term of his magisterial synthesis.<sup>3</sup> The implication of the term *daoxue* is really rather grandiose, and this was noted by many of his friends and critics alike. By calling his philosophy *daoxue* he was not only claiming it to be the true or authentic continuation of classical Confucianism but also that it was simply the most correct way to understand the Dao itself, the complete order and function of reality if you like.

Those habituated to the Western philosophical and theological tradition would devoutly desire that Zhu Xi had followed in the footsteps of Xunzi and the Eastern Han scholar Wang Chong (27-ca.100 王充) in composing well-organized thematic essays about philosophical topics and disputations. However, this was not the case. What is fascinating about Wang Chong is his defense of what Wiebke Denecke calls the worth of "Master Literature" (*zi* 子). Her suggestion is that we take what started as a bibliographical category to consider the role of the early classical authors. The other category in play is "classics" *jing* 經. Wang Chong was famous for his defense of the worth of the Master even in competition with the revered classics. In fact Wang held that the Master's texts, which had clearly been created *zuo* 作 or authored by thinkers

2 Puett (2001) has an extended and excellent discussion of the whole issue of what he calls "the ambivalence of creation" in early Chinese thought.

3 For three excellent introductions to Zhu Xi's thought see Munro 1988, Kim 2000, and Ching 2000.

such as Kongzi, Mengzi, Xunzi and Hanfeizi, might be superior or certainly the equals of the classics. Wang went on to argue that these Masters' texts were of more intellectual interest than the commentarial genres that were being more and more elaborately attached to the classics per se. However, as Denecke points out, Wang's audacious defense of authorial creativity lost out to the commentarial veneration of the classics.

In fact, in order to understand Master Zhu's achievement one must rely on at least five different genres of textual resources: (1) his voluminous commentaries on the Confucian classics, (2) his immensely innovative and influential collation of the Four Books, (3) his dialogues conducted with and then recorded by his students over the decades, (4) his vast correspondence with students, friends, colleagues and critics, and (5) anthologies such as the famous *Jinsilu* 《近思錄》 co-written with his friend Lü Zuqian (1137-1181) 呂祖謙. In a short essay one must be selective in choosing sources but it is important to keep in mind that the important statements or texts by Zhu Xi can appear in any of these basic sources of his immense and highly variegated corpus. Moreover, I will make use of a key philosophical lexicon by Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159-1223), one of Zhu Xi's most philosophically astute students, to help organize a view of *daoxue*<sup>4</sup> creativity.

It is in the intricate and complex sedimentation of these overlapping series of explications and elaborations of the Confucian Way that we discover the profound creativity of a master scholar such as Zhu Xi and his school.<sup>5</sup> However complex the intertextuality of the sources, however complicated the connections between and among *daoxue*'s different genres, if we persevere in

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4 In this essay I am making a distinction, now more and more common, between *daoxue* and *songxue* 宋學. Put simply *daoxue* is the more narrow and specific term. It means the philosophical synthesis and intellectual history created by Zhu Xi and those who follow his vision of the cosmos (and the ordering of Confucian intellectual history). *Songxue* is a much broader notion and encompasses all the great political, historical and philosophical thinkers of the Northern and Southern Song dynasty. This was a justly famous galaxy of thinkers who lead to the second great flourishing of the Confucian Way. While *daoxue* was indeed declared to be the orthodox imperial philosophy, *daoxue* itself only captures a part of the immense contribution of Song thought to the history of the Confucian Way. Hon Tze-ki's (2005) study of the use of the *Yijing* in Song political philosophy has an excellent summary of what is at stake in differentiating *daoxue* from *songxue*. I intend to focus on *daoxue* but never for a moment forgetting that it nestles in the much large intellectual history of the rich and complex achievements of the Northern and Southern Song periods.

5 For excellent overviews and informed philosophical elaborations of Neo-Confucianism see Bol (1994, 2004; Angle 2009). In fact Angle offers a robust philosophical reinterpretation of *daoxue* and commends many facets of this tradition, broadly conceived, to the emerging world philosophy of the 21st Century.

reading we discover an inventive sensibility that made Master Zhu and the *doaxue* school a truly creative enterprise. As modern thinkers in a world enamored with creativity, we cannot but admire and respect how Southern Song public intellectuals such as Zhu Xi and Chen Chun balanced an appreciation for the transmissions 述 of the past with a desire for an elaboration *jiao* 教 of the *dao* for future generations. In this dynamic balance of explications and elaboration lies a richly profound manifestation of philosophical creativity.

The process of explication and elaboration that ends with a refreshed articulation of a traditional philosophical vision, or selected aspects of the philosophical worldview, is usually a bit more complicated than just explication and elaboration per se. It often includes a number of discrete steps such as those included in the chart below (with appreciation of Lonergan). But in the end the linked notions of the explication of a text or tradition and then a creative or refreshing elaboration of the text or tradition captures the pulse of the exercise.

#### THE METHODIC PROCESS OF COMPARATIVE EXPLICATION AND ELABORATION

**I. ATTENTIVE & ACCURATE DESCRIPTION:** accurate, adequate, imaginative & comprehensive description of the material; there is often the stated intent not to impose the preconceptions of the investigator; **be attentive.**

**II. INTELLIGENT ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION:** seeking divine and/or secular origins; can be theological, philosophical, sociological or historical. Cogent **Interpretive** method becomes important in order to organize the material; preliminary recognition of the preconceptions of the investigator. The question of emic or etic method emerges such that the question becomes: Do you let the text suggest its own method or do you apply an etic method? **Be cogent and intelligent.**

**III. REASONABLE THEORIZING [scope of reception]:** Empirical and/or theoretical; often called the trait of “explanation” of the theory & history of religion; the hermeneutic moment of understanding. Testing the hermeneutic method of range, adequacy, power of explanation, cogency and coherence as *theoria*. **Be reasonable.**

**IV. RESPONSIBLE RECOMMENDATION:** to state what is worthy or valuable in a religious or philosophic tradition in terms of thoughts, action and passion; clearly shades off into confessional theology, religious philosophy, praxis and/or ideology. How would such judgments of value be made and sustained within various communities of discourse? The task of hermeneutic **responsibility** is often the work of theoretical elaboration. **Be responsible for its key ethical and critical injunctions.**

## Motifs

For any philosophical tradition that endures for more than one generation something important must be transmitted. In Zhu Xi's case the transmission embodied in *daoxue* was massive and included his evaluation, explication and elaboration of the history of the Confucian Way and his promotion of this cultural deposition in terms of what he hoped would be its living reality in the Southern Song. Moreover, every great cultural system, such as the Confucian Way, has a number of major and minor motifs that help to define its contours and distinctive sensibility over time. Once a topic of conversation and debate has been added to the philosophical lexicography of a tradition as a theme or motif, it remains a part of the patrimony of the tradition. Of course, different thinkers can select different motifs as objects of commentary over time, yet some motifs always seem to remain critical to the self understanding of members of a tradition, such as the ongoing debate about *xing* 性 (human dispositions or nature) throughout generations of Confucians from Kongzi, Mengzi, Xunzi down to scholars such as Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) 牟宗三, Tang Junyi (1909-1978) 唐君毅 and the current generation of New Confucians.

The motifs I will present are what Justus Buchler calls natural complexes (Buchler 1990).<sup>6</sup> In order to focus on the question of the elaborative creativity of Zhu Xi and Chen Chun I draw attention to two ongoing motifs that are either very much front and center in Confucian philosophical discourse or form part of the assumed background of the debates and discussions of Confucian scholars. The first of these is the motif or trait of the *relational nature* of Confucian correlative speculative cosmology. In short, everything that was, is, will be or can be imagined is related in some fashion to everything else in the cosmos. Of course there are graduations of relevance—some things, such as members of our family and our friends, are much more important to us than an electron in some far distant galaxy.

In terms of major philosophical motifs, this relational sensibility manifests itself in the Confucian Way as a form of social ethics of a particular sort. I agree with this observation. Kongzi is reported to have said "Virtue is never solitary; it always has neighbors (Slingerland, 37; *Analects* 4.25)." Because of the clear concern for the virtues and their cultivation in the Confucian Way in all its var-

6 I like Buchler's notion of a natural complex because I think that it nicely captures the range of Zhu Xi's inventory of the constituting elements and processes of the cosmos. For instance, Zhu would often talk about the *shìwù* 事物 of the world and the best way to understand this is to realize that for Zhu the cosmos is made up of events and things. It is a very rich view of the range of cosmological items in need to explication, interpretation and elaboration.



ious branches, Confucian ethics, in terms of comparative philosophy, is often called a form of virtue ethics. This sense of the importance of relationships was a sensibility shared by all Song, Yuan and Ming Neo-Confucians and was often epitomized as *tiandao xingming xiangguantong* 天道性命相貫通 or the mutual interconnection of the Way of Heaven and human nature/dispositions and destiny.<sup>7</sup> While almost everyone considers this a reasonable linkage to Western virtue ethics tradition, some contemporary scholars have tried to nuance this moral definition of trait of relationship by calling Confucian ethical theory praxis Conduct Ethics (Mou 2009b, 29-30) or Role Ethics (Rosemont and Ames (2009). This is an interesting point and we will return to it later in the essay. However both Conduct and Role ethics are at least siblings or first cousins of virtue ethics.

The second trait is what Cheng Chung-ying (Mou 2009a, 71-106) calls the *principle of the creativity or co-creativity* (in Mou 2009a, 87). Cheng's phrase nicely comports with the notion of relationship as critical to the Confucian vision of cosmological creativity in that it is always a co-creativity (via relationships) of the myriad things one with another. Mou Zongsan even paraphrased this notion in English, after quoting the famous statement in the Great Commentary of the *Yijing*, likening the great Dao's (*dadao* 大道) generative action to *shengsheng buxi* 生生不息 generation without cessation (Mou 1994, 31-32) or "creativity itself" (in Mou's English gloss). While many contemporary scholars have argued that the Chinese philosophical tradition has always emphasized the processive, generative and even creative aspects of the cosmos, many of the same scholars qualify this observation by noting that these same traditions also have a place for being as well as becoming, for the constant as well as the changing.<sup>8</sup> For instance, it would be hard to think of any traditional Confucian scholar as affirming that *xiao* 孝 (filial piety, family reverence) is merely an optional facet of a humane human life. We will return to this debate below.

7 In this translation, the difficult concept to get right in English is *ming* 命. Destiny is indeed one good possibility and probably better than fate. It also means what *tian* mandates as human nature/disposition. It is enshrined in the *daoxue* canon because it is a key term at the very beginning of the *Zhongyong* 中庸. The notion of the interconnection of the various things and events of the cosmos is drawn from the work of Mou Zongsan (1968, 1:417).

8 For a concise and informative discussion of the role of relationality and traits of process and creativity in Chinese philosophy in the first part of the 20th Century, Zhang Dongsun, see Jiang Xinyan's essay in Mou 2009a, 499-511. Jiang also notes that Zhang may have been the first philosopher to suggest the notion of correlative cosmology to define classical Chinese notions of the cosmos. Because of this Zhang also believed that Chinese thought has cosmology but not ontology as understood in the Western philosophical tradition.

Zhu Xi and Chen Chun were certainly interested in the relationship of the myriad things, but most especially in the social and ethical relationships of human beings. However, along with a rich ethical theory they also generated a very elaborate cosmology to show how ethics and cosmology form an interconnected vision of reality. In this regard Zhu Xi, followed closely by Chen Chun, was fairly unique in fashioning such a systematic meta-theory about cosmology. Some scholars such as Cheng Chung-ying have even called this an onto-cosmology in that it combines what in Western philosophy are both ontological questions, such as why is there something rather than nothing, and concerns along the lines of cosmological theory, namely how do the myriad things arise, flourish, decay, and most importantly, relate to each other. I am convinced that Confucian thought in general and Zhu Xi's *daoxue* are definitely cosmological, whereas the question of whether or not they are ontological needs further discussion.

In order to demonstrate the depth and range of Zhu Xi's complex axiological cosmology I have included a sketch below of some of the key elements of the philosophical lexicon of the important domains and terms, traits and concepts that constitute Zhu's *daoxue* 道學 synthesis. My understanding of what constitutes a philosophical lexicography and the genre of a philosophical lexicon owes a great debt to the work of John Tucker (1998, 2003, 2006) and Hilde De Weerd (2007). As both scholars note, the genre of the philosophical lexicon among Zhu Xi's most important immediate disciples can be traced to Chen Chun (Chen 1968; Zhang 2004) and his famous discussion of critical terms in Zhu Xi's philosophy. Later Qing dynasty bibliographers (Chen 1968, 11; modified) noted, "Among the pupils of Zhu Xi, Chen Chun was the most sincere and faithful." By this the Qing scholars meant that later generations used Chen's lexicon as a textbook for interpreting Zhu Xi's *daoxue*.<sup>9</sup> The genre of philosophical lexicography allowed generations of Chinese, Korean and Japanese scholars an entrance into the complex work of Zhu's thought. In some respects this organized lexicography provides a systematic and concise introduction to Zhu's corpus that Zhu himself did not offer.

As an aside I have always lamented the fact that for his own reasons Zhu Xi excluded Xunzi in the orthodox transmission of the Way. Along with the loss of

9 Wing-tsit Chan notes in his introduction to his translation of the lexicon and additions traditionally included in various editions over the centuries, the work was prized because of its fidelity to Zhu's thought. However, as Zhang Jiacai points out in his study of the lexicon (which also includes a complete critical edition of the text as translated by Chan) Chen, from time to time, elaborated on Zhu's work. As we shall note, Chen had a coherent reading of Zhu's work that is philosophically interesting in itself.

easy and positive access to Xunzi's brilliant philosophical work, it also meant that the kind of carefully crafted philosophical essay that was such a landmark in Xunzi's work also fell out of favor with the Song philosophers. As noted before, this means that Zhu Xi, even in the midst of a monumental writing effort (now constituting twenty-seven volumes in the modern collected edition; Zhu 2002) never provided an extensive summary overview of his entire axiological cosmology. The great majority of his philosophy is therefore found scattered in his recorded dialogues with his students, his written correspondence with colleagues, and in his extensive commentaries on the Confucian canon. Therefore one of the tasks of explication and elaboration of the creative elements in Zhu's *daoxue* begins with assembling what I have called a philosophical lexicography, a reconstruction of what a scholar deems to be critical to the work of Master Zhu. For the purposes of this essay I will make extensive use of Chen Chun's (Cheng 1986; Zhang 2004) famous philosophic lexicon as exemplary summary of the creative elements of Zhu's *daoxue*. Chen's lexicon is especially useful because Chen selected 26 key terms<sup>10</sup> that he believed needed to be explained in order for a student to understand the complexity of Zhu Xi's *daoxue*. In other words, and probably not the way Chen thought of the lexicon, the text illustrates clearly the 'creative' or at least novel elements of Zhu's explication and elaboration of classical Confucian philosophical nomenclature.

In terms of Western philosophical taxonomy I call Zhu Xi and Chen Chun's work a form of axiological cosmology. Of course, some scholars have suggested that *daoxue* is a metaphysics and ontology as well. However, above all else Zhu is interested in the order, pattern and *appropriate* (*yi* 義 rightness) relationship of the myriad things. Moreover, he is most concerned with the patterns of human interaction, and hence the focus of values is always part of his account of the cosmos. Hence his work is relentlessly axiological insofar as it assigns values to the interaction of human beings. It is likewise cosmological in that Zhu places human beings within an account of the cosmic process of the generative interaction of the *li* 理-*qi* 氣 dyad—the two most important concepts Zhu uses to frame his axiological cosmology—and what has counted as the most creative and contested of his philosophical elaborations of classical Confucianism. Historically it is precisely this kind of cosmological synthesis and elaboration of classical philosophical lexicography that marks Zhu's

10 Many editions of the lexicon have only twenty-five sections. Wing-tsit Chan (Chen 1986, 12-13) believes that the twenty-sixth selection is the *yiguan* 一貫 or one thread, a section separated from its original location as a part of the section on loyalty and empathy, which makes a lot of sense because all three of these terms are part of a famous saying of Kongzi about the nature of *ren* 仁 being linked by one thread (*Analects* 4:15).

creative philosophical contribution. Over the generations some philosophers applauded Zhu's achievement while others were appalled by it. However, no one could ignore it. As Whitehead once observed, the history of thought never recovers from the impact of a great philosopher.

This discussion of the relationship of *li* and *qi* and how to understand these dyadic concepts together and separately has generated an almost endless contested debate ever since the 13th Century in East Asia and now in world philosophy. Moreover, it is considered to be the centerpiece of *daoxue* philosophy and the site of its most creative or novel elaboration of the Confucian Way—both in a positive and negative sense depending upon the scholar's evaluation of *daoxue* as philosophy.

*Qi* has to be one of most protean and important of traditional and contemporary pan-Chinese and East Asian philosophy. Many scholars have confessed that it is simply impossible to find a single English term to translate it in the myriad philosophical context in which it appears almost from the beginning of Chinese civilization. It has been translated as vapor, matter, energy, matter-energy, force, configurational force (Porkert 1974), material force, generative action, etc. I now lean to using generative energy or vital force, though I recognize there are sound reasons to use different translations in the context of a particular passage. But what is almost equally fascinating is that *qi* does not seem to have perplexed Song and post-Song Confucian philosophers as did *li*, its cosmological twin in *daoxue* discourse. Everyone seems to agree, more or less, on what he or she meant by *qi* or what the other philosopher had gotten wrong in talking about the range of meanings for the term. We all know, of course, that a form of what is called *qi* monism was popular from Zhang Zai in the Song down to Dai Zhen in the Qing.<sup>11</sup> In this case these philosophers held, or seem to have held, that *qi* was the prime trait of the cosmos and everything else had its cosmological place or order in terms of how it was embraced by *qi*.

How do *daoxue* philosophers like Zhu Xi and Chen Chun define *qi*? Because it was not a contested term, Chen Chun does not devote a separate section to *qi* theory in the philosophical lexicon. We must therefore review briefly Zhu Xi's comments about *qi* to better understand the role the concept played in *daoxue* cosmology. First and foremost, generative, configuring vital energy or action is simply everything that is. This means that whatever we can have been, now is, and will be, is implicated in the field of *qi*'s generative action and energy. For something to be in any way whatsoever, it must reside within the field of *qi*.

11 One of the best discussions of *qi* is found in Porkert 1974, 9-76. In this case Porkert is discussing the foundations of Chinese medicine, and as with all specific Chinese disciplines, to understand traditional Chinese medicine you have to cope with *qi* theory.

As Edmund Ryden, the translator of Zhang Dainian's study of Chinese philosophical concepts, writes (Zhang 2002, 45):

*Qi* is both what really exists and what has the ability to become. . . . *Qi* is the life principle but it is also the stuff of inanimate objects. As a philosophical category, *qi* originally referred to the existence of whatever is of a nature to change. This meaning is then expanded to encompass all phenomena, both physical and spiritual.

Of course *qi* has a long and distinguished history in Confucian philosophy<sup>12</sup> beginning most importantly with Mengzi's statement about his vast and flowing *qi*: *haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣. For Mengzi it is a generative vital force/energy that fills his body and is subject to self-cultivation by Mengzi in order to become a more worthy person. In D. C. Lau's translation it fills the body such that it is "... exceedingly great, and exceedingly strong. Being nourished by rectitude and sustaining no injury, it fills up all between heaven and earth" (Lau 1984, 1:57). There is also a long history of Daoist reflection on *qi* as well, and Zhu Xi is aware of this and in fact discusses, for instance, a famous quote from the *Liezi* about *qi* theory. "Liezi said that heaven was a mass of *qi* and that the sun, moon, and the nightly stars were what has luminosity within the amassed *qi*. This description is correct (Zhu 2002, 22:2255)." I have always appreciated Zhu's willingness to quote Daoist texts when he thinks they make a valid point. It also goes to show that from Zhu's *daoxue* perspective everyone (more or less) really does agree about the basic outlines of *qi* theory. Of course, the main source of Zhu's *qi* theory is neither from classical Daoist nor classical Confucian sources, but is the thought of Zhang Zai. As we know, Zhang Zai was considered the father of Song and post-Song Confucian *qi* theory in the same sense that Cheng Yi was considered the prime source for the elevation of *li* to its place of honor alongside *qi* in *daoxue* cosmology. Zhu Xi would agree. Zhang Dainian (2002, 57-58) quotes Zhang Zai: "When one realizes that space and emptiness are *qi* then being and beinglessness, the hidden and the manifest, the wondrous and transformation, human nature and destiny are seen as one and not as separate things." If there ever was a truly "creative" cosmological category in Confucian thought, it is *qi*.

12 Zhang Dainian (2002, 45-63) also has an excellent overview of *qi* within the development of Chinese philosophy. What makes Zhang especially rewarding is that he does not privilege Zhu Xi's *daoxue* and has other philosophical heroes and hence quotes from a wide range of thinkers.

Chen Chun makes the following comment on *qi*.

In actuality, *li* does not lie outside vital generative force, because in the operation of the two *qi* [yin and yang], the process of production and reproduction (*sheng-sheng*) has gone on without cease from time immemorial. It is impossible for there to be nothing but *qi*. There must be something to direct it and that is *li*. *Li* is in *qi* and acts as its pivot. That is why as the great transformation functions and prevails, production and reproduction have never stopped. When we say it is spoken of in terms of *li*, we don't mean that principle is separated from *qi*. We merely mean to point out that when *qi* is considered as such, *li* is not mixed in with it. (Chen 1986, 38 modified; Zhang 2004, 237)

As we will see, it is just this kind of analytic statement about the different roles of *qi* and *li* that caused so much controversy both in the Southern Song and throughout the history of Neo-Confucian philosophy. What provides a sense of pattern or order, namely the recognition of the coherent patterns/principles of the myriad things or events of the cosmos as things or events and the interaction of the myriad things and events is *li*. It is almost as if Zhu and Chen are positing a order of recognition, i.e., that we know the real things and events of the world, because we first recognize their distinct and often unique coherent patterns/principles and then we also know how they concretely manifest themselves as this epistemic form or coherent pattern/principle within the dynamic field of *qi* as a generative active agency. As far as the generative active role *daoxue* assigns to *qi*, theory thinkers like Zhu and Chen actually do not have a cosmological quarrel to pick with other Song-Yuan-Ming-Qing Confucians.

Notwithstanding the crucial role that *qi* plays in Master Zhu's thought, I think it is nonetheless accurate to say, as has been said so often in the Confucian tradition, that Zhu Xi has an *eryuan* 二 元 cosmology, with *qi* and *li* being the dyadic poles of the *daoxue* synthesis.

It was this combination of terms and how Song *daoxue* thinkers explained the conjunction of these two terms that was a signal token of the creative elaboration of this form of Song philosophy. Moreover, a great deal hinged on how Zhu and Chen defined *li*. This was either, depending on your perspective, an inspired elaboration of the Confucian Way or a ghastly mistaken departure from authentic Confucian philosophy. The crux is (1) how to interpret *li* and then (2) explain how *li* is related to *qi*.

In an apt metaphor that became a favorite way to describe, in a negative way, the conundrum of the *li-qi* dyad is to ask, how can a dead rider (*li*) ride a living horse (*qi*)? The implication is that, unless *li* is alive and not dead, there is



no way to see how *li* is anything more than the coherent patterns or principle embedded or inherent in the generative activity of the manifestations of *qi*.<sup>13</sup> In either case we would have to count the *daoxue* position creative even if we were to agree with its critics that it was about as grand a philosophically bad detour as anyone could possibly make. Great Ming-Qing scholars such as Wang Yangming and Dai Zhen and the contemporary New Confucian Mou Zongsan would all still call Zhu Xi “Master Zhu” in order to acknowledge the scope of his achievement, however wrong they believed it to be. And they, along with many capable thinkers, did think that the *daoxue* cosmology was fundamentally flawed at the level of its foundational bipolar architectonic of conceptual analysis and structure.

While *qi* as a key part of *daoxue*'s philosophical lexicon does not appear to have unduly worried the Song-Yuan-Ming philosophers, the proper definition and understanding of *li* was an entirely different question. The two terms also share the trait of being extremely difficult to translate into just one English word or phrase. The reason for this is evident on two counts. First, *li* does play a pivotal role in *daoxue* speculative axiological cosmology. Second, as with so many other important philosophical concepts, *li* has a long history of sedimentation of different shades of meaning over the long range of pan-Chinese thought in general and in the elaboration of the Confucian Way in particular.

Zhang Dainian (2002, 26-42) again provides a very useful summary of the historical development and sedimentation of *li*. While *li* does have a long history in the Confucian intellectual tradition, it is also fair to say that it never was asked to carry the weight of the whole cosmological system until the rise of Song *daoxue*. Zhang notes that we first find the term *li* in middle Warring States philosophical discourse, and cites the *Mengzi* and quotes from the *Yijing* as evidence for the rather humble beginnings of the deployment of *li* Confucian thought. In terms of Warring States thought we also find *li* discussed in the works of Zhuangzi and Xunzi, though in both cases it would probably be better to translate *li* as pattern or order and not as coherent principle as is later understood in Song-Yuan-Ming *daoxue*.<sup>14</sup> Zhang then works his way through

13 I have discussed this issue and its philosophical background in a previous set of works (see Berthrong 1994, 1998a, 2008). In English probably the best and most detailed discussion of the development of Zhu's cosmology is Levey (1991). Levey engages in an extended dialogue with and careful criticism of Mou Zongsan's epoch making study and interpretation of the rise of Song philosophy.

14 This point is ably explained and defended by Aaron Stalnaker (2004). He notes that *li* is used 107 times in the *Xunzi*. Again it is a shame that the Song *daoxue* transmission of the Confucian Way excluded serious consideration of Xunzi's thought. However, when



the rest of the Chinese intellectual tradition and ends with comments by the great Qing scholars Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen. While *li* is important to both thinkers, they are clear that *li* is the element of patterned or ordered difference that allows us to identify the myriad things as they become a focused and manifested thing or event within the creative and generative cosmic field of *qi*.

Contemporary arguments about how to translate *li* illustrate this point nicely. The standard translation of *li* as principle has been sponsored by the collaborative work of Wing Tsit-chan and Wm. Theodore de Bary. This immensely talented pair of scholars and good friends settled on “principle” for a number of reasons.

While both de Bary and Chan have offered published defenses for their translation, I will now rely on a series of conversations I had with Provost de Bary in the 1990s and the 2000s at the Columbia University Neo-Confucian seminars. Many of these conversations took place during meetings when the issue of the proper translation of *li* was a major topic of conversation. De Bary explained to me that he and Professor Chan choose principle as the best choice for two reasons. De Bary held that in English the term principle carries two main valences. First, it can indeed mean the pattern or order of an object of query. Second, it also has a distinctly ethical import as when someone would say that they are taking a particular course of action based on “principle” as a moral commitment. Hence de Bary believes that principle embraces both the “is” and “ought” dimensions of Song and later Neo-Confucian usage. As Zhang’s translator Edmund Ryden notes, “As principle [*li*] it encompasses both the natural and moral orders, both ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ there being normally no sense of a clear distinction between the two (Zhang 2002, 27).” This of course is alternatively considered the glory of *daoxue* style philosophy or its downfall—a massive confusion of what is and what ought to be.

In terms of alternative translation, I note *li* 理 has been translated as the state, condition, pattern, order, coherent principle, or rationale *suoyiran* 所以然 of the cosmos; *li* is, for instance, a concept found in the classical Ru/Confucian *Xunzi* as the great pattern 大理 of the world and a critical concept, even defining element, in Song and post-Song philosophical discourse as the *dangran* 當然 necessary and *yi* 義 right, correct and/or appropriate quality of the *dao*.

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you read through Zhu Xi’s dialogs and correspondence it is clear that even though Zhu would not cite Xunzi as an authority, Zhu certainly knew Xunzi’s work very well, as he also clearly read the *Zhuangzi* with pleasure. But then, who is not entranced by the sheer beauty of the *Zhuangzi*’s scintillating prose and poetry?

The lexicography of *li* certainly has grown in philosophical stature since its earliest usage as the demarcations of the boundaries of a field or the striations in a piece of jade. From such humble beginnings do great cosmological concepts grow and great debates arise about the proper interpretation of *li*.

One of the more interesting definitions of *li* under contemporary scrutiny is using the terms coherence or coherent. I have myself been persuaded by the cogency of the use of coherent when linked to a translation of *li* and now often use the term coherent pattern or coherent principle. I like the way coherent highlights the sense of rationale or *suoyiran* of *li* and its sensibility of being the pattern or order of the myriad things. I believe this current discussion in Western scholarly circles simply proves the *li*, along with *qi*, is such a philosophically sedimented term that probably no one English translation will ever satisfy the scholarly republic of letters.

While *daoxue* has often been called a form of two origins, *eryuan*, cosmology, it was most definitely never Zhu's or Chen's idea to promulgate a dualism in the sense of a dualistic philosophical architectonic such as it has been understood in Western philosophy or religion. There are at least two major reasons for this. The first is, as Thomas Metzger (2005) has so strongly argued, that one very distinctive feature of Song and post-Song Neo-Confucian philosophy, and even contemporary Confucian thought, is its resolute cosmological and ethical holism. Whatever else the cosmos might be, it is seen as a unified or related whole that can be known through various cognitive means of discernment, mastered through assorted forms of self-cultivation.

To confirm this point we only need to quote Zhu Xi's famous (infamous?) addition to the purported lost fifth chapter of the *Daxue* 大學. Not only did Zhu suggest a rearrangement of the classical text, but he also, even more astoundingly for a Confucian scholar, added comments from Cheng Yi in order to explain what ought to be there in order to explain the famous concept of *gewu* 格物 or the examination of things.

The meaning of the expression 'the perfection of knowledge depends on the investigation of things' is this: in order to extend knowledge, a person has to go to things and appropriate their *li*, for the intelligent mind-heart (*xin* 心) of the person is certainly formed to know, and there is not a single thing in the world which does not possess *li*. It is only because all *li* are not appropriated that a person's knowledge is incomplete. For this reason, the first step in the education of an adult is to instruct the student, in regard to all the things of the world, to proceed from what knowledge she or he had to their *li*, and investigate until she or he reaches the limit. After exerting oneself in this way for a long time, she or he will one day achieve a wide and far-reaching penetration. Then the qualities of all things, whether internal or external, refined

or coarse, will all be apprehended, and the mind-heart, in its totality and great functions, will be perfectly intelligent. This is called the investigation of things. This is called the perfection of knowledge [underline added].<sup>15</sup>

Whatever else Zhu and his *daoxue* colleagues might have been seeking to explain and elaborate, it is not some kind of cosmological or ontological dualism. It is an epistemological vision of a holistic, relational cosmos.

Furthermore, the *daoxue* vision for self-cultivation also always had a social dimension as well. It was not just a personal quest. It has often been explained as seeking the *dao* for oneself (that is, you have to actually achieve a personal and real penetrating understanding of the things, events, and *li* of the world) in service to others. The concept for this is neatly summarized in the claim that one of the main goals of Confucian education and self-cultivation was to reach the state of becoming *neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王 or a sage within and king without. Even someone like Zhu Xi, who never held major or high administrative positions in the Song government, was nonetheless passionately involved in following the political world and commenting on it as Yu Yingshi's magisterial study (2003) has shown conclusively.

It is around the axis of the *li-qi* dyad that we find (1) evidence for *daoxue* creativity and (2) also the fulcrum of the intense debates concerning the coherence or incoherence of its philosophical architectonic of meaning. The problem becomes clear in the following famous quotation from early in Zhu Xi's recorded conversations *Yulei* 語類.

*Li* is only a vast and empty realm, without form or traits, and it cannot produce anything. *Qi* can ferment, congeal, and produce things. But when there is *qi* then *li* is in its midst. (Zhu 2002, 14:116)

This is precisely the place where we see a perfect example of Zhu's philosophical creativity at play, and it is also the same passage that is used over and over again to prove that while Zhu might be creative, his philosophy is ultimately incoherent. Why? Because in this famous passage, Zhu seems clearly to posit a vast and empty realm of passive *li* without any distinctive agential potency. Before I go on to defend Zhu's *daoxue* creativity, I do want to note that in the same section of the dialogues from which the famous passage above is drawn, Zhu goes on to use the metaphor of a seed (*zhongzi* 種子) to describe *li*, with the metaphorical implication that *li* is not completely dead in a cosmological sense but only that we can never understand the creative generativity of the *dao* without recourse to a balanced analysis of the *li-qi* dyad. Nonetheless

15 While it is true that Zhu Xi was no doubt thinking of men in this passage, there is no reason internal to the logic of his argument for women to also achieve this goal as well.

this is a point of contention that has given endless hermeneutical work to generations of Asian and now global philosophers.

First, the linkage of the *li-qi* dyad is one of the places where scholars find Zhu's *daoxue* to be creative. It is creative precisely because it is one of the key elements of *daoxue*'s complex cosmological architectonic. I have previously described (Makeham 2005, 153-175) what I take to be Zhu's contribution to *daoxue* cosmology. In essence what Zhu has done is to show the diverse elements of what I call the four domains of his axiological cosmology.

<i>BenTi</i> 本體 =	Patterns, Coherent Principles & States and Conditions
<i>Yong</i> 用 =	Dynamic Functions or Processes
<i>He [Wen]</i> 和/文 =	Harmonizing Cultural Outcomes
<i>De</i> 德 =	Axiological Values & Virtues

The four key domains catalog and order the intricate architectonic integral web schematizing the four major fields and foci of Zhu Xi's complex axiological cosmology in terms of his philosophical lexicography. The terms and concepts outlined below are obviously not exhaustive of Zhu's massive corpus but they partially encompass the cosmological vision of the Southern Song master—although, for instance, Zhu's political concerns only register tangentially even if they would have mattered greatly to the Song master. Therefore, when Zhu Xi described any of the events *shi* 事 or things *wu* 物 of the world, he would have recourse to these and other terms either singularly, or more commonly, as clusters of concepts, some vague and some complex, that allowed him to explain, describe, and even commend the vast variety of things, events, dispositions, characters, actions, inner and outer social and mental states, roles of personal and social activity, and modes of cultivation that any person must seek out in order to become a worthy student of *daoxue* Teaching of the Way.

1. **States/Conditions/Formats** ® Forms, patterns, formatting, or coherent principles that 'format' the things and events of the cosmos (*li* 理); the coherent principles/patterns *suoyiran* 所以然 for the natural dispositions and sedimentation of all things and events. The fundamental *dangran* 當然 matrix of the Dao.

2. **Functions/Processes** ® The dynamics of any given situation; most cogently the functions and processes, field and focus of *qi* 氣 the protean power of cosmological autotelic generativity, *shengsheng buxi* 生生不息.

3. **Civilizing Cultural Achievements** ⇒ the trait of unification of the formal and dynamic dimensions constituting the emergence of an event or thing (*he* 和 & *wen* 文) encoding the cosmic, social and personal balance needed to achieve harmony.

4. **Axiological Values & Virtues** ® the values that are achieved, shared, and embodied through the selection of appropriate *yi* 義 cultural norms or coherent principles or patterns *li* 理 expressed as *de* 德 refined *wen* 文 virtues and appropriate conduct via civility *li* 禮.

It is this highly articulated and sophisticated cosmological vision that Zhu takes to be a description of the cosmos as well as an outline of how a person ought to flourish through a path of self-cultivation that has caused many scholars to describe Zhu Xi as the second most influential Confucian thinker after Kongzi. While other scholars, such as the equally creative Wang Yangming and Dai Zhen, might disagree mightily with Zhu's *daoxue*, it did become the official state orthodoxy from 1313 until the demise of the traditional imperial system in 1911.<sup>16</sup>

Second, the question of creativity is also challenged by the internal coherence or lack thereof of Zhu's use of *li* as a lynchpin for one of the most critical elements of the most abstract level of his cosmology, the *li-qi* dyad. The problem was this: if the Dao or cosmos is considered to be creative (*shengsheng*) then is *li* likewise creative, dynamic, active—or, as one common question we have seen raised, does *li* move? The answer to the question whether or not *li* is creative, dynamic or generatively alive is that Zhu, as cited above, reminds us that *li* is vast, empty and without form or traits. But he also does not answer the question directly here by saying that *li* is cosmologically dead or inactive. Frankly, there are enough citations to be found in Zhu's huge collection of dialogues, commentaries, essays, and correspondences to make a plausible case for either side of the argument. For instance, Li Minghui, in his study of the famous Four-Seven Debate in Korea (2005), is representative of those competent scholars who argue that *li* in *daoxue* is not dynamic.

Taking a different track, Chen Chun has been recognized for a long time in East Asian scholarship as going in the opposite direction and clearly believes

16 It should be clear by now that I am a great fan of Zhu Xi. I also fully recognize that my positive sentiments are not shared by generations of other scholars and I think I can understand why. Zhu Xi was neither a perfect human being nor philosopher. But then, who is perfect or even good? Nonetheless I think there is grandeur in his vision that still has relevance for world philosophy today.

that *li* is dynamic and creative in parallel to the obviously generative and active *qi*. Chen is often cited over the centuries as someone who had a firm grasp of Zhu's *daoxue* and hence is a reliable source for at least this part of the argument, namely that one of Zhu's most distinguished disciples believed that Zhu believed in the living, dynamic quality of *li*.

Before citing some of the evidence in Chen Chun's glossary, I will provide a general outline of how I think Zhu and Chen could plausibly respond to the rising challenge that they did indeed asserted a dynamic, generative and creative aspect of *li*. First, Zhu was never happy when his students asked him to prioritize the *li-qi* dyad. He always asserted that we could never find an instance where there was *li* without *qi* and vice versa. But when pressed very hard by astute and somewhat confused students, he did sometimes respond that we find *li* first and then *qi*; but he would always add that in terms of concrete things and events<sup>17</sup> (*wushi* 物事) you always found *li-qi* inextricably interrelated.

Second, I also believe that Zhu and Chen had good reasons for making this claim. It is based on what I, but not these Song scholars, would call the order of recognition and the order of reality. In the order of recognition it is deemed plausible to say that *li* comes first, but in a very specific way. What Zhu points out is that when we perceive anything we almost always do so via what I would call pattern recognition. When I drive into Boston from Milton to Boston University I see lots of cars on the road, and given the driving habits of Boston drivers it behooves me to recognize the common patterns, shapes, colors, direction and speed of what I take to be cars on the road with me, especially when I am in Boston's famous roundabouts. They flash by me and there might be someone dragging a life-sized picture of a car behind them in their car, but I will have little time to figure this out because in Boston, a red light does not mean stop, it means rather to speed up. However, in at least two instances I have had an accident when I was rear-ended by another car. Having pulled to the side of the road and talked with the other driver and looked at the damage to both vehicles I am ready to assert not just that I have been rammed by a car in the order of recognition but I have been physically punched and had my

17 Zhu used the term *wushi* 物事 for some interesting reasons. It was not just *wu* as some kind of concrete object like the autos I am using in the thought experiment below. Rather it also includes *shi* and I translate this as events. So for Zhu and Chen 'real' *shi* 實 world is composed of events as well as physical objects. I often think that *daoxue*, and most other Song and post-Song Confucian philosophers, do this because for them, for instance, a really refined ethical or moral action is just as real as an event as my story about autos in Boston. If we have ever seen anyone adroitly handle a difficult social situation in a tactful and prudent fashion I think we can understand Zhu and Chen's point here.

bumper dented by what I am assured by the police and my insurance agency was another auto in an order of reality on the roads of Boston. Zhu believes that we can really only know the objects and events of the world when we successfully merge the order of recognition and concrete reality in our mind-hearts. While I am not sure that Zhu's notion of a penetrating comprehension cited in the supplementary fifth chapter of the *Daxue* included a badly dented auto bumper, I think if Zhu Xi returned to a philosophy conference at Shandong University in Jinan or visited Qufu and became acquainted with cars and modern Chinese traffic, he would have little trouble understanding my analysis of the situation and the things and events involved.

How then does Chen Chun defend the living, dynamic potential of *li*? In the first place this does not seem to have been a specific hermeneutical or philosophical problem for Chen, and his discussion simply assumes that *li* is indeed a living *li*, or at least the pivot of the transformations of the myriad things. While Chen does hold that *li* does have living, dynamic qualities, this was not something he felt he needed to explain in any great detail. He writes in a fashion that indicates he is simply explaining something he thought was obvious or assumed to be an integral part of *daoxue* philosophy.

Second, Chen Chun still, from time to time, does make it obvious that *li* has dynamic, living potential. In the very first section of Chen's lexicon on *ming* 命 (command, destiny, etc.) Chen writes "... when the great transformation functions and prevails, whenever the *qi* gets to point where it become this thing, this thing is born, and when it gets to the point were it becomes that thing, that thing is born" (Chen 1986, 37 modified; Zhang 2004, 236). But also immediately he goes on to implicate *li* in the *ming* generation of things, writing "It is impossible for there to be nothing but *qi*. *Li* is in *qi* and acts as its pivot. This is why the great transformation functions and prevails, producing and reproduction have never stopped" (Chen 1986 modified, 38; Zhang 2004, 237). A moment later Chen writes, "We merely mean to point out that when *qi* is considered as such, *li* is not mixed with it" (*Ibid.* modified).

This is actually an interesting way to set up the whole discussion of the nature and function of *li*. The first thing to notice is that the explication of the *li-qi* dyad is carried out in the section devoted to *ming*, a command or mandate. So why does Chen Chun start with *ming* rather than *li* or *qi*? Even the great Southern Song anthology, the *Jinsilu*, begins with a discussion of the Dao. But there is still a very good reason to begin with *ming* if you think about the matter in two ways. First, it is with *tianming* 天命 that the *Zhongyong* begins its explanation of how the world and all the myriad things of the world receive *ming* as *xing* 性 or natural dispositions or human nature. Moreover it was the *Zhongyong* that Master Zhu designated as the most profound of the



Four Books. It was the book that revealed the weightiest aspects of the teaching of the Confucian Sages. In this respect, any examination of the cosmos could hardly do better than pay homage to the opening refrains of the *Zhongyong*, known to every educated Chinese scholar.

Second, I must explain what I think is implied by Chen Chun's choice of a beginning for the lexicon with *ming*. As I noted above it is a noteworthy strategy to commence the lexicon with *ming* in order to liken the Song philosophical reflection to the discussion to the opening passage in the *Zhongyong*. However, the implication of *ming* in the early discussion of the *li-qi* dyad is also intriguing on a philosophical level. It shows how Chen holds, as did Master Zhu, that there is an action that stands behind the constant conjunction of the *li-qi* dyad in the generation or production of the myriad things. Such a conjunction, Chen argues, is demanded by the command of *tian*. No higher reason could be given within the *daoxue* axiological cosmology. The lively and productive union of *li-qi* is the *tianming* for the myriad things and events of the world.

The rest, as they say, is commentary. The implication, at least on one reading of the *li-qi* dyad, is that this *xing* itself is dynamic in the sense that it is the agent or model that allows for the manifestation of the things and events of the world. Hence *tianming* functions within the paradigm of *liyi fenshu* 理一分殊 (*li* is one while the manifestations are many) in all the possible permutations of the generative and productive agency of the cosmos, the relational mixture of *li-qi* that functions as the primordial architectonic of the dynamic field and focus of *shensheng buxi* 生生不息.

Chen writes "In terms of *li*, origination is the beginning of the *li* of life; flourishing, its free movement; advantage, its accomplishment; and firmness, its security (Chen 1986, 42 modified)." Here again we can see that for Chen *li* is a living, active agent in the dynamics of the cosmos. Or in discussing *xing* 性 Chen notes that change "is the transformation of yin and yang, involving both *li* and *qi* (*Ibid.*, 61 modified)." Yet once more Chen links transformation and hence productive action to both members of the *li-qi* dyad. There is always a mutual implication of these two elements in the emergence of anything whatsoever.

In the section of the lexicon on the *dao*, Chen Chun is abundantly clear that he believes that *li* has dynamic, creative, living properties. He writes, "Obviously *li* is not something dead lying around. As the *qi* of the one origin spreads out, it produces people and things. There are thus the lines and veins, as it were. They are the way followed by people and things. This is what it is when one traces the source of the creative process (*zaohua* 造化)" (Chen 1986, 106 modified; Zhang 2004, 278 ff). Later when talking about *li* again, Chen notes, "How can *li*, which is without physical form or shape, be seen? It is simply the specific

principle (ze 則) of what a thing should be (*dangran* 當然). A specific principle means a standard (*Ibid.*, 112 modified).” In this specific way, Chen holds that it is unchanging in that it is a pattern that shapes and gives the lines and veins to the recognition of people and things and also their moral purpose.

While I could cull more quotations from Zhu and Chen about the dynamic, living functions of *li*, this would merely prove that one can plausibly defend the argument that *li* actually does have, at least for some *daoxue* scholars, a dynamic, generative function in the architectonic of *daoxue* cosmology. To pursue this further would entail a discussion of how *daoxue* cosmology is also a relentlessly fundamental axiology. This argument has, in part, been provided by Angle’s (2009) meditation of a contemporary elaboration of these kinds of themes in *daoxue* philosophical discourse.

When we look for creativity in the work of the Song and post-Song Confucians we will not find it in the same form as in modern Western theology or philosophy. Nonetheless it is precisely the creative achievement of thinkers such as Zhu Xi and his disciple Chen Chun that made *daoxue* such a powerful synthesis. *Daoxue* was actually seen by many to be creative in a positive sense in that it was a faithful elaboration of the work of Zhu’s favored Northern Song masters and, in turn, what Zhu would call the Transmission of the Way (*daotong* 道通). What is ironic is that while the Confucians, for the most part, eschewed neologisms because of their piety for the classical heritage that they assumed contained the whole Confucian lexicon, the notion of the Transmission of the Way was a creation of the Song philosophers. But on the whole Zhu’s creativity is found in a different format.

First, Zhu did have a rich and sophisticated cosmological vision that included a theory of how things arise, flourish and ultimately decay. Moreover, Zhu and Chen were convinced that this cosmology also manifested values and hence is really an axiological cosmology. Second, Zhu sought to articulate, to create if you like, his cosmological tapestry out of the sedimented lexicon he inherited from generation upon generation of Confucian scholars. I have listed a few of the most basic items of *daoxue* philosophical lexicography in this essay. These are the yarns out of which *daoxue* was woven and expressed in the fabric of things and events. Hence *daoxue* is both a profoundly commentarial explication and homage to the Confucian Way, as well as a fascinating new elaboration of this rich tradition as envisaged by a brilliant group of scholars.

As we have seen, it was not perfect. No philosophy, however great, ever is. But it is possible to defend its fascination even while continuing the debate about whether or not *daoxue* ultimately makes coherent sense. The pleasure of elaboration is still found in the kind of dialogue that Zhu Xi began in the

Southern Song. To paraphrase A. C. Graham, this is truly a rich disputation of the *Dao*.

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# The Refracted Moment: Photographing Chinese History in the Making

*Bruno Lessard*

## Abstract

This article examines the way in which both Western and Chinese photographers have documented Chinese history in the making by focusing on the photographic documentation of two key events in the formation of Chinese society: the 1911 Revolution that laid the foundation for the birth of the republic and the “energy revolution” that was the Three Gorges Dam project (1994-2012). The major difference between the two revolutions is that the latter was documented by the Chinese themselves. No longer relying upon images made by Westerners exclusively, as was the case in 1911, the Chinese appropriated this monumental event in their history to archive it photographically. The article offers a conceptual framework for understanding revolutionary events in the context of historiography and photography history. The analysis of various photographs of the 1911 Revolution by Francis Stafford and of the Three Gorges Dam project and area by Edward Burtynsky, Bill Zorn, Zeng Nian, and Yan Changjiang shows that the event remains an evanescent and quasi-impossible entity to capture photographically, and that photographers can only archive its *refracted presence* in the faces, landscapes, and objects in front of the lens. What the pictures unveil is that the *refracted moments* of these two events are far more significant than the actual events themselves for the photographers under study.

## Keywords

1911 Revolution – Three Gorges Dam – documentary photography – landscape photography – event

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It is seldom remarked upon that the century that invented the discipline of history in the West also invented photography. Photography would eventually challenge the more traditional, historical recording of events as a result of the empirical truth-value that photographic documents possess. The events and people who would have been relegated to history books would now be preserved in still images that greatly enhanced narrative descriptions. Photography's truth claim and indexical link to the real combined to shape a new type of historical document that greatly transformed the manner in which individuals document and archive the lives of others and capture history in the making. This is the issue historian James L. Hevia has referred to as the nineteenth-century "photography complex" ("Photography Complex" 80-82), which was a novel assemblage of photographic images, illustrated newspapers, and human actors whose production of knowledge for global consumption was unprecedented.

The photographic documentation of nineteenth-century China is a case in point, and it has attracted a lot of critical attention lately.<sup>1</sup> Examining the photographs taken by Western missionaries, travelers, soldiers, and traders, numerous studies have shown the great interest the late Qing had for those established in the various concessions and treaty ports. In this article, I build upon such critical efforts to shed light on the way in which both Western and Chinese photographers have documented Chinese history in the making. The chosen approach to the photographic documentation of societal formation is different from that adopted by photo historians, however, in that it embraces both the past and the present. Indeed, I will examine the photographic documentation of two key events in the formation of Chinese society: the 1911 Revolution that laid the foundation for the birth of the republic and the "energy revolution" that was the Three Gorges Dam project (1994-2012). The major difference between the two revolutions is that the latter was documented by the Chinese themselves. No longer relying upon images made by Westerners exclusively, as was the case in 1911, the Chinese appropriated this monumental event in their history to archive it photographically. If sociologist Martin Hand is correct to claim that "Our understanding of the societal life of the last hundred and fifty years or so has been to a great extent *photographic*" (188, emphasis in original), then examining the formation of Chinese society through the photographic lens is bound to generate a fascinating portrait of a nation constantly striving to modernize itself.

The first section lays the groundwork for understanding revolutionary events in the context of historiography and photography history. Avoiding the

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1 For studies of early Chinese photography, see Bennett 2009; Chen and Xu 2011; Cody and Terpak 2011; Lau 2008; Ma et al. 1987; Roberts 2012; and Suchomel and Suchomelová 2011.



more philosophical debates that have characterized the study of the “event” in the West lately, the writings of historians such as Pierre Nora, François Hartog, and François Dosse have revealed a far more complex and nuanced picture of the place of the event in historical writings and the current challenge that the notion of the event still poses to more traditional approaches emphasizing history, memory, or heritage.<sup>2</sup> The key point derived from the historiographical reflections considered in the first section is that the event remains an evanescent and quasi-impossible entity to capture photographically, and that photographers can only archive its *refracted presence* in the faces, landscapes, and objects in front of the lens to document what photo historian Michel Poivert has referred to as the “traces of past events in the present.” (101) The following sections substantiate this claim by turning to the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam project. Needless to say, the goal is not to favor the choices made by Chinese photographers over those of Western photographers, or vice-versa, but to open up a space for discussion about the various strategies used to document the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam project as key events in Chinese history. What the images unveil is that the *refracted moments* of these two events are far more significant than the actual events themselves for the photographers under study in this article.

### Photographing the Event

An event is often said to be an occurrence that shatters the course of daily life. It can be a radical rupture in the political world such as the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949; it can be a path-breaking discovery in the medical sciences such as pasteurization; it can be an artistic breakthrough in the form of Schönberg’s atonal writing system that took the Viennese music world by storm; or, on a more personal level, it can be two individuals falling in love. The reader familiar with Alain Badiou’s philosophy (2005) will have realized that the aforementioned examples derive from his understanding of the event that can happen in only four realms: politics, science, art, and love. Although several commentators have taken issue with Badiou’s very selective choice of types of events—also known as “truth procedures”—what I want to underline is not so much the potential types of events that Badiou’s

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2 Well known in historiographical circles for his influential concept of “regime of historicity,” Hartog (2003 and 2013) has also written at length about the various shifts that have defined the discipline of history over the last two centuries. Dosse (2010) is the author of a study of the fascinating journey of the notion of the event in historiography.

philosophy excludes such as the economic event (e.g., the 2008 financial crisis) or the technological event (e.g., the first moon landing in 1969) as how *modern* his conception of the event is. By “modern” I mean that Badiou’s philosophy of the event is predicated upon an understanding of political, scientific, artistic, and amorous change that leaves little room for longitudinal study and historical inquiry. A modern understanding of the event such as Badiou’s is based upon breaks, ruptures, and disjunctions that minimize historical change in the *longue durée* in order to capitalize on the sensational or spectacular eruption of change and newness in the present. In this sense, Badiou’s philosophy is in line with televisual media’s fetishistic emphasis on the event that it should help to question in the first place. Badiou’s modern conception of the event thus is a product of its times that is unhelpful to understand the complexity of historical and socio-political transformations that events such as the 1911 Revolution and the construction of the largest dam in world history entail. The title of one of Badiou’s latest books, *The Rebirth of History* (2012), could not be more apropos to illustrate how historical inquiry and a philosophy of the event are antithetical in the form of yet another “end-of-history” discourse that the word “rebirth” implies.

The media’s appropriation of the event has long preoccupied historians. Worried that the craft involved in the writing of history may be at stake in the common predilection for the event and jeopardize the understanding of historical change as unfolding over time rather than in a flash, historians have questioned the influence of the event on their practice. As early as 1974, Pierre Nora, whose stellar editorial efforts on the *Les Lieux de mémoire* multi-volume project has made him a key player in contemporary historiographical debates, noted the imminent change that could be perceived in historiography as a result of the emphasis on the event. Aptly historicizing the rise of the notion of the event in the years following the rise of mass media such as radio, newspapers, and television as the de facto provider of information, Nora pointed to a crucial shift in the writing of history insofar as the “tyranny of the event was prohibited from entering history; it was understood that history would rest upon the event.” (285) He comments on how this shift—the event now resting on history given its predominance—had major consequences for a discipline whose positivistic inclinations made the historian the person who would organize events in a historically coherent narrative rather than the historical narrative itself culminating in a given event.

Nora elaborates on the problem of the event by turning to a crucial distinction that will bring to bear on photography: modern society’s incessant production of events as opposed to traditional society’s *rarefaction* of the event (296). Traditional society’s time was a time with few to no events beyond the

cyclical and repetitive nature of particular events such as religious rituals and seasonal festivities that would somewhat lose their evental character due to their annual repetition. This rarefaction of events in traditional societies sustained a worldview based upon stability and equilibrium that the emphasis on the event would challenge. It was therefore necessary to negate the potential force of the event to sustain a way of life. Similarly, the “historian of the present” would not be that different from the “historian of the past,” were it not for the fact that, as Nora insightfully reminds us (303), the contemporary historian’s work culminates in the event, whereas the Annales School historian, for example, tended to subtract the event to examine a phenomenon over decades or even centuries in order to reduce its impact and put the emphasis on the structure of a historical system rather than on the events punctuating it.

In light of the preceding discussion, one can see that the problem of the event in historiography is how to characterize *change* itself. The two competing approaches take the form of either emphasizing the change brought forward by an event in its unforeseen irruption in the present, or prioritizing the unveiling of the structure or system enabling the production of events in the first place. The conclusion to draw is that with the rise of “evental history,” which is to say historical writing that culminates in a given event, came the slow decline of subtractive historiography, which refers to the type of writing that uses the event as only one element in the story it tells.

Celebrated French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson would have applauded the rise of “evental history,” for it conforms with his famous description of the task of the photographer vis-à-vis the event: “To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.” (42) Cartier-Bresson’s understanding of the photo event can be described retrospectively as Badiouian in nature: the photographer’s job is to capture the event as it unfolds in a flash when all compositional elements are at a standstill for less than a second. Such a photograph cuts through the real and represents the “decisive moment” dear to Cartier-Bresson. His photographic practice thus was predicated upon the suspension of contingency and the subtraction of all elements unnecessary to the composition in the present.

Photographers have always taken issue with the cult of the event and the present that a perspective such as Cartier-Bresson’s promoted, and the fact that it would function as the truly quintessential moment in the photographic act. As an alternative to Cartier-Bresson’s decisive moment, countless artists in the history of photography have emphasized the traces left behind by an event, which is to say the “indecisive moment.” Such photographers do not seek to capture a once-in-a-lifetime compositional miracle. Rather, they bear

witness to the traces of past events in their spectral presence. It is in this sense that photographers have always questioned the primordial place the event should occupy in order to privilege the *rarefaction* of historical events via their *refraction* in other elements in the frame such as faces, landscapes, buildings, and objects. Hevia echoes this view when referring to the photograph as “neither reflection nor representation of the real, but a kind of metonymic sign of the photography complex in operation.” (“Photography Complex” 81) It is the traces of what is left on the margins of events that many photographers value more than anything, regardless of technological improvements to their medium, and it cannot but suggest that documentary photography has always been one step ahead of historiography in its rejection of the event’s hegemony and of what photo historian Vincent Lavoie has described as “the reduction of history to the instant.” (“Photography and Imaginaries” 16) This could already be seen in the work of the photographers who documented the 1911 Revolution well before the notion of the event was canonized in 1930s photojournalism.<sup>3</sup>

### 1911: Revolutionary Pictures

As a result of the Western forces, both imperialist and capitalist, that made their way into China in the nineteenth century, a new global market for images of daily life in China and the Chinese themselves framed the major socio-political events that marked the second half of the century. It is not farfetched to claim that China became an object to be visually consumed by Westerners during the same period. In the form of *cartes-de-visite*, stereoscopic cards, and postcards, pictures of the Middle Kingdom catered to the overseas demand and the Western gaze’s insatiable thirst for all things Chinese. A sign of the longstanding Orientalist fascination with the Far East, the visual construction of China began in the early 1840s. The Western technology accompanied the invasion of Chinese territory to show the world the superiority of British forces; it photographed their presence and made an indelible mark upon the psyche of both the Chinese and Westerners. The photographs taken by John Thomson, Felice Beato, Leone Nani, Milton Miller, William Saunders, Ogawa Kazuma, James Ricalton, Auguste François, George Ernest Morrison, Edwin John Dingle, Luther Knight, and Francis Eugene Stafford, to name the most well-known, committed this period of Chinese history to memory at a time

3 Lavoie (2001 and 2010) has written at length about the function of the event in photography history, especially with regard to the monumentalization of the photograph in photojournalistic practices and the iconic figure of the war photojournalist.

when photography rose to prominence as the medium par excellence to archive daily lives and events. The images of pre-revolutionary China testify to the importance of photography for offering a novel type of historical documentation in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the first decade of the new century.

As Chinese art historian Wu Hung has shown in his examination of early photography in China, the types of photographs that Westerners took can be divided into three categories: photographs of people, places, and events. Whereas photographs of people can be associated with traditional portraiture, racial and ethnic typologies, and medical photography, photographs of places documented buildings, landscapes, and panoramas. The third type is the one Wu is at pains to describe. Indeed, regarding photographs of events, Wu does not clearly state what the image revealed. Rather, he mentions the need to construct a visual narrative to depict events ("Introduction" 15), and discusses the rise of photojournalism in China in the context of colonialism and war imagery. The incapacity to describe the essence of a photograph of an event is a serious problem in the context of a medium that was supposed to illustrate historical accounts or even replace them. Of course, the fact that photographic technology did not allow for the capture of events due to long exposure times has to be taken into account. However, this technologically deterministic explanation does not solve another of Wu's problems: the fact that photographs of events tended to include both people and places would question the need for a tripartite distinction. Here we are confronted with the double-sided problem of the event in photography: on the one hand, the photograph cannot seem to give a complete account of the unfolding of an event regardless of technological advancements, and, on the other hand, the photo of a given event invariably includes people and places, thereby rendering the distinction between people, places, and events superfluous.

What I wish to stress is not so much the conceptual limitations of Wu's model as the representational problems that arise when the still image wishes to document an event rather than a person or landscape. As Wu intimates, constructing a visual narrative turns out to be crucial to capture an event, and resorting to an album or a photobook is key for the photographer interested in archiving an event. With the help of two publications containing dozens of photographs documenting the events surrounding the 1911 Revolution, let us see how two editors have reconstructed the revolution that launched China on its path to modernization. Two brief case studies will be presented below: American photographer Francis Eugene Stafford's work, as collected and introduced in historian Lu Hanchao's *The Birth of a Republic: Francis Stafford's Photographs of China's 1911 Revolution and Beyond*, and the mostly anonymous

photographs collected in the lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogue entitled *China in Revolution: The Road to 1911*, edited by photographer Liu Heung Shing. What these two publications unwittingly stage via photographs of the 1911 Revolution is the problem of representing the event in the still image.

The 1911 Revolution is considered a watershed in Chinese history, because it marked the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and it was the first of a series of major socio-political revolutions that would characterize twentieth-century China. The 1911 Revolution put an end to two millennia of Confucian way of life and imperial rule and to what one historian of China has called “the most enduring political system in the history of mankind.” (Esherick 1) After a series of humiliating defeats at the hands of Western and Japanese powers that would culminate in the signature of unjust treaties in the nineteenth century, the first decade of the new century saw rebellious activities and European-influenced revolutionaries and intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei contest the primacy of Manchurian rule and its possibility of guiding China into the new century.

Noteworthy is the fact that the 1911 Revolution, which expressed the desire to transform society in the aftermath of the cruel defeats at the hands of Western and Japanese powers and the unfair financial settlements that followed, is an event that is available for visual consumption today due to the efforts of Westerners interested in capturing the faces, landscapes, and locales defining this crucial moment in Chinese history. The late-Qing dynasty events that led to the 1911 Revolution were documented and archived by Western photographers to such an extent that the “visual memory” of this crucial period in Chinese history is the result of the efforts of Western missionaries, diplomats, traders, and a few professional photographers. They depicted the Chinese in their everyday lives in the treaty ports, and their photographs can be seen as the backdrop against which Chinese history unfolded. Francis Eugene Stafford (1884-1938) was one of those photographers.

Stafford was based in China between 1909 and 1915. During these busy years, he worked for the Commercial Press and photographed court officials, prisoners, rebels, revolutionary soldiers, school children, female workers, beggars, and peasants. He also captured on film various locales and pagodas, the Temple of Heaven, public demonstrations, buildings in ruins, and, most interestingly, he indulged in various acts of self-inscription in the form of numerous staged photographs of himself. Bearing in mind Wu’s three types of images—of people, places, and events—one can see how the first two types are easily identifiable in the list above. As far as events themselves are concerned, they are more difficult to locate in Stafford’s photographs. Actually, one has to look for them in their refracted presence, as we shall see.

Lu Hanchao's book collection of Stafford's photographs is divided into five sections covering the various moments associated with the 1911 Revolution in chronological fashion. The two sections that would seem most conducive to the study of the event in photography are the ones entitled "Wuchang Uprising" and "The Politics of Chaos," which are the book's middle sections. The last two sections, entitled "A Society in Transition" and "Stafford in China," focus on the aftermath of the Revolution and Stafford's autobiographical photographic acts. As far as the middle sections are concerned, they demonstrate that Stafford was interested in documenting not so much the 1911 event itself as its refracted moments using urban scenes and portraiture.

Stafford's photographs document the people associated with the 1911 Revolution and the urban backdrop against which various military activities unfolded.<sup>4</sup> Pictures of revolutionary soldiers on the march follow the gruesome photo of the severed heads of two leaders, Liu Fuji and Peng Chufan (44), which memorably opens the "Wuchang Uprising" section. Images of rebel troops and imperial forces on the move accompany more sober portraits of army officials and Red Cross workers tending to the wounded. A sequence of four powerful pictures of bodies of dead soldiers on the battlefield, gunned down rebels, corpses whose clothes are missing, and a corpse that is being devoured by a dog (87-90) conclude this section and offer a devastating portrait of the uprising without actually showing eventful situations.

Stafford photographed various sites empty of human presence, and the last sequence of this section focuses on buildings either in ruins or burning with heavy smoke occupying the pictorial space. Hankou is seen aflame (93) and, then, after the fire, the burned down city is pictured in a state of ruins (95). Two photographs focus specifically on the Chinese looking for valuables left behind or returning home only to find it in ruins (96-97). Most tellingly, the section ends with two photographs of Stafford (99-100): the penultimate image features the American leaning against the wall of a bombed out house now in ruins, while the last provides a most picturesque, staged photograph of Stafford sitting atop the city wall in Wuchang holding a fan and looking afar. It is a most enigmatic coda to the most visually shocking section of the book.

Lu Hanchao's collection of Stafford's photographs is instructive in several respects. First, it underlines the role photography played in permitting Chinese history to reach the West via still images. What certainly strikes this viewer is Stafford's hovering presence throughout, which was both literal and symbolic

4 The reader will find more than 200 of Stafford's photographs of the 1911 Revolution on the Stanford Digital Repository website: <http://purl.stanford.edu/th998nko722#gallery/1>.



given the pervasive role Western photographers played in the production and dissemination of images of China. Second, Stafford's photographs captured the 1911 event only by way of what preceded it or followed it, thereby implying that capturing the event in the present was impossible. Indeed, Stafford's pictures do not document any particular *momentous* event during these years. Rather, his images focus on the people and places associated with the 1911 Revolution either before or after it took place. The emphasis on post-battle landscapes and the faces of prisoners attest to this. This is a point Lavoie makes with regard to the invisible presence of the event in war photography. He notes: "what war photography shows is situations without any real evental quality [*qualité événementielle*]... Photography fails to represent war in its evental quintessence, which means that the bulk of photographic representations of war deal with the geographical and temporal periphery of the event." (*Photojournalismes* 207) Bearing in mind this last remark, Stafford can be said to have documented the 1911 Revolution via the event's refracted presence in the portraits, buildings in ruins, and, therefore, the material traces of history rather than the event itself.

Another publication that has thoroughly documented the 1911 Revolution is photographer Liu Heung Shing's *China in Revolution: The Road to 1911*, which also adopts a chronological approach. Rather than focus on one particular photographer, however, Liu's collection provides a longer history of the events that led to the 1911 Revolution, beginning with the Second Opium War (1856-1860), which serves as the first core chapter. There follow five chapters focusing on the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1903), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Wuchang Uprising (1911), and the Chinese warlord era (1912-1928). The six core chapters thus offer a photographic history that frames the 1911 Revolution itself.

One notices how the historical frame provided by the other five sections do contextualize the 1911 events, but they also distract the reader from having access to the event itself insofar as the publication is more about what preceded the 1911 Revolution as recorded photographically than what either constituted it in the present or its impact in the years that followed. This is no small editorial move on Liu's part, as "The Road to 1911," which is the book's subtitle, indicates the orientation of the editor. Indeed, what matters to Liu in the 1911 Revolution is not so much the momentous events themselves as what paved the way for them. The images in the "1911: The Wuchang Uprising" chapter reveal a concern for group portraits of imperial troops, rebels at rest, laborers, and prisoners waiting to be sentenced or executed. Noteworthy is the absence of buildings in ruins in Liu's selection for this central chapter,

aside from two panoramic photos of Hankou after being burned to the ground (332).

The differences in treatment between Lu Hanchao's and Liu Heung Shing's collections come to the fore by way of their treatment of the event by photographic means. On the one hand, Lu puts the emphasis on the post-evental situation, privileging Stafford's photographs of building in ruins. On the other hand, in terms of framing and background information, Liu accentuates the importance of the decades that preceded the 1911 Revolution to make the following point: the event itself, and the photographs selected, do not matter so much as the actors and situations that led to 1911. Both collections of photographs clearly indicate that the event itself, in the present, is an evanescent occurrence that defies the photographic act.

Regardless of the editorial choices made, however, where both collections' photographs unite is in refracting the 1911 Revolution, that is, rarefying the event that was the end of Manchu rule and the fall of the Qing dynasty and making it discernible only in the human faces, street scenes, and landscapes that either preceded or followed the event. Such a strategy might explain why Esherick would describe the 1911 Revolution in terms that would question the use of the word "event" to characterize what, the historian claims, was "a most unrevolutionary revolution." (8) That said, it is Lu's and Liu's merit to have shown how photographs taken by Westerners have shaped our understanding of the years preceding and following the Revolution. The refracted moments that were captured on film by nineteenth-century photographers such as Stafford added to both the "knowledge of 'Chineseness' that had been produced over the previous decades" (Hevia, *English Lessons* 196), and the visual production of China for Euro-American consumption inside and outside of the empire that would extend all the way into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

### **The Three Gorges Dam: Chronicle of a Disappearance Foretold**

Juxtaposing two watershed events in the formation of Chinese society such as the 1911 Revolution and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam serves a comparative function aiming at revealing a significant change in terms of photographic agency. Indeed, what characterizes the dam and its photographic documentation is that, contrary to the 1911 Revolution, both Western *and* Chinese photographers have archived the building of the dam, the neighboring areas left in ruins, and the lives of the Chinese. I will focus on four artists, the ones whose photographic inquiries into the Three Gorges have been the

most extensive and are the most well-known both in the West and China: Edward Burtynsky, Bill Zorn, Zeng Nian, and Yan Changjiang.<sup>5</sup>

One potential pitfall would be to claim that Westerners photographed the Three Gorges Dam project in such a way, whereas the Chinese adopted a different strategy. As will be made clear, a nation-based or ethnic approach to photographic strategies does not help to make sense of the various ways in which photographers conceptualized their task as they went about documenting an area that would go through a cycle of demolition and construction impacting the lives of millions of people. It is more useful to focus on the strategies that were used to face the challenges the Three Gorges Dam presented as an event unfolding over several years. Similar to the photographic coverage of the 1911 Revolution *qua* event, Burtynsky's, Zorn's, Zeng's, and Yan's photographs implicitly reveal the solution for capturing the Three Gorges event in all its complexity. Here again, archiving people, places, and objects is the most popular strategy used in order to confront an event that could only be documented as refracted in the faces, landscapes, and the material culture that framed it.

First proposed by Sun Yat-sen in 1919 but eventually left on ice for decades, the idea for the dam was revived by Mao Zedong in 1953. After Mao's death and the Cultural Revolution, it was Deng Xiaoping who brought the project back to life a second time in the early 1980s. Elaborated over a period of more than fifteen years, the plans for and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam were imbued with controversy from the inception. The three reasons justifying the building of the dam were to increase the national output of electricity in light of China's economic reform and industrial boom; to control flooding downstream; and to improve river navigation. These are the positive aspects that the Chinese authorities played up during the initial stages of the construction and over the following decade. Environmentalists and activists who alerted the Chinese and the international community to the dangers of constructing such a gigantic dam mentioned issues such as hastily conceived resettlement plans, the rebirth of the destroyed ecosystems, the protection of still unearthened antiquities and unexplored archeological sites along the Yangtze

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5 This is not to say, however, that these four are the only photographers worthy of interest. For example, Benson (2006) and Butler (2004) have published important photobooks on the same topic. Others such as Chetham (2004) have combined the more scholarly tone with personal observations. Moreover, the Three Gorges was the object of two noteworthy exhibitions in 2007 that would deserve closer attention: "Three Gorges / Sanxia," Minnesota Center for Photography, Minneapolis, and "Na shan, na shui, na ren—Chen Wen, Li Ming, Song Ge Sanxia yingxiang zhan" (那山, 那水, 那人 — 陈文, 黎明, 宋戈三峡影像展), Jianeng Yingxiang Kongjian, Beijing.

River going back to the Daxi and Ba cultures, and land use, to name only the major challenges.<sup>6</sup>

There were two main problems according to most Chinese and international observers. First, the resettlement of 1.4 million people was the most pressing issue, which explains why journalists such as Dai Qing made their voices heard and aroused the ire of Chinese authorities.<sup>7</sup> Second, the construction of the dam worried environmentalists because its potential collapse would have disastrous consequences for the environment and the population. Bearing in mind the collapse of the Shimantan and Banqiao dams, Henan Province, in August 1975, which killed more than 85,000 people, the impending catastrophe was on the minds of several observers such as Dai, who claimed that building a series of smaller dams on the Yangtze's tributaries would have achieved the nation's energy targets.

The artistic responses to the Three Gorges Dam have been varied. Liu Xiaodong's series of Three Gorges paintings, filmmaker Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*) and *Dong*, and Li Yifan and Yan Yu's documentary film, *Before the Flood* (*Yanmo*), are the most well-known works associated with the controversial dam (Wu, "Internalizing Displacement"). These and other artists who documented the area in the midst of profound changes in the early 2000s now belong to the long tradition of Chinese artists such as Li Bai and Du Fu who have been inspired by the breathtaking scenery. However, contrary to the elegiac tone used by their forebears, the painters, filmmakers, and photographers who have turned their attention to the Three Gorges area adopt a more cautionary than celebratory tone. As one curator has put it regarding documentary photographers: their works act as "evidence of transformation and suggest the many facets and implications of this extraordinary undertaking." (Slade 10) The photographic responses to the Three Gorges Dam project thus demand that we pay close attention to how photographers have approached the hydroelectric event. While conceptual and compositional strategies differ from photographer to photographer, the viewer soon notices that there remains the need to refract the event using the faces of the Chinese in various individual and group portraits and to focus on the changing landscape via buildings in ruins.

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6 For studies of the Three Gorges Project and its related social challenges, see Luk and Joseph (1993), Heggelund (2004), and Tan (2008).

7 Dai Qing is a journalist who was imprisoned for publishing a book of interviews and essays critical of the Three Gorges Dam project in 1989. Since then, she has been involved in another book project and has served as an inspiration for critics both Chinese and Western. See Dai (1994) and (1998).

The photographs documenting the Three Gorges to be discussed in this section cover the period between 1996 and 2010.<sup>8</sup> Some of the most well-known images of the area are those of Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, whose oversized color photographs of the Three Gorges were shot in Fengjie, Wushan, and Wanzhou between 2002 and 2005.<sup>9</sup> The title of Burtynsky's first publication devoted to China, *Before the Flood* (2003), clearly indicates the intention underlying the project: capturing the lives of individuals on the move, the actions of demolition workers, and the ruins left behind. Burtynsky's retrospective photobook published two years later, *China*, opens with the photos taken in the Three Gorges area, but it does not limit itself to it. Indeed, *China* is the summation of Burtynsky's work in the country, and the book features sections about steel and coal, old industry, shipyards, recycling, manufacturing, and urban renewal.<sup>10</sup>

In order to document the gigantic nature of the Chinese modernizing forces at play in the Three Gorges Dam project, Burtynsky uses a view camera, repeat photography, and the panoramic book format. "Dam #2, Three Gorges Dam Project, Yangtze River, 2002" (*China* n.p.) captures an imposing section of the dam in construction spread over two pages in panoramic fashion. Other photographs, taken in Fengjie and Wushan, archive the massive urban destruction that took place prior to the flooding of the areas and indulge in framing areas in ruins. Shot eight weeks apart in 2002, "Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #1" (*Before the Flood* 4) and "Three Gorges Dam Project, Feng Jie #2" (*Before the Flood* 5) masterfully reveal the pace of change in Fengjie once demolition workers started tearing down the walls of the various buildings in the background of the first photo taken. In the second picture, the background buildings have disappeared. Relying upon "repeat photography" (also known as "re-photography" and "before-and-after photography"), Burtynsky thus allows change and transformation to enter the still image. It is also used in two other pictures, this time taken in Wanzhou. "Three Gorges Dam Project, Wan Zhou #5" (*Before the Flood* 12) features a side view of an already half demolished

8 The photographer who first "specialized" in capturing the Three Gorges was Chinese. She Daike travelled there in the 1960s, that is, well before Western photographers got interested in the region as a result of the dam project.

9 Several of Burtynsky's Three Gorges photographs can be found online. See [http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site\\_contents/Photographs/China.html](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/China.html).

10 An aspect of Burtynsky's work that would deserve further investigation is the omnipresence of China in his photos of the early 2000s. China still occupies a central place in Burtynsky's latest projects, the photobook *Water* (2013) and the documentary film *Watermark* (2013), co-directed with Jennifer Baichwal, which actually opens with a sequence shot in China.

building in the background and two demolition workers in the foreground. "Wan Zhou #4, Three Gorges Dam Project" (*China* 27) captures the façade of the same building spectacularly suspended in midair before it crumbled to the ground to suggest how the event took place in real time.<sup>11</sup>

Burtynsky's photographs of various areas that were to be flooded focus on the cost of hydroelectric modernization as refracted in ruins. In fact, Burtynsky's work in China expresses two tensions: the mixture of environmental anxiety and "catastrophism" (Dupuy) that his photographs reveal, and the concern for the size of post-industrial transformations via a detached, almost abstract perspective. This greatly impacts the way in which the viewer is meant to appropriate his photographs: "The spectator is thrust into an ambiguous situation of pondering pictures of ecological devastation while beholding dazzling visual surfaces. Such is the visual event Burtynsky stages with his photographs." (Bordo 91) A problem thus arises from the fact that Burtynsky's photographs double the event they are supposed to document by acting as pictorial events themselves. This may explain the critical reception his work has faced, especially in terms of aestheticization, abstraction, and detachment. As we shall see, other photographers approached the Three Gorges with a very different goal in mind in the early 2000s.

A retired ER doctor now living in Beijing, American photographer Bill Zorn zeroes in on the Three Gorges and the faces of the Chinese whose lives were impacted by the building of the dam and the resettlement campaign rather than the sites or buildings themselves, which, if present, serve only as background to the more humanistic portraits he privileges.<sup>12</sup> Zorn's black-and-white photographs focus on the "landscape of the Chinese face" in order to offer a "personal portrait of the area between Yichang and Fengjie with a two year exposure, between 2001 and 2003." (n.p.) Zorn's preface to his photobook makes a very pregnant remark on refraction to the effect that it is through the eyes of the descendants of the countless Chinese that we can observe the Three Gorges as event, and it is by means of documenting the faces of the Chinese that he has most poignantly archived a disappearing area and its people.

Accompanied by quotes from Laozi, Bai Juyi, Kongzi, Du Fu, and Li Bai in both Chinese and English translation, Zorn's photographs combine landscape

11 Intriguingly, these two photographs of Wanzhou do not appear in *China*; only "Wan Zhou #4" does. In the case of *Before the Flood*, "Wan Zhou #4" is not featured in the book itself but on the book cover. For more about Burtynsky's work in China, see the award-winning Canadian documentary film, *Manufactured Landscapes* (dir. Jennifer Baichwal, 2006).

12 A selection of Zorn's China photographs can be found on his website: <http://www.billzorn.com/china/intro.shtml>.



and portraiture, interiors and exteriors. Two of the most iconic photographs in Zorn's series are "Nai-Nai and Grandbaby, Qingshi" (48) and "Chengkehua, Daxi Village, Qutang Gorge" (39), which is a well-composed portrait of a grandmother holding a baby in her arms, with the background displaying the river and the mountainous area, and the portrait of a man against the dramatic natural background provided by Qutang Gorge, respectively. The first photograph frames the two generations and the implicit disparity between the life experiences of the grandmother, who, we assume, had been living there for decades and whose habitat was on the verge of being flooded, and the uncertain future of the baby. Contemplating this image a decade after it was made, the viewer comes to the conclusion that their shared experience is to have been relocated. "Peisha Village, Wu Gorge" (54) is another photograph that testifies to Zorn's superlative abilities as a portraitist of the elderly. Other pictures such as "Fengjie Square" (20) are group portraits in which local residents gathered around the photographer "to be in the shot," and "Fengjie" (27) uses the same compositional strategy to capture the smiling faces of young children. While a photographer such as Burtynsky exclusively focuses on more dramatic urban scenes and buildings in ruins, Zorn captures the face of the place, so to speak, using masterfully conceived portraits that refract the Three Gorges event. After having examined how Western photographers have documented the Three Gorges, let us have a look at how two of their most outstanding Chinese counterparts have documented the Three Gorges project.

A Jiangsu-born photographer who has been living in Paris for more than twenty years, Zeng Nian has offered some of the most artistically perfected photographs of the Three Gorges. Collected in a beautifully conceived book published in Lyon, France, which aptly uses the panoramic book format to fit the orientation of Zeng's photographs, these images combine Burtynsky's and Zorn's styles in order to offer a vivid account of the region before the completion of the dam project. Using both color and black-and-white, Zeng provides stunning photographs of the entire building process using the wide-angle lens. Zeng's photobook adopts a clear thematic progression focusing on demolition, resettlement, dam building and workers, archeological matters and object culture, and, finally, life in Chongqing. The book chronologically retraces the photographer's steps between 1996 and 2010, making his work one of the most sustained photographic inquiries into the Three Gorges project. The main advantage of Zeng's photobook design is to take the viewer on a journey from the first years after the construction of the dam was announced to the now inundated areas and relocated families.

A former member of Contact Press Images who is now with GAMMA, Zeng, as mentioned above, could be said to combine Burtynsky's and Zorn's styles to



fashion a unique portrait of the Three Gorges *qua* event over fourteen years. Indeed, Zeng deftly uses both the panoramic perspective and the close-up portrait to effectively convey a sense of the place and the locals. In fact, having already examined Burtynsky's and Zorn's conceptual strategies, it appears that one of Zeng's most successful strategies is to have struck a good balance between the place, its people, *and* its material culture. In other words, Zeng's strategy is to be able to read the Three Gorges event as refracted in the faces, landscapes, and objects left behind before the area was inundated.

A few photographs will suffice to illustrate Zeng's method. A solemn panoramic black-and-white group portrait shows how Zeng uses the human face to refract the drama in the region. "Three Lumberjacks" (48-49) captures in a side view three men gazing at something unidentified across the river. The caption reveals that their intense, collective gaze stares at the gate of Kui (*Kuimen*). One can read in their gazes the immensity of the transformations afoot and the human presence dwarfed by the mountainside. Finally, noteworthy color portraits (102-103) remind the viewer of Zorn's work and its focus on the elderly gazing at the urban landscape in ruins.

Another strategy to illustrate the changing nature of landscape itself is to have photographed Zigui County, Hubei Province, at least twice in 1996 and 2010. The 1996 color picture (69), which includes a blurry funeral procession, archives the Yangtze in the background, and, most importantly, the buildings that would either be demolished or flooded. Returning to Zigui County in 2010, that is, fourteen years later, Zeng's use of re-photography captures a stunningly different area: the buildings in the 1996 color picture are invisible, and the city life in the 2010 black-and-white panoramic picture is imbued with nostalgia and features two workers gazing across the river and a German shepherd in the foreground (234-235). Water dominates the scene, as a ferry can be seen making its way to the other side of the river.

Concerning material culture, one of the most vivid ways in which Zeng manages to convey what will be lost is in his black-and-white photographs of White Crane Ridge (*Baiheliang*) in Fuling District, Chongqing (88-89). The natural giant stone ridge that was 1750 yards long and 18 yards wide is now submerged. It featured hydrological inscriptions, poems, and fish carvings, some of them dating back to the Tang dynasty.<sup>13</sup> Whether it be via portraits, landscapes, or objects, Zeng delivers a complete photographic account of the Three Gorges as refracted in the quotidian aspects of life in the area.

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13 Fortunately, there is an underwater museum, which opened in 2009, where visitors can still have access to the ridge.

The last example of work done in the Three Gorges area is that of Yan Changjiang. Having published two books about the Three Gorges area, Yan should occupy a central place in any examination of the photographic documentation of the Three Gorges.<sup>14</sup> Born in Zigui County, Hubei Province, in 1968, Yan is a graduate of Wuhan University, and works as a picture editor for *Yancheng wanbao*. In *Sanxia rizhi*, Yan presents the diary of his travels in the Three Gorges area and along the Yangtze between 2002 and 2008. This work is a most idiosyncratic document of the Three Gorges region that belongs more to the photographic essay genre than the traditional photobook.<sup>15</sup> Heavily relying upon the written word given its nature as a diary, Yan's publication offers autobiographical snippets, hand-drawn maps, and long meditations upon his travels written in both vernacular language and classical Chinese. The color photographs accompanying Yan's daily entries capture the faces, landscapes, and artefacts encountered in various counties such as Zigui, Yunyang, Fengdu, Fengjie, Badong, and Wushan and suburbs of Chongqing such as Fuling and Changshou. Yan's diary contains more than 200 pictures, 2002 and 2003 having been his busiest years.

Yan's photographs alternate between the genres (portraiture and urban landscape) and the spaces covered so far in the work of Burtynsky, Zorn, and Zeng, although his aesthetics is far less polished than that of these three photographers and recalls street photography aesthetics. Some of the most moving portraits in the photo essay include the image of a middle school classroom in Yan's hometown, Zigui, the children's faces staring at the photographer's lens and provoking the viewer into thinking about the future of these students once relocated (127); the portrait of a middle-aged man standing next to a statue of the mythical Da Yu (2100 BCE), who is said to have tamed the floods, reminds the viewer of the perennial place flood control has occupied in Chinese history (233); and the photograph of Liu Guoxiu, a former army volunteer, in a shrine dedicated to Guanyin, the bodhisattva associated with compassion and mercy, in the town of Yuzui, Chongqing (275).

The landscapes found in Yan's diaries vary greatly, and some of the most interesting photographs were taken in Yan's hometown, going from the idyllic to the city in ruins à la Burtynsky. For example, an ancient gate in the process of being demolished (54) and a primary school in ruins whose mural is still visible amongst the rubble (59) refract the Three Gorges event in Yan's

14 It is no small irony that Yan's given name, Changjiang (长江), means "long river," which is also the Chinese name of the Yangtze (*Changjiang*).

15 I will focus on the 2009 publication, as it contains most of the images found in the 2003 work and is the more recent and comprehensive work.

urban landscape photo work. More picturesque in nature, the photo on the book cover of the diary is one of the most memorable in the lot. Shot in Daxi, Wushan County (181), it features a man crouched over facing a mountainous landscape whose bluish aura shrouds the area at dawn.

Regarding the documentation of material culture, Yan focuses his efforts on the remains and visible traces in objects themselves. For example, near Chongqing, Yan archives the remains of folk calligraphy carved in a stone monument that is still standing on the site of a former grain depot in ruins (219). Also noteworthy is a series of three photographs of White Crane Ridge (*Baiheliantang*) in Fuling District, already discussed above. Yan adopts a strategy different from Zeng's more detached perspective, however, insofar as he zeroes in on one fish carved in stone (151). Then, he proceeds to photograph the same inscriptions Zeng shot for the second picture (156). The third photo is a most fascinating act of preservation, showing two men using tracing paper to copy two birds carved in stone before they were submerged (157).

The last picture in the book is quite significant at the end of the viewer's journey (and Yan's), and it was taken on a ferryboat in Mudong, Chongqing, in 2008.<sup>16</sup> Its particularity is that in the center of the image one finds a newborn baby. The caption reads: "2008 nian 4 yue 16 ri, Mudong, Changjiang duchuan shang de xin shengming." (379) It is quite fitting that Yan's work should end on a celebratory note, for the "new life" (*xin shengming*) that he privileges in the end is the one that will not have known the hardships associated with the Three Gorges firsthand, and that will nevertheless be the continuation of life in the region. Though it may be Yan's farewell to the area reaching the end of the road, this newborn baby's presence serves as an unassuming welcome after several years of travels documenting the refracted impact of the Three Gorges Dam project.

### Conclusion: Why Photography Matters to the Chinese as Never Before

The formation of twentieth-century Chinese society as captured by photographers could include a myriad of events such as the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution. The two chosen events examined in this article being roughly one hundred years apart, their singular function is to bookend a century of Chinese revolutions, starting with the

16 Yan reminisces about his experience that day in a 2012 blog entry. See <http://yanchangjiang.vip.blog.163.com/blog/static/30041404201231511156450/>.

birth of the republic after two millennia of socio-political life predicated upon Confucian principles and ending with the building of the Three Gorges Dam in the era of economic reform and openness, which symbolizes yet another event in China's quest toward modernization, transformation, and adaptation.

What the photographic documentation of these two events signals is a major concern for cultural memory as refracted in portraits, landscapes, and objects. In fact, for both the 1911 Revolution and the Three Gorges Dam, a key *topos* for photographers, from Francis Stafford to Yan Changjiang, is the significance of ruins as temporal markers of change. Wu Hung's recent study of Chinese visual culture, *A Story of Ruins*, is helpful to summarize the various approaches to the refraction of the event as found in ruins. Focusing on the use of ruins in the visual arts and media from Chinese antiquity to the present, Wu shows how images of ruins, initially a predominant interest of the West, gradually made their way into Chinese culture as a result of war-related destruction and the need to memorialize and monumentalize certain sites and events. In the face of many contemporary art projects interested in documenting urban ruins, one cannot but come to the conclusion that both memory and transition are refracted in these images of ruins.

Inspired by the images of Westerners whose culture of ruin images was based in the pictorial tradition, Chinese artists developed a predilection for ruins in the early twentieth century that was unique to them. As Wu points out: "What became influential and finally developed into a broad visual culture in twentieth-century China was a different kind of ruin and ruin image. Instead of inspiring melancholy and poetic lamentation, they evoke pain and terror." (*Story of Ruins* 121) Whether it be images of war scenes or of late twentieth-century urban demolition, they record "destruction that left a person, city, or nation with a wounded body and psyche." (*Story of Ruins* 121) As refracted records of events, such images have come to stand in for what Wu has described as a "suspended temporality" (*Story of Ruins* 172) that oscillates between the past, present, and future of China. This is the story the photos discussed in this article tell, regardless of the photographer's nationality one might add, as China reemerges and transitions into a new era of its already rich and fascinating history.

It is a truism today to remark that we live in a world of images. In fact, one could say that, in the West, we are bombarded with images of China. Ever since the implementation of the economic reforms, the proliferation of images of China has been continuous and often reinforces the Orientalist biases of yesteryear. Given China's eventful history, it is no wonder that it has always been a privileged object of fascination in the West. Starting with the first European missionaries who set foot in China in the seventeenth century to convert the

Chinese, China has remained at the heart of the West's concerns, and this is not going to change now that China has positioned itself as one of the world's top economic leaders. It will be Chinese photographers' role to counterbalance the images produced in the West about their society and develop their own poetics of documentary knowledge. Reviving the role of the socially committed photographer in China will be key to accomplish this.

In recent years, there have been several efforts at re-legitimizing photography in light of both its ubiquitous status and the prevalence of moving-image media that seem to have rendered it passé. For example, Michael Fried (2008) and Jerry L. Thompson (2013) have both sought to demonstrate that photography still matters. For Fried, it is the fine art photography tradition (Jeff Wall's work and the Düsseldorf School mainly) that still matters. For Thompson, it is the legacy of 1930s documentary photography and its key figure, Walker Evans, that matter. In other words, according to Fried and Thompson, photography would still matter because of its accomplishments in the realm of fine art photography and documentary photography. What is most telling, however, is the sense of urgency that belies the very question of photography's meaningfulness in the twenty-first century, a question that neither Fried nor Thompson ponders but which the Chinese can answer from a very different perspective.

The Chinese know that photography matters to record and archive the great transformations their country has undergone over the last 150 years. The only caveat is that the production and distribution of images were in the hands of Westerners whose ownership and command of photographic technology allowed them to capture the formation of a modern nation for so long that a rebalancing needed to take place.<sup>17</sup> The major change is that since the mid-1970s the Chinese have restarted documenting themselves, and have produced a diversified photographic body of knowledge that is still mostly unknown in the West beyond what can be found in coffee table books. Building off Richard Kent's comment to the effect that the Chinese would have to reclaim the documentary photography tradition left behind in the Mao years, one can certainly say mission accomplished in light of the work of documentary photographers such as Zeng Nian, Yan Changjiang, Wu Jialin, Hu Wugong, Lu Yuanmin, Hei Ming, Zhao Tielin, and Zhang Xinmin, among others. Moreover, an artistic event whose importance will only emerge with time is the "Humanism in

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17 Drawing upon Jack Goody's revisionist position in *The Theft of History*, one could very well claim that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there occurred the theft of Chinese history via photographic means given that the visual history of the period that was and still is available today is the result of the efforts of Westerners living in China.

China" exhibition, held at the Guangzhou Museum of Art in 2003, which collected the works of many of the aforementioned photographers. An impressive catalogue (Wang and Hu 2003) featuring essays by well-known Chinese photographers and critics accompanied the pioneering exhibition.

In his insightful study of contemporary photography, Michel Poivert devotes a chapter to the fate of photojournalism and documentary photo after the rise of broadcast media. He remarks that in the works of photographers such as Eric Baudelaire, Luc Delahaye, and Carl De Keyzer, there occurs a fictionalization of historical matters, which points to the alternative role photography has come to play in the West to offer something that live television coverage cannot envisage. Reaching the end of this study, it is important to underline that, in the case of China, documentary photo and photojournalism have not exhausted their role as provider of visual information about the Chinese. Although there are photographers such as Liu Zheng, whose *The Chinese* (2008) may come to occupy in China the same place as Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1958) occupies in the West, who have already started fictionalizing Chinese history, the various documentary book series available and the images coming out of China today show that the tradition is thriving. If Wang Hui is right to claim that the "political subjectivity [*zhengzhi zhutixing*] of New China was established on the basis of the foundation of its own historical activity" (105), then one can add that future documentary activity will help to ground the political subjectivity of twenty-first-century China.

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# From *kang* (炕) to *kongtiao* (空调): China's Twentieth Century Cooling

Emily Williams

## Abstract

This essay suggests an alternative strategy for thinking about changes in Chinese society in recent decades, using not economic data or theories of development, but the metaphor of temperature. It argues that the cultural imperative in China has, in recent decades, switched from that of keeping warm to that of keeping cool. This change is made tangible through two key objects: the *kang* (炕), the northern Chinese heated bed, and the *kongtiao* (空调), the air conditioner. The antiquity of the *kang* is explored as an object that is key to the development of Chinese civilization in the inhospitable northern climes. Moving between physical and metaphorical ideas of heat, the essay argues that throughout much of the twentieth-century, heating remained the main focus. Twentieth-century revolutions and mass campaigns under Mao Zedong were undeniably 'hot,' aiming to stoke the fire of revolution and radical social change. Under the reforms following Mao's death, however, politics 'cooled off': the political system crystalized and the frenzy of mass campaigns cooled down. This was accompanied by social changes, including what can be called the rise of individual cool, defined by ironic detachment, hedonism and narcissism. The new cool society and cool persona find their architectural accompaniment in the *kongtiao*, the air conditioner, which has become a must for urban living, even in north China. The *kongtiao* is presented as an ultimately unsocial device, a machine with intensive energy requirements that dumps heat into communal spaces in the effort to preserve individual comfort.

## Keywords

*kang* – *kongtiao* – air conditioner – domestic architecture – Mao Zedong – modern China – political change – social change – climate – heating – cooling

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China, it would appear, is heating up. Indeed, the history of twentieth century China can be seen as one in which the thermometer was gradually rising. China has experienced the heat of revolutions, the fervor of mass campaigns, and more recently, the explosion of the free market economy, the rapid expansion of cities, and the fast-paced lifestyles they encourage. Modern Chinese society seems to embody heat, both literally and metaphorically. Not only has the economic focus shifted in the post-socialist period to the country's subtropical South, its economy has moved from agrarian to industrial in nature, and its population has shifted from countryside to city.

China has perhaps always been 'hot' in the Western mindset, both literally, due to the fact that foreigners were long restricted to southern ports, and figuratively, through the classic Orientalist worldview that saw the tropics as places of lust and degeneracy. Montesquieu saw Confucian ethics as condoning lying and deception, while Max Weber identified China's problem in its lack of 'cool' rationality.<sup>1</sup>

But the interpretation of China as 'hot' seems to have modern purchase as well. Numerous commentators have seen the word *chai* (拆, demolish) as the archetypal character of modern Chinese life, due to its omnipresence on condemned old buildings.<sup>2</sup> *Chai* speaks to the disintegration of both traditional physical infrastructure and ideological and moral anchoring points.<sup>3</sup> It seems the ever-increasing speed of modern life has seen the temperature of society rise so high that the bonds that typically hold a community together have dissolved. As Marx and Engels said 'All that is solid melts into air.'<sup>4</sup>

Society, released from the restrictions of socialist loyalties, has become more diverse, perhaps more chaotic, certainly more individualistic. The economy's energy use has leapt to such heights that China is now the world's biggest user, and power shortages have become a fact of life since the early 2000s, despite surpluses in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Contemporary China can therefore be read as 'hot'.

But it is perhaps more interesting to view it from the opposite direction: to see modern Chinese life as one in which strategies for cooling are of paramount

1 David Martin Jones, *The Image of China in Western Social and Political Thought* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 30, 119-121.

2 Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 21; Michael Dutton et al., *Beijing Time* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 10.

3 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 21.

4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: Comiso Classics, 2009), 45.

5 Elspeth Thomson, 'Power Shortages in China: Why?' *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2005): 155.

importance, and are in many ways what define it. This essay will argue that the cultural imperative in China has in recent decades switched from keeping warm, to keeping cool. This concept can be visualized through domestic heat arrangements: from a society based around the *kang* (炕), the northern Chinese heated bed, to the *kongtiao* (空调), the air conditioner.

Writing about the transitions Chinese society has undergone in recent decades and centuries is always difficult. Modernity is a deeply contested territory in Chinese studies, with different dates chosen and movements selected as its starting point. Some scholars have instead questioned the validity of the term, suggesting it is little more than the extrapolation of the specifics of Western development—industrialization, civil society, the rise of the nation state—applied to the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> New perspectives are, however, arising, which try to take a global perspective on modernity.

Wang Hui calls for a study of Chinese modernity that incorporates ‘interculturality’: one that finds both the typically ascribed passivity, but also elements of autonomy in China’s interaction with the outside world.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jason McGrath sees Chinese post-socialist modernity as an integral part of global modernity.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps rather than looking at economic statistics and membership in international bodies, a radically different approach is needed. Perhaps temperature can provide an alternate model of modernity: it is the strategies of cooling that provide the true insight into modern life. If heat (epitomized in urban life, industrialization and so on) is seen as an aspect of modern life, the call to keep cool can be seen as a defining reaction against it. A model for modernity based on temperature could perhaps provide the ‘interculturality’ that Wang Hui calls for. It need not ascribe superiority to any society (a temporal element—who started cooling first—seems unhelpful), but instead could look at independent and borrowed strategies of cooling. It could try to trace some of the ways the heating up and the attempts to cool down in response have manifested. This essay will use the topic of domestic architecture in order to look at strategies for heating and cooling and will argue that the move from the *kang* to the *kongtiao* speaks to more than just climatic changes, but rather characterizes something of the experience that China has undergone in recent decades and centuries.

6 Jones, *The Image of China*, 7; Theodore Hutters, ‘Introduction’ in *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 4.

7 Wang Hui, ‘Weber and the Question of Chinese Modernity’ in *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, ed. Theodore Hutters, trans. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 306.

8 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 14.

### 'Keep Me Warm': the *kang* (炕)

Strategies for heating and cooling have always been imperative to the development of society. Lisa Heschong speaks of the 'civilizing force of the warmth of the fire',<sup>9</sup> and it seems this quotation is particularly true in China, where it can be speculated that without the development of the *kang*, the rise of civilization in northern China would have been nearly impossible. While the climate of China has, no doubt, changed over time, the inhospitable nature of the north is undeniable, with extreme cold in the winter and harsh winds coming off the steppes. Homes in north China—regardless of the ethnicity of inhabitant—share far more similarities than those in the South; the climate reduces, it would seem, the room for innovation and individuality.<sup>10</sup>

The most basic dwelling is the cave house (*yaodong*, 窑洞, kiln cave or heated cave), which has been used in the Loess Plateau of Northern China for at least 4000 years.<sup>11</sup> The simplest above ground structures are rectangular buildings, with the door and windows on the south-facing wall, to take in the sun's heat, with the rest of the walls solid, to block out the wind.<sup>12</sup> These eventually developed into courtyard structures (*siheyuan*, 四合院), considered to be the most complete form of dwelling, as they provide structure for the whole of family life and can be adapted to local climatic realities.<sup>13</sup>

While these adaptations and uses of the local environment are ingenious, it seems that life in the north could not have functioned without the *kang*, a feature all three dwelling structures share. Heat from the cooking stove is carried through a series of pipes that run underneath a brick or adobe bed, which is called the *kang*.<sup>14</sup> The heat produced from cooking is therefore harnessed to heat this bed, which becomes the central point of most northern houses.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of variations of the *kang*, including running the flues through walls (*kangqiang*, 炕墙) or under the whole floor (*dikang*, 地炕), but the general principle remains the same. In all, the *kang* is a gathering point,

9 Lisa Heschong, *Thermal Delights in Architecture* (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1979), 12.

10 Ronald Knapp, *China's Old Dwellings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 224.

11 Jiang Lan, *Disappearing Architecture of China*, trans. Chen Fuming (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2009), 68.

12 Knapp, *China's Old Dwellings*, 167.

13 Deqi Shan, *Chinese Vernacular Dwelling*, trans. Wang Dehua (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2003), 6.

14 Qinghua Guo, 'The Chinese Domestic Architectural Heating System [kang]: Origins, Applications and Techniques', *Architectural History*, 45 (2000), 32.

15 Xuefu Wu, *Chinese House*, trans. Jun Liu (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2009), 42.

the centre of home and even community life. It was the place where guests would be welcomed, where groups of women would work, and the place where together, a family could survive the cold.

The word *kang* has great antiquity. A Chinese dictionary from 121AD defines it as 'to dry'. This suggests that the word was used by the second century AD, but Guo Qinghua argues that this source indicates a far earlier origin. The dictionary summarized words used during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Given that the Eastern Zhou Dynasty ended in 771BCE, Guo suggests that we can trace the term back at least this far.<sup>16</sup> The practice of capturing heat started far earlier. Neolithic building remains in Shenyang, northern China, believed to be from the Xinle culture (c. 5300-4800BCE) and those from a Banpo site (c. 5000-4800BCE) both have 'baked' floors.<sup>17</sup> It appears the floor was heated by fire before being slept on, a process called *zhidi* (炙地 roasted earth), which is possibly a precursor to the *kang* itself. Some insight into the *zhidi* process is provided by Tang poet Meng Jiao (751-814), who said 'No fuel to heat the floor to sleep, standing and crying in cold at midnight'.<sup>18</sup>

Practices for capturing heat, therefore started very early in China, and archaeological remains indicate the presence of structures we would now recognise as similar to the *kang* can be seen from the first century. Far earlier than this, remains from the mid-Neolithic Yangshao culture show that people lived in a cave-like *yaodong*'s with open hearths and fireplaces.<sup>19</sup> Strategies for heating were therefore of crucial importance in establishing civilization in the Yellow River region, and over time it came to take the form of the *kang*. The *kang* continued to be used throughout the imperial period and much of the twentieth century. It can be seen, for example, in Mao-era posters, where it is often depicted in interior scenes of rural life (see Image 1).

There is no equivalent to this in southern China, even though it also has an extreme climate in parts, with high temperatures, oppressive humidity and abundant rainfall. This prompted numerous architectural innovations, including raised floors, numerous small doors and windows to allow ventilation, and wide, steeply sloped roofs to encourage the rain to run off and to block the sun.<sup>20</sup> While it would be foolish to suggest that southern strategies to, for example, decrease exterior surface area would provide a cooling strategy comparable to a modern air conditioner, the point is that architectural innovations

16 Guo, 'The Chinese Domestic Architectural Heating System', 35.

17 Ibid., 36.

18 Ibid.

19 Guo p. 37.

20 Shan, *Vernacular Dwellings*, 8; Knapp, *Old Dwellings*, 227, 230.





IMAGE 1 This image from a 1975 poster shows a group of women perched on a kang, trying on shoes. Source: H80 The University of Westminster China Poster Collection.

alone were enough to allow society to flourish in the south in a way that would have been impossible in the north without the *kang*.

The *kang* is therefore both a physical device in domestic architecture, and a symbol of Chinese civilization. It symbolizes the communal, family-based nature of Chinese society, the interpersonal relationships established by the Confucian system, and the economic and social ties based on co-dependence and trust. Given that Chinese society has long been assumed to have originated in the north, the *kang* seems an appropriate symbol to substantiate Michel Serres's idea that culture and communication can be summed up in the injunction, 'keep me warm'.<sup>21</sup> It now seems that this has changed over the

21 Michel Serres, *Hermès IV: La distribution* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), 264 n. 1.



course of the twentieth century such that the cultural imperative is no longer to heat, but rather to cool.

### Hot Politics: Mao's Rage Bank

This change can be posited on both the political and individual level, hinged on the widespread changes that occurred after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. It can be argued that in the preceding years of the twentieth century, the metaphor of heat was still appropriate; indeed China's short century of revolution, lasting from 1911 until 1976 can be seen as a 'hot' period. The reforms reacting against this perpetual heating up, however, have been defined by the opposite: strategies of cooling.

It seems everything about the period 1911-1976 was 'hot'. Revolutions took place in 1911 and 1949 and much of the inter-revolutionary period was defined by war and struggle. The mass campaigns of the Maoist years emphasized fervor, collectivity and loyalty. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to comprehensively analyze this period, it can be posited theoretically that China's socialist period can be seen through the metaphor of heat.

Revolutions are always 'hot' affairs. Collective resentments explode in an orgy of violence, well-ordered paths of power are thrown into chaos, and zealous idealists foresee the overturning of power: in thermodynamic terms, great energy is released and heat dissipated in the revolutionary event. In analyzing the role of rage throughout Western history, Peter Sloterdijk suggests that revolution is a process of teaching the masses to externalise rage, rather than internalize it as the Church would have them do.<sup>22</sup> Once externalized, it could be collected and deposited in 'rage banks', which allowed individual rage deposits to combine and be directed towards the creation of a new society.<sup>23</sup> In reference to China, Sloterdijk argues that rage management was even more significant than in other revolutionary moments. Missing 'revolutionary energies', China had to draw on the 'collective fury' of radicalized individuals, which could be spread to others through guerrilla tactics.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that Mao's revolution was even 'hotter' than its equivalent in Russia. 'Fury' suggests an almost uncontrollable rage, a situation of 'absolute stress',<sup>25</sup> a concentration

22 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 126.

23 Ibid., 137.

24 Ibid., 168-9.

25 Ibid., 169.

of heat and intensity far beyond 'revolutionary energies'. Sloterdijk argues Mao carried out a 'deliberate psychotization' of the entire country, thinking he would have infinite credit in his rage bank if he could amalgamate rage, despair and revolutionary pride.<sup>26</sup> In a sense, Sloterdijk is suggesting Mao thought if he could get the fire stoked just right, it would power itself for eternity.

Thermodynamics, however, does not work like that; laws of entropy suggest that thermal energy always flows from regions of higher to lower temperatures, and in doing so, move from a state of order to disorder. Mao's thermopolitics can be understood in a number of ways. Firstly, it can be seen as a fight against entropy. Seen this way, rather than creating a society of psychotics as Sloterdijk suggests, perhaps Mao's true vision was for a well-ordered, socialist society. Due to entropy, however, new energy had to be continuously invested to prevent the inevitable decline to disorder (or for Mao, traditional or bourgeois values). Alternatively, constant revolution can be seen as an attempt to overcome the principles of latent heat, which say that large amounts of energy must be invested in order to effect a change of state. Perhaps the series of mass campaigns that ran throughout the 1950s and 1960s, most famously, but by no means only, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, were Maoist efforts to withdraw thymotic capital from the rage bank, and to invest them in ever 'hotter' cycles of revolution in order to bring society to the boiling point that is necessary for a truly new society to be constructed.

Hannah Arendt sees movement as one of the key features of totalitarianism, an extended project of total domination marked by constantly shifting networks of power.<sup>27</sup> While the application of Arendt's definition of totalitarianism (based on an analysis of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin) to China is not unproblematic, it is worth highlighting that this fluidity, this movement, at the heart of totalitarian power seems to be a perpetual feature of 'hot' politics in general. The concept of constant revolution is precisely aimed at preventing the ossification or solidification of the political system. Perhaps by keeping the metaphorical heat up, Maoist politics enable fluidity to be maintained in Chinese politics and society, keeping alive the possibility of revolutionary change, which seems to disappear once the temperature starts to cool down.

26 Ibid., 172.

27 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego & New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 56; Mark Bittman, 'Totalitarianism: the career of a concept' in *Hannah Arendt: Thinking, Judging, Freedom*, eds. Gisela T. Kaplan & Clive S. Kessler (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 62.

If totalitarian politics can be defined by its heat, authoritarian politics is absolute cold. Its ability to control knowledge production means it can control—or restrict—the terms of debate. This is precisely what happened after Mao's death. The debate on the Cultural Revolution and Mao's legacy were established very quickly. By 1981 at the sixth plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party, the Cultural Revolution was repudiated and Mao was deemed to have erred.<sup>28</sup> Little deeper discussion has taken place in official spheres; it is as if the era, once its historical narrative and meaning was established, could be frozen and left in the past.

Chinese political theorist Wang Hui argues that the Party had to stereotype the Cultural Revolution as a totality, in order to build its legitimacy on an opposing totality. The Cultural Revolution's command economy and anarchic politics were established as a disaster to be counteracted with the reform era's neo-liberal economics and authoritarian politics.<sup>29</sup> In thermopolitical terms, the Cultural Revolution's 'hot' politics and 'cold' economics were inverted, and replaced by 'cold' politics and 'hot' economics.

Cold, authoritarian politics is a politics that is finite, knowable, in a way that hot, totalitarian politics never is.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Deng Xiaoping's reforms intended to 'cool off' or stabilize the political system under the CCP, to end the constant flux of the Mao era. While he opened the economy to the market in order to build a new legitimacy for the party based on wealth creation, the political system was crystalized. Like a glacier, political reform in China creeps forward

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28 Communist Party of China, 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the People's Republic', Eleventh Central Committee of Communist Party of China, (27/06/1981), Online: <<http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/5089/5103/20010428/454968.html>> (accessed 26/11/2013).

29 Chris Berry, 'CinemaTalk: Chris Berry on Cultural Revolution Cinema', Dgenerate Films (24/08/2011), Online: <<http://dgeneratefilms.com/cinemataalk/cinemataalk-chris-berry-on-cultural-revolution-cinema/>> (26/11/2013).

30 While outside the scope of this essay, it could be interesting to look at the increasingly common use of self-immolation as a defiance tactic in China. Over 100 people have set themselves on fire to protest Beijing's rule in Tibet since 2009, and over 50 have self-immolated for other reasons, such as the destruction of their homes for development reasons or other local grievances. Why is the use of heat deemed to be such a potent weapon of protest against the CCP? Frank Langfitt, 'Desperate Chinese Villagers Turn to Self-Immolation', *NPR*, (23/10/2013), Online: <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2013/10/23/239270737/desperate-chinese-villagers-turn-to-self-immolation>> (accessed 26/11/2013), Jeffrey Bartholet, 'Aflame: Letter from Dharamsala' *The New Yorker*, (08/07/2013), Online: <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/07/08/130708fa\\_fact\\_bartholet](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/07/08/130708fa_fact_bartholet)> (accessed 26/11/2013).

and retreats based on the surrounding environment, but unlike the economy, which changed rapidly, the cool temperature of politics prevented any fast movement.

### Contemporary Cool: The Rise of the *kongtiao* (空调)

Contemporary politics is defined by the imperative of cooling, the attempt to 'cool off' after the heated mass campaigns of the Mao era. This cooling off had implications for the relationship between individuals and their society. While politics and society were intricately linked throughout the Maoist period, the reform era witnessed an attempt to wean people off politics or at least revolutionary politics. Rather than ideology, Deng Xiaoping encouraged people to 'seek truth from facts',<sup>31</sup> and instead of mass political campaigns, Deng's 'Four Modernizations' focused on modernization of the economy. People were encouraged to focus their energies on business, and a political apathy was seemingly encouraged; indeed, class struggle was declared over.<sup>32</sup> The heat which had been stoked throughout the Communist period was finally allowed to subside.

The rise of individual cool is also a defining period of post-Mao China. Jason McGrath argues that post-socialist China is characterized by a transformation from social and cultural heteronomy to a highly individualized autonomy.<sup>33</sup> He notes the rise of domestic and individual pleasures and sees anomie, hedonism and nihilism in much of contemporary Chinese culture.<sup>34</sup> These features mirror the traits that Dick Pountain and David Robins see as comprising a cool personality or cool attitude in modern Western society. They identify a triad of ironic detachment, hedonism, and narcissism as the defining features of the attitude.<sup>35</sup>

The economic boom has led to mass migration to cities across China. It has been estimated that 150 million people have already migrated, and another

31 Paul Bailey, *China in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 201.

32 Ibid.

33 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 22.

34 Ibid., 23.

35 Dick Pountain and David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 26.

300 million are expected to do so in the next 20 or 30 years.<sup>36</sup> Many of these people will have moved illegally due to the complicated *hukou* (户口) housing registration system, which is designed to prevent such movement by denying citizens access to education, healthcare, housing and other welfare benefits outside of their registered village or city. This lack of access to welfare resources is a crucial factor in preventing migrants from establishing true community bonds in the cities, and recent surveys have found that at least a third of migrants plan to eventually return to their home village.<sup>37</sup> Brutal working conditions, job insecurity, distance from traditional family bonds, and an inability to access what remains of China's social welfare system has resulted in the creation of a huge group of young people with little attachment to the society around them.

This development can be explained theoretically. As the market expanded throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it fundamentally changed society's relationship with politics and the economy. The market drives differentiation or disaggregation of society, as different spheres of relations are carved out.<sup>38</sup> 'Impersonal' relations become possible due to the abstraction of exchange, and economic relations come to dominate social relations.<sup>39</sup> This expansion of market relations into every sector of social life dissolved the system of social guarantees previously provided by the state, and in the pre-modern period, by the family or community.<sup>40</sup> The result is the rise of China's often talked about new individualism.

This individualism is not necessarily negative. While income inequality has skyrocketed in China, a large number of people are now enjoying more comfortable living standards. Just as some former Red Guards recall the Cultural Revolution fondly because of the freedom it gave them, so too many see China's economic boom as an opportunity to escape the restricting confines of socialist society and village life and develop a new persona in the city. Pountain and Robins see in the 'cool attitude' precisely this attempt to displace traditional family ties through the creation of space for self-invention.<sup>41</sup> The rise

36 The Economist, 'Invisible and Heavy Shackles', *The Economist*, (06/05/2010), Online: <<http://www.economist.com/node/16058750>> (accessed 26/11/2013).

37 Ibid.

38 McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 8.

39 Ibid.

40 Wang Hui, 'The 1989 Social Movement and the Historical Roots of China's Neoliberalism' in *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, ed. Theodore Hutters, trans. Theodore Hutters, (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 118.

41 Pountains and Robins, *Cool Rules*, 23.

of fashion, pop music, and contemporary art can all attest to the creative powers of the cities, spurred on by new wealth and a lack of fear of showing it. In a rejection of the moral attitudes of the Mao years, which denounced individualism and luxury as corrupt, bourgeois, Western values, the desire for personal comfort has become a crucial part of life for those city dwellers that have become the upper and middle classes. While Chinese citizens are, of course, not as politically apathetic as their government might like (as the thousands of protests every year demonstrate), there does seem, for many young people in China, more interest in pursuing 'freedom' through economic means than democratic ones. This is symbolized through the rise of the *kongtiao* (空调), the air conditioner.

According to Joseph Needham, crude forms of air conditioning have been around in China since the second century AD. During the Han Dynasty, a manually-powered rotary fan was invented. Needham quotes the source, *Miscellaneous Records of the Western Capital*, as saying 'The whole hall became so cool that people would even begin to shiver.'<sup>42</sup> Needham also reports that during the reign of Tang Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712-761), a Cool Hall (*Liangdian* 凉殿) was built in the imperial palace that had water-powered fan wheels.<sup>43</sup> While there are numerous references to similar air-conditioning devices during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), references seem to diminish after that, and the history of modern air conditioning in China does not seem to have received much academic attention. Their commercial popularity only began in the 1990s, and they have quickly become an important feature of modern urban life. In urban households, the growth in air conditioner ownership has surged, from 2.3% in 1993 to 61% in 2003,<sup>44</sup> and numbers from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics state that in 2011, Chinese consumers bought approximately 110 air conditioners per 100 urban households.<sup>45</sup>

As people crowd into the cities and huge skyscrapers are erected, having an air conditioning unit sticking out of your window seems to be a sort of status

42 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 4: Physics and Physical Technology, Part 2, Mechanical Engineering* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 151.

43 Ibid., 151, 404.

44 Michael A. McNeil and Virginie E. Letschert, 'Future Air Conditioning Energy Consumption in Developing Countries and what can be done about it: The Potential of Efficiency in the Residential Sector, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, (2008), Accessed 26 Nov 2013: [escholarship.org/uc/item/64f9r6wr](http://escholarship.org/uc/item/64f9r6wr).

45 Richard Dahl, 'Cooling Concepts: Alternatives to Air Conditioning for a Warm World', *Environmental Health Perspectives* Vol. 121, No. 1 (2013): 21.

symbol.<sup>46</sup> It suggests you value your own comfort and you can afford the extra energy costs. It is a declaration of the triumph of the individual, as individual air conditioning units are an ultimately selfish device: heat is extracted from the room, and deposited into the outside air, making the shared exterior environment even more oppressive and therefore less appropriate for communal existence.<sup>47</sup> This produces a phenomenon called 'heat canyons', where each building or unit's attempt to keep the inside cool creates waves of heat in the space between them, thereby necessitating the need for further cooling.<sup>48</sup>

They are, therefore, the opposite of the *kang*, which gathered people together, instead of sending people scurrying from the shared space into their individual flats. If they provide sites for people to gather together, it is in locations like shopping malls, the ultimate 'cool' sites, both in terms of physical temperature, and in terms of being the location where generation of teenagers—in China as in the West—go to construct their new 'cool' identity.

As cities get bigger, more industrial and more polluted, it seems the climate itself can become modified, turning all of China into the tropics. In the summer, 32 percent of Beijing's electricity use goes to air conditioning, while in Jiangsu, that number is closer to 40 percent.<sup>49</sup> Just as politicians struggle to 'cool down' politics and control an 'overheating' economy, so individuals dedicate themselves to individual cool: the *kongtiao*, it would appear, has become the cultural imperative for life in modern China.

That the air conditioner reigns supreme in Beijing as well as the more traditionally hot areas of China speaks to changes both architecturally and climatically. Homes, as we have explored, used to be designed in order to be as responsive to the natural environment as possible. This resulted in specific climatic variations in domestic architecture, such as roof shape and window placement. With the rapid growth of Chinese cities, and with it the requirement to house the millions of new urban inhabitants, huge blocks of flats have sprung up in cities across the Eastern seaboard, sharing an unerring architectural similarity. Whereas previously, architecture was determined climatically,

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46 Ibid.

47 Peter Lehner, 'In China, Air Conditioning Is Efficient Because of How It's Used, Not Just How It's Built', *Switchboard Blog*, (17/10/2010), Online: <[http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/plehner/in\\_china\\_air\\_conditioning\\_is\\_e.html](http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/plehner/in_china_air_conditioning_is_e.html)> (accessed 26/11/2013).

48 The Economist, 'No sweat: Artificial cooling makes hot places bearable—but at a worryingly high cost', *The Economist*, (05/01/2013) Online: <<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21569017-artificial-cooling-makes-hot-places-bearablebut-worryingly-high-cost-no-sweat>> (accessed 26/11/2013).

49 Ibid.





IMAGE 2     *This Mao-era poster is called 'Man must conquer Nature' (人定胜天), based on the slogan printed on the building, bottom left. Source: A4, undated, The University of Westminster China Poster Collection.*

now it is based on economic imperatives: the requirement to house, as cheaply as possible, the labour force necessary for China's growth. Rather than being responsive to nature as Chinese architectural tradition has been, these new architectural forms require advanced, energy-intensive technology to deal with the problems of heating and cooling. It seems in this way to represent another element of modernity, and one particularly pertinent to the Chinese example, which is the change in man's relationship with the environment. Whereas man was previously victim to the whims of the natural world, modern science has produced the myth that we can control it. During the Mao era, the slogan 'Man must conquer nature' (人定胜天) reflected the idea that just as the Chinese people would no longer be subject to the will of the elites, so too would they take control of the whims of nature (see Image 2). The environmental consequences of these actions, and the post-Maoist economic boom that put short-term profit motives ahead of environmental sustainability, are well documented.<sup>50</sup> They have resulted in the disconnect that our analysis of contemporary housing has highlighted. The heat of cities requires people to retreat to individual oases of cool in their individual apartments. This, however, both adds heat to the external environment, and requires huge energy consumption, thereby contributing to the climate change that will likely make the tower blocks even less appropriate for living in the future. Heat begets heat, which will necessitate further strategies for cooling.

The metaphor for cooling can, of course, only be taken so far. During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of reforms to both politics and the economy were instituted, and they cannot all be captured as strategies for cooling. If Wang Hui is correct, and coercive state intervention was necessary for the expansion of market relations,<sup>51</sup> it seems hard to overlook the violence at the heart of the economy. Furthermore, while the government may have instituted strategies for individual cooling, when individuals do not adopt the detached position expected of them, when they protest or agitate, the state is quick to use its continued monopoly of violence against them. Chinese social, economic, and political interactions still have deep elements of friction within them, which

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50 Jianguo Liu and Jared Diamond, 'Revolutionizing China's environmental protection,' *Science*, 319, no. 5859 (2008): 37; Scott Rozelle, Jikun Huang, Linxiu Zhang, 'Poverty, population and environmental degradation,' *Food Policy*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, (1997); Paul Harris, 'Environmental Perspectives and Behavior in China,' *Environment and Behavior*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2006); Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

51 Wang, 'The 1989 Social Movement', 117, 119.

should not be forgotten in the celebration of the rise of the individual consumer and individual cool.

This essay started from the assumption that existing paradigms for understanding modernity and China's place within it are insufficient. It has argued that analyzing changes in Chinese society through both metaphors of heating and cooling and physical domestic infrastructural adaptations for heating and cooling provides an angle through which to open up some of these changes. It has argued that Chinese society has moved, throughout the course of the twentieth century from the imperative to "keep me warm," whether physically, as embodied by the *kang*, or politically, in Mao's 'heating up' mass campaigns, to now a position where the dominant culture imperative is to keep cool. The government tries to freeze the political structure and cool down an over-heated economy, and encourages individuals to remove frenzy, excitement, and heat from their everyday life, producing the cool generation, embodied by the now prevalent *kongtiao*.

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