

China: Back to the Imperial Sense of the State?

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Historian Pierre-Etienne Will decodes the current official revaluation in China of some Qing dynasty officials as great patriots and paragons of bureaucratic ethics. It may be attributed to the resemblance between present-day political life and the context of fear and muffled political confrontations that characterize the Qing, contrary to the Ming.

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Wondering if and how China's strong political and administrative tradition connects with present-day political and administrative realities is an old question, for which fairly different answers have been proposed by political scientists depending on the current state of politics in Mainland China. For example, during the Maoist period there has been much "mandarin and commissar"-style literature—essays that posited a sort of parallel, or even continuity, between the Confucian mandarin of old and the modern communist commissar. A flurry of studies have also attempted to analyze China's "political culture" in terms of China's cultural traditions. In this case the focus was less on the devotion and ideological correctness of the communist cadre, supposed to have Confucian roots, than on the unshakable respect of authority attributed to the Chinese, the avoidance of public debate and conflict, the politics of secrecy inside the power apparatus, and so forth.

What has always struck me in such efforts is the profound ignorance of historical change they display. The Chinese past is, in a way, essentialized, it is used as an undifferentiated repository from which notions and institutions are picked up at random to explain present realities. In other words, the exact opposite of history. It is therefore as an historian that it has seemed to me worth it to revisit all these debates and statements. But there

is another reason, more interesting perhaps: this is the relatively recent, and presently very strong, comeback of tradition and celebration of the past in China.

This revival takes all sorts of forms. Despite the active encouragement of the regime, it certainly cannot be said that it is entirely engineered and monitored by the government. Take for example the recent revival of Confucianism and of the values it is supposed to embody. While on the one hand this revival is definitely supported, and largely funded, by the state – in stark contrast with decades of official rejection of what was called the “old society”, when Confucianism was ridiculed as an idealistic and hypocritical doctrine whose main rationale was to support the interests of the dominant class and when imperial institutions were denounced as a tool of the feudal class of big landowners –, on the other hand there is no doubt that this new vogue is received with much favor in large sectors of the society and that, whatever sort of “Confucianism” it is that we are dealing with, there is a true popular demand for it.

Now that China is well advanced in the process of joining the global economic order created by the capitalist West, but that its leaders insist that it *is different* and wants to remain so, it seems to me important to determine what exactly the Chinese today find in their political and institutional past that in their view can help them build a modern socialist state with Chinese characteristics (as the phrase goes). Then my other aim is to evaluate these claims in the light of what I may know of this political and institutional past—again, *as an historian*. And at this point I should make clear that what I am going to consider, mainly, is the so-called “late-imperial” past, that is to say, more or less, the last two dynastic regimes, those of the Ming (1368-1644) and of the Manchu Qing (1644-1911). Even though the Ming and Qing dynasties form a coherent historical period in many ways, in as many other ways they are strongly contrasted periods. And of course there have been profound evolutions within each of the two dynastic periods.

A Fashion Craze

Why are these contrasts of interest regarding our topic? The regime which is, in a way, rehabilitated in today’s China is the last one in the succession of imperial dynasties. One might almost say that the Qing dynasty is the subject of a sort of fashion craze—the so-called “Qing fever” (*Qingchao re*), which has been alternatively going up and down since the 1980s. Apparently one of the principal media for its propagation has been a variety of popular

television series which certainly did much to popularize about every aspect of the folklore surrounding the old Manchu regime: its emperors (and, of course, dowager empress), its ministers, its forbidden city, its men with shaven heads and wearing the queue (looking so little Chinese when you think of it), and so on and so forth. There have been many popular books on the Qing emperors and ministers, too. However, the ones I am interested in here are quite a special sort of publications, still aimed at the public at large, but written or edited by university professors and with obvious scholarly pretensions. For several years now these publications have been quite in evidence on the book market—and not just in academic bookstores.

They are anthologies assembling and commenting upon a sort of materials to which I happen to have devoted a lot of attention for many years, namely, the professional literature aimed at training the officials of imperial times and helping them in their everyday work. This professional literature is in fact immense, and still incompletely explored. But at least some of these books are relatively well-known to historians. They are often called (in English) “magistrate handbooks”, because they were aimed at the so-called “district magistrates”, in other words, at the local officials who were placed at the bottom of the formal official hierarchy and who were directly in charge of administering the populace. The first known examples of such handbooks go back to the end of the Northern Song dynasty (in the early twelfth century); and the genre then developed considerably in the Ming and especially the Qing periods. But almost all the handbooks published in the Ming had fallen into oblivion by the end of the seventeenth century—within a half-century of the dynastic transition—to be replaced by a new crop of titles, and it is among these Qing titles that the works best known today, and the ones most often reprinted, are found.

In Chinese the magistrate handbooks are called *guan zhen shu* (官箴書). Note that the word *guan zhen* means literally “admonitions to officials”; “official handbook” is a derived sense. And the fact is that, besides purely technical advice, these handbooks contain a quantity of considerations on personal and professional ethics; better than that, these considerations always take pride of place in the books: ethics and (in effect) a correct ideology come first, because they are the foundation; technique comes second, and it is understood that technique alone is not sufficient to ensure good government.

Even though this literature is replete with information of the highest interest to the historian, it makes rather austere reading. But apparently, it is believed in some quarters today that the imperial official handbooks still can be useful as a tool for edification. These works, which by definition celebrate good government in its traditional form—imperial, bureaucratic, and Confucian—have been recently anthologized in several books aimed at the general public, as opposed to an academic audience, sometimes—but by no means always—in the form of translations in modern Chinese; and these anthologies are expected to be widely read. In what way can such texts, which deal with a political and administrative system long disappeared, be of any use in present-day China? The answer is found in the editors’ prefaces and commentaries to several of these publications, and it seems to me worth it to give at least one example. This is Guo Chengwei (郭成偉), then a rather young and rather liberal professor at the China University of Political Science and Law (*Zhongguo zhengfa daxue*) in Peking, who edited in 2000 a fairly well-done anthology introducing large extracts from a variety of official handbooks, with punctuation and explanations, and accompanied by a series of essays on what he calls “the culture of handbooks” (*guanzen wenhua*).¹ In his preface to the book Guo, who quotes generously from Deng Xiaoping, resolutely places his effort under the current effort to build a “socialist state based on the rule of law”, as has been decided by the Party; he stresses the necessity of improving the cadres’ frame of mind, and recalls in particular the difficult problem of corruption, which as we know has become ubiquitous in the political discourse in China since the country launched out into a market economy (“socialist” or otherwise). At this point in Guo Chengwei’s preface, the old imperial handbooks are called for help because they explain how the officials of old learned “self-cultivation”, in other words how they learned, literally, to “restrain themselves” (*ziwo yueshu* 自我約束). I find it rather remarkable that an author dealing with the improvement and renewal of cadres in the People’s Republic of China and with what he calls “socialist ethics” should invoke the well-known Neo-Confucian progression, starting from self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身), continuing with ordering one’s family (*qijia* 齊家), and ending up at “governing the country” (*zhiguo* 治國)—and, beyond that, at “bringing peace to the universe” (*ping tianxia* 平天下). In short, a direct connection is posited between the traditional values extolled in the guidebooks for imperial officials since at least the twelfth century, and the values that the Communist leaders strive to instil into the cadres of twenty-first-century socialist China.

¹ See Guo Chengwei, *Guanzen shu dianping yu guanzen wenhua yanjiu* 官箴書點評與官箴文化研究 (A punctuated and commented anthology of official handbooks and a research on the culture of handbooks), Beijing: Zhongguo fazhi chubanshe, 2000.

To be sure, some authors of such anthologies insist that everything was not positive in the past, and in particular that it should be kept in mind that, while present-day cadres are public agents serving the people, the role of imperial officials was in the end to “oppress the people”. But this is not a universally shared view. Quite the contrary, it is remarkable how some famous Qing officials who in the good old times used to be branded as agents of the feudal autocracy and oppressors of the people have been recently reevaluated as great patriots and paragons of bureaucratic ethics.

What the compilers of the works I am discussing strive to illuminate in the legacy of the past is a certain style of governance that one might define as a combination of ideological correctness, technical proficiency, dedication to the people’s interests, and unshakable loyalty to the regime. As I noted, the sources used are mostly Qing sources, and it is a fact that there is a special quality in the sort of bureaucratic leadership advocated in the Qing—controlling, highly disciplined, and keeping clear of politics—which, it seems to me, explains its popularity today, in circles that clearly extend well beyond the propaganda bureaus of the regime. All the books in question raise an important question, which is to know how far the traditional Chinese culture of public service not only should be regarded as an original contribution of Chinese civilization and an asset for the present build-up, but actually *is better* for the Chinese than foreign-imported models. This is never explicitly said, but it seems obvious to me that the subtext in the considerations I mentioned before is that, now exactly like in the past, what is the most desirable for the Chinese is a mode of governance which is at the same time authoritarian, enlightened, and virtuous, and which is entrusted to competent officials whose only preoccupation is the good of the nation, whose actions are guided by superior principles, and who have been selected by the government because of all these qualities. In other words, a sort of autocratic paternalism, as opposed to a democracy where manipulative and incompetent politicians are chosen by an ignorant populace.

I am all the more convinced that this is indeed the subtext, because a majority of these anthologies of imperial official handbooks were published in the second half of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, in other words, at a time when the desirability (or not) of a democratic transition in China was debated in many quarters, both in China and abroad. This debate seems to have lost much of its urgency in the more recent years, but the Qing are still there—I would even say, more than ever. Most interestingly, in 2002 several scholars from the

People's University of China in Peking, which has been for some time one of the centers of historical research on the Qing, were called to Zhongnanhai—the equivalent of the forbidden city for the Communist leadership—to conduct a series of seminars with the leaders of the regime, devoted to the golden age of the Qing, i.e. the eighteenth century.² The big question was: how do you explain such grandeur, and how about the first signs of decay already in evidence during the same period? More generally, academic research on the Qing dynasty seems to have become a kind of national priority, and it is all the more generously funded since China is presently in a position to devote large amounts of money to academic research, and is willing to do so. For a few years now the government has launched a mega-project of writing what amounts to a new official Qing history, in the line of the so-called standard histories of old, but making use of modern resources.

And beyond these academic projects the “Qing fever” seems to continue unabated. One finds a quantity of publications aimed at the general public, usually closer to romance than to history, celebrating the emperors and statesmen of the Qing dynasty. The eighteenth-century Manchu emperors (Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong) are of course treated as superstars: they presided over an empire that conquered Mongolia, Central Asia and Tibet, today considered sacred parts of the motherland, and, moreover, an empire that was much admired in Europe at the time for its power and sophisticated organization. But interestingly, the less successful nineteenth-century emperors are still seen as symbols of the resistance against external aggression and internal rebellion, even though in reality they proved totally unable to deal with situations that were beyond them. In other words, the dominant emotion here is nationalism.

In the same way, a number of statesmen who used to be denounced in the PRC as Confucian reactionaries, as representatives of the landowning class, and as people who were not afraid to massacre peasants and did not hesitate to sell themselves to the foreigners in the hope of rescuing the Qing regime have now become eminent patriots and models of administrative authority and integrity. I believe that the cause for such a reversal is not just that what has been on the agenda in the official discourse lately is “harmony” (*hexie* 和諧), as opposed to class struggle, and that the emphasis now is less on revolutionary leaders and more on political organizers; the cause is also, perhaps mostly, that through their writings and

² See Guo Chenkang 郭成康 et al. (ed.), *Kang Qian shengshi lishi baogao* 康乾盛世歷史報告 (Report on the history of the Kangxi-Qianlong golden age), Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2002.

actions officials in the league of Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) and his famous colleagues, who engineered the revival of the Qing after the Taiping catastrophe, can be considered as symbols of this austere authoritarianism and exclusive devotion to the service of the people and of the regime I mentioned earlier, and are consequently proposed as models for the builders of today's socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Was There Such a Thing as a State in Imperial China?

This leads us to what I would call “the sense of the state”, even though there was nothing in imperial China like “the state” in today's acceptance, which is to say, as a legal (and abstract) entity distinct and independent from the government itself. In imperial times the word used in modern Chinese for “state” (*guojia*) meant, rather, the dynastic regime currently in power; or else it meant the sum of the political and bureaucratic institutions in charge of administering the empire in the name of the dynasty. In other words, we should be wary of speaking of “the state” in imperial China as if it were a nation-state in the modern sense.

But such shifts of meaning can be tempting, and in some cases they may not be without some justification. Take the imperial bureaucratic structure, the legal texts that described it, its bureaus and personnel, regulations and procedures, and so forth: formally at least, none of this had any existence outside the will of the ruler, since the emperor was supposed to sanction in person (if not physically “sign”) every law and regulation, every appointment and every decision. And yet, this structure always had a tendency to become autonomous, to acquire an existence by and for itself, or even to assert itself more or less explicitly against the ruler; to which one should add a long tradition in Chinese political thought according to which the state (that is, the government and administration) exists for the sake of the people, not of the ruler.

Two aspects illustrate rather well the notion of the bureaucracy as an autonomous body. The first is the notion of the bureaucracy as a salaried group; and the second is the development of what I like to call a “culture of administrative excellence”, which is particularly in evidence in the Qing dynasty. Let me comment briefly on these points.

Seeing the officials of imperial China as a group of agents who support themselves by getting paid according to a pre-established scale for the work they are supposed to accomplish—which is exactly what it was on paper—does not always fit with the views of

historians. For most of them in fact, this orthodox view of the officials as salaried personnel is purely theoretical, for several reasons. The most obvious of course is the abyss that separated the nominal salaries paid to officials from their actual needs, not to speak of their desire to leave office richer than they were at the beginning. For many historians, mostly influenced by the views of Max Weber, China's imperial bureaucracy, far from constituting a "rational" system like modern bureaucracies, should rather be counted among the so-called "patrimonial" states. That is to say, despite the apparent precision and rationality of the system as it was described in legal and, so to speak, "constitutional" sources, the reality was that the ruler was handing out "prebends" to his officials in the form of positions, and especially of territories to administer, from which they were more or less free to extract whatever resources they could. In exchange for this, they would have to do no more than deliver a minimal set of services, such as forwarding tax revenue in time and according to the amounts specified (which were not particularly high), ensuring social order, maintaining local tranquillity, and the like—and of course, supporting the regime in times of trouble.

It is indeed possible, and actually rather easy, to find facts and arguments pointing in this direction; but in my view things were much more complicated than that. For one thing, what I have called the orthodox view of officials as salaried personnel has always remained the norm, and what is more, despite all realities to the contrary this norm was deeply internalized. Not a few handbook authors from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—certainly a turning-point in terms of bureaucratic ethics—explain how they have managed to solve the apparently intractable problem of low salaries and meet satisfactorily their professional expenses and unavoidable needs: what they did was to authorize a low and perfectly controlled rate of fiscal levies "beyond quota" (or in other words, of "surcharges"), possibly taking advantage of the conversion rates between copper and silver money, or other such tricks—all of which, without being *lawful* strictly speaking, was considered perfectly acceptable and was indeed expected by the taxpayers. In other words, the logic at work here is the exact opposite of a patrimonial (or "prebendary") logic, in which an official is viewed as more or less owning his position and free to do whatever he wants with it; and indeed, in the discourse conveyed by such authors the civil servants' activity has no other rationale but a strict performance of the duties assigned to them by the state—and they were constrained by an extremely detailed set of regulations—while at the same time preserving their own financial autonomy, but no more no less. To be financially autonomous is of course a precondition to exercising one's functions independently of any pressures, therefore, *fairly*. In

other words, what must be avoided as much as possible is the confusion between public and private resources, which is, precisely, one of the hallmarks of a Weberian non-rational system.

The Sense of the State and Administrative Excellence

And it is from this that what I call the “sense of the state” follows: one is expected to serve the state (meaning more or less the dynasty and its bureaucratic apparatus) and the people *exclusively*, not to help oneself in any way, even though there is temptation everywhere. The problem is one of proportion, perhaps. The authors I just mentioned regarded themselves as model officials, and by definition they were a minority, perhaps a tiny minority. At the other end of the spectrum were all those who simply were not concerned with such principles—who had no sense of the state, in other words. But in between, I am convinced that actual practice at least approached these principles more often—at times much more often—than we tend to think. Still, I agree that it is difficult to make any definitive statement at any given time. What is needed is careful historical investigation, a sense of nuance and precision in reading sources, and first of all, reading as many sources as possible; and also, an ability to resist the attraction of grand generalizations, even when they are offered by people *in medias res*, that is to say, by the contemporaries themselves.

One major difficulty is that there is no absolute criterion to distinguish between being strict and responsible and being indifferent and corrupt. Everything shows that norms and perceptions kept changing. Behavior that would have been unthinkable at one particular time—or at least, that would have been kept concealed at all cost because, if revealed, it would entail harsh punishment and social discredit—could be seen at other times as perfectly banal and in no way detrimental to the reputation of those who indulged in it—because, precisely, everybody did it. In short, there is nothing more difficult than defining corruption, and therefore, integrity. Historically, this kind of change rarely proceeds through a sudden challenging of the dominant values; it goes through minute shifts, and this of course is where the problem lies, at least in part: one needed a lot of perceptiveness and clear-sightedness to become aware that the situation was gradually deteriorating, and much authority to be able to reverse the trend.

I believe that the overall contrast stressed by most historians, between the middle decades of the eighteenth century and the larger part of the nineteenth, is real. Whereas during the short but impressive reign of Yongzheng (1722-1735), and then in the first two or three

decades of the long reign of Qianlong (1735-1795), the emperor had the administrative apparatus relatively well in hand and was able to keep it more or less in a state of constant mobilization, during much of the nineteenth century the opposite was true. Despite much professionalism in some quarters and a few important exceptions, the dominant mood was one of selfishness and moral compromise, and mutual protection and complicity within the bureaucracy were pervasive. There were many reasons for this, of which at least one needs to be mentioned here: it is that the civil service was overwhelmed by money—or more precisely, by an obsession with money—to an extent, I suspect, rarely reached before. What we hear of everywhere, and quite openly, is influence peddling, the circulation of gifts, a general confusion between private and public resources, an obsession to accumulate as much revenue as possible in one's "official pouch" (*huannang* 宦囊) as long as one holds a position—hence the care with which positions were evaluated as either "fat" or "lean" among the profession—and so forth.

Now, what is remarkable is that, despite all of this, the combination of integrity, professionalism and commitment that had been championed with such eloquence by eighteenth-century emperors and model officials continued to be dutifully extolled by the leaders of the profession during the entire nineteenth century; and more than that, it was still accepted as the norm by the profession at large and remained the ultimate reference in the discourse. Should we speak of a sort of schizophrenia, then, or of universal hypocrisy? The question is of course more complicated than that, and it leads me to turn to what I have called a "culture of administrative excellence".

In its typical form, this professional culture, which is very distinctly Qing, took shape during the so-called "high" eighteenth century (the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns), and the best (if not the only) way to get a good idea of it is to look at the Qing official handbooks, because it is there that it is expressed in the most systematic and elaborate fashion.

What exactly characterizes this professional culture? First of all, it puts forward what should be in any system the highest ideal of public service, to wit, a militant devotion to the interests and well-being of the people—of what it would be anachronistic in this case to call the citizenry. We constantly encounter such phrases as *weimin* 為民 ("for the sake of the people", which was resurrected in a famous Maoist slogan), *jingmin* 敬民 ("respect for the

people”), or *aimin* 愛民 (“love of the people”)—phrases which, as far as I can tell, are virtually absent from Ming official handbooks, with, however, one important exception: the *Records of Real Government* (*Shizheng lu* 實政錄), a collection of administrative writings dating from the end of the sixteenth century by a famous official and neo-Confucianist named Lü Kun 呂坤 (1536-1618), whose works remained extremely influential in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and who was the first, at least in writing, to express this almost fanatical devotion to the people; and also to state bluntly that being an official means, first of all, to be made to suffer.

Integrity, which is not a specifically Qing value to be sure, also is an essential part of this culture. But more original is its exponents’ profound concern with the most concrete and technical aspects of everyday administration: first of all what we might call human resources management; then fiscal administration, public works, economic development, and famine relief; and perhaps most of all, the complexities of law and every aspect of the judicial procedure. The last two domains (famine relief and the legal disciplines) experienced considerable advances under the Qing, especially in the nineteenth century in the case of law and justice; and this was accompanied by a large output of specialized handbooks and guides.

There is no doubt that in actual practice administrative excellence as I have defined it was always very unevenly distributed across the civil service; and the sources suggest that in much of the nineteenth century—when government was much more difficult than in the 1750s or 1760—it was definitely a minority phenomenon, if not necessarily in terms of technical proficiency (there were large numbers of well-paid technical advisors to help the officials in this respect), then certainly in terms of public commitment (which defines the “sense of the state” properly speaking). But in the discourse it maintained its strength and appeal, as is suggested by the fact that the eighteenth-century “classic” handbooks were constantly reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, alongside more recent, but equally popular works that conveyed the same values. This proves at least, if it were necessary, that there existed a large market among inexperienced (and sometimes quite experienced) local officials for publications displaying the combination of ideological admonition and practical advice that defined this culture of administrative excellence.

The Administrative Elite

The men who embodied these values and at the same time devoted much effort at disseminating them among the bureaucracy at large—at making every civil servant internalize them, as it were—formed a self-conscious bureaucratic, or rather, administrative, elite. Two important features, it seems to me, need to be stressed here. The first is that this elite was composed of men whose position in the administrative structure was extremely variable: it went all the way from powerful provincial governors general (the so-called “viceroys”) to non-tenured county magistrates, and it prominently included a number of technical advisors (or “private secretaries”, *muyou* 幕友) who strictly speaking did not belong to the bureaucracy but were highly respected (and needed) specialists of the various administrative disciplines; and as one can observe in the many prefaces with which all these people graced each other’s books, the considerable differences of rank and status between them tended to be, if not abolished altogether, at least very much downplayed when they came to discuss their shared passion for public service and administrative technique. In such circumstances they regarded each other as simply “men with a shared purpose”, *tongzhi*, the word that came to mean “comrade” in Communist China. In this respect, and all things equal, we have something which is not unlike the so-called Republic of Letters in contemporary Europe.

The second feature is that this elite enjoyed the active support of the Qing rulers. Model officials were extolled by the emperors, and, conversely, the proponents of administrative excellence concurred with the emperors in deploring and criticizing, not without much rhetoric exaggeration, the moral and professional mediocrity of ordinary officials. What makes the Qing discourse on administrative problems very special, is that beyond the activism and political will that impels it we can detect a feeling of urgency, even of anxiety, in the face of the enormity of everything that needs to be done; and, again, this is found both in the writings of officials who claim they will never be up to the tasks assigned to them by their emperor, and in a quantity of imperial edicts and proclamations complaining that, indeed, the bureaucracy is not up to the challenge. Thus, until at least the death of the Daoguang emperor in 1850, the Qing emperors (who by that date had been around for two centuries) kept getting at their officials, scolding them, complaining of their selfishness and incompetence, ordering the provincial chiefs to mobilize everybody under them, and so on; and, above all, they kept reminding the bureaucracy that *they* knew everything about the technicalities of government, local or otherwise, so that it was impossible to cheat on them. In other words, the “sense of the state” as I have defined it was supposed to be something shared by the emperor and the bureaucratic elite—hopefully some day the entire bureaucracy. This makes quite a strong

contrast with the Ming, and it seems to me that it is in part this complicity between the ultimate holders of political power and a devoted bureaucratic elite that makes the Qing so attractive to the leaders of present-day China.

Different Approaches to Criticizing Political Power

It was extremely difficult to criticize the powers-that-be in Qing China. By definition the emperor, who embodied and to a large extent actually exercised supreme power, could not be attacked. Likewise, until political control was somewhat relaxed at the end of the nineteenth century, it was extremely risky to criticize the emperor's close advisors and favorite ministers—or else it had to be done backstage, and with extreme caution. In the eighteenth century the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors were in effect able to render any public show of opposition impossible, as it would be automatically regarded as a form of treason, even if it were not a direct attack on the regime (and in the latter case it would be ferociously repressed, of course). In particular, the Qing emperors prohibited in the harshest terms the formation among the bureaucracy of factions aiming at capturing political influence, or even power.

How can we explain this rejection of any sort of open opposition—which is, again, strongly evocative of today's China? While the Manchu rulers would not explicitly admit it, it is clear that, having conquered the throne as foreign invaders, they were especially sensitive about whatever might seem to question their legitimacy. But what they did explicitly give as a reason was the negative example of the Ming dynasty they had overthrown in 1644. The Qing emperors' argument was that the factional politics of the last century of Ming rule had fatally weakened the regime, and eventually brought about its collapse—a view that was actually shared by many post-conquest Ming loyalists—and therefore that *they* would not allow the same sort of situation to endanger their own regime.

Comparing political life under the two regimes is a fascinating exercise inasmuch as it introduces us to two strikingly contrasting modes of operation of the Chinese imperial system. It is not useless, in this respect, to recall that political modernity in early-twentieth century China had to define itself against a very special pattern in terms of the Chinese tradition—to wit, the Manchu-Chinese diarchy and the intolerant authoritarianism of the Qing dynasty. And it does not seem a completely pointless question to ask what would have happened if the regime that had to confront Western modernity from the mid-nineteenth century onwards had

not been the Manchu Qing, but the Chinese Ming, whose political structure and mode of operation were extremely different.

Why the Ming Dynasty is not as Popular as the Qing These Days

Ming political life is in several respects strikingly contrasting with political life during the centuries after. Still, we should not forget that the Ming regime was anything but liberal. Quite the contrary, the Ming emperors, each one in his own way, were pure autocrats, most of them were very stubborn, more often than not they were quite cruel, and in any case they hated to be criticized. And yet, criticizing the emperor was not an impossible thing to do in Ming China, even though it was always risky; and what could be criticized was not just the policies of the imperial government, or the actions of the officials, it could be the behavior of the emperor himself—something that would have been completely unthinkable under the Qing. There were some quasi constitutional reasons for such a situation. The Founder of the Ming dynasty, who did not trust very much his own bureaucracy, had enacted certain laws according to which anybody in the empire was authorized to memorialize the throne on any public questions, or even to denounce by name any civil servants who might have committed some crime or abuse. As they had been decreed by the dynastic founder, these laws could not be openly abolished by his successors. Still, criticizing the emperor himself was something else. Legally, only the members of the censorate were allowed to do so. Yet, as a result of a weakening of the regime's political control in the course of the sixteenth century more than one official felt bold enough to take the risk of sending the emperor a memorial that criticized not only his policies, but also his personal conduct.

Here a basic difference between the Ming and the Qing, sometimes overlooked, must be emphasized. The literati of the Ming were never denied the ideological dominance that had always been theirs: because of the education they had received, which distinguished them from the rest of the population, they considered themselves (and were generally considered) as the guardians of the Confucian orthodoxy embedded in the Classics—and the Classics had an authority and a legitimacy greater than any reigning dynasty. It was in accordance with such guardianship, and with arguments based on their knowledge of the Classics, that under certain political circumstances the literati could allow themselves to criticize the government, or even lecture the emperor. This was completely changed at the beginning of the Qing dynasty. With the help of some eminent Chinese scholars in his entourage, the Kangxi emperor was able to do what no emperor had ever achieved before him, namely, to become

himself the guardian of Confucian orthodoxy: from now on the emperor in person would decree what was orthodox, he would be the ultimate arbiter in scholarly debates, and in this way he would be in a position to lecture his officials and, beyond them, all the literati in the empire; and it is a fact that some Qing emperors, Qianlong in particular, had no compunction about doing so in endless edicts prepared for them by their literati advisors. In contrast, the Ming emperors did not pride themselves on any particular competence in such topics. And again, capturing ideological legitimacy at the expense of the intellectuals, as Kangxi and his successors were able to do, is something that cannot fail to remind us of more recent realities in China.

Because they were in a position to claim the ideological high ground, the literati of the Ming did not fail to get embroiled in certain ideological, or more precisely, ritual controversies in which the emperor's own decisions or preferences were harshly criticized by part of the bureaucracy and literati opinion. And since ideology and politics are inseparable, in China as elsewhere, these conflicts gave rise to violently opposing factions whose disputes extended to all sorts of subjects and whose ultimate goal was to control the central government. And thus it came that from the late sixteenth century onward and until the fall of the Ming in 1644 the empire experienced something akin to partisan politics, with one party replacing the other at some points, following a process that was not devoid of verbal or even physical violence.

But this pattern, in which the possibility of criticizing the men in power was central, did not mean that the sense of the state as I defined it before could not exist. Quite the contrary, there is no lack of information showing that local administration resisted remarkably well to the political trouble that pervaded the last decades of the Ming, not to mention grave social unrest and the threat of military aggression—in other words, that even without the imperial leadership and support I mentioned for the Qing the more committed and militant among the local government and gentry could achieve remarkably much in the name of a failing regime.

Finally, and importantly, the political conflicts of the late Ming were acted openly and publicly, and even the criticism aimed at the emperor was made known everywhere in the empire through the medium of the *Peking Gazette*, which from a certain point was left in the hands of partisan politicians instead of being controlled by the throne. There were several causes for this situation, the main one being probably the long period, between 1590 and 1620

approximately, during which the Wanli emperor (r. 1572-1620) more or less refused to invest himself in government, except perhaps in fits and starts, and allowed the factions in the bureaucracy to compete openly to take control of the government. The Qing, needless to say, considered such practices horrendous and outlawed them.

In short, political life in the late Ming was not only antagonistic, it was acted in public, and it had in fact a flamboyant quality inasmuch as it consisted in a constant exchange of equally violent, and more often than not outrageous, accusations and counter-accusations offered for everybody to discuss and comment upon. In contrast, political life under the Qing, in the eighteenth century in particular, was muffled and took place, one might say, under a cloud of fear: there were conflicts, to be sure, but they resembled conflicts inside the Party apparatus today—ending with the dismissal of some political leader under accusations impossible to verify—more than political confrontation in an open polity.

This last remark is important because it has sometimes been claimed that the flamboyant and especially open style of political life in the late Ming could have evolved into a sort of proto-democratic polity had it not been brutally terminated by the Manchu conquest. For my part I very much doubt that such a thing can be seriously argued, if only because the partisan politics of the Wanli period were only made possible by the temporary retreat of active imperial power, and were limited to a narrow sector of privileged gentry. Still, the possibilities for political debate outside the authorized channels were real, and it is not for nothing, I believe, that this episode in Chinese history is much less publicized in China today than the more stolid qualities of dependability and discipline of the elite administrators of the Qing.

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