The Constitutional Debate in Early Qing China

John DELURY
Graduate School of International Studies, Yonsei University

ABSTRACT

In the first few decades of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Chinese political thinkers engaged in a seminal debate over how to redesign the basic “constitution” of imperial authority. The pivotal figure in this rich argument was Gu Yanwu (1613-1682), who proposed a “mixed model” approach that would combine the strengths and counteract the weaknesses in the two rival systems for constituting political authority—the decentralized fengjian system versus the centralized, bureaucratic junxian system. This article reconstructs the main arguments in that debate, looking at how mixed model advocates differed from fengjian revivalists, focusing on the role and ideas of Gu Yanwu, but also drawing attention to their shared goal of using reform to strengthen the imperial state and the authority of the emperor. The concluding section shows how the consolidation of Qing ideological authority by 1680 brought a close to this constitutional debate, leaving it to be rediscovered during the crisis of the 19th century.

Keywords: history of political thought—China, constitutionalism—China, Qing Dynasty, fengjian, junxian, Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi

Constitutional Debate in Early Qing China

China in the early Qing period witnessed a remarkable outpouring of critical political thought, led by two of the “great Confucians” (da ru) of their generation—Gu Yanwu (1613-1692) and Huang Zongxi (1610-1695). Gu and Huang, along with a host of now lesser-known thinkers, produced landmark “statecraft” (jingshi) writings that were constitutional in nature, in the sense that they grappled with the fundamental principles involved in ordering the state (De Bary 1967; Kuhn 2002; Schrecker 2004; Rowe 2012). They argued with one another at a system-level over how legitimate political authority ought to be constituted, and left a fascinating trail of political discourse.

The richness of this early Qing moment in critical political discourse was inspired by the liberating effect that the structural failures and acute collapse of the Ming Dynasty exerted upon the political imagination of Chinese intellectuals. Similar to the profound intellectual reverberations of the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty, the demise of the Ming caused leading thinkers to question basic elements of the imperial system (Song 2011). This liberation was not only a mental one. In material ways, too, literati discourse networks were liberated by the fall of the Ming from the homogenizing orthodoxy of patronage by a well-centralized state, at least
until the Qing turned the full force of its attention and resources to “wooing the intellectuals” (Spence 1999, 58). At the same time, early Qing scholars—even self-proclaimed Ming loyalists—did benefit from a steadily increasing ration of Qing patronage and protection at the local and provincial levels that helped to subsidize their thinking (Struve 1982). It was the worst of times politically, but the best of times for political thought.

At the center of this efflorescence of critical political reflection was Gu Yanwu. His magisterial Record of Daily Learning (Rizhi lu), researched, composed, and revised from 1657 until his death in 1682, is the pre-eminent work of practical political reform thought from the late imperial period. Gu was also an archetypal post-Ming/pre-Qing figure. His mother committed suicide in loyalty to the Ming house and to protest the Manchu invasion of her native Jiangnan region. Gu briefly fought in the Southern Ming resistance to Manchu conquest, and was arrested twice on allegations of treason against the Qing (Xu 2006). He publicly threatened to commit suicide upon hearing rumors of a summons to the Qing court in Beijing, and he resisted full acknowledgement of Qing legitimacy until his death. On the other hand, he enjoyed—and actively courted—an audience of powerful Qing officials; he was quoted in examination essays and public writings of close advisers to the Kangxi Emperor; and he was highly sought after in district magistrates’ homes all the way up to Court salons in Beijing as he traveled about early Qing China working on, and sharing copies of, Record of Daily Learning. Because, by the 1650s, Gu recognized that the Ming was irretrievably lost, and yet held the Qing at arm’s length, he was inspired to ask the most basic questions about the ordering of imperial authority. The creative tension implicit in Gu’s peculiar position contributed to the depth and pragmatism of his political reform ideas.

In this endeavor, Gu was not alone. There existed a loosely networked cohort of scholars—many of whom had ties to Gu—who in the 1650s, 1660s, and 1670s grappled with fundamental questions about the Chinese political system. In particular, they debated the age-old question of how to balance strong centralized bureaucratic authority, associated with the ancient Qin Dynasty model of the “commandery and district” (junxian) system, versus responsive local governance, ensured in the even more ancient Zhou Dynasty’s “border establishment” (fengjian) system (Li Feng 2003, 143). The fengjian system was apotheosized by early Confucians, notably Mencius, as a prelapsarian polity where the early Zhou emperor or “Son of Heaven” (tianzi) enfeoffed local lords, who in turn relied heavily on clan structures to maintain socio-political order (Feng Tianyu 2010; Li Feng 2009). The archetypal junxian state, meanwhile, evolved in the kingdom of Qin during the late Zhou period, and was predicated on the central authority—in the person of the Qin king and his court—recruiting and appointing officials to serve in various regions of their realm as representatives of the central power (Creel 1964). By late imperial times, junxian had been institutionalized through a highly sophisticated bureaucratic system of civil service examination recruitment and structured rules such as avoidance (barring officials from service in their native areas) and transfer (relocating officials on a regular basis—typically three years). Yet central bureaucratic authority co-existed with the power of entrenched local
elites, who at times asserted themselves collectively through lineage organizations, keeping hopes for fengjian revival alive (Faure 2007; Szonyi 2002; Rowe 1998).

The long-running debate between the junxian and fengjian models was analogous to the argument in Western civilization, going back to the ancient Greeks, between the three basic “constitutions” of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy (Ryan 2012; Wang 2004). Just as in the history of the West certain periods witnessed an efflorescence of the debate between rule of one, of a few, or of the many, similarly, in early Qing China the argument between junxian and fengjian bubbled to the surface through the writings of the self-described statecraft thinkers.

The watershed moment that signaled the end of this fertile period of statecraft debate on the constitution of imperial authority was the Ming History Project, launched in 1678 with the announcement of a special nation-wide examination to recruit researchers for writing the history of the fallen Ming. The special examination successfully conscripted most of the remaining holdout “Ming loyalist” scholars, or their disciples, into direct service of the Qing state. Not coincidentally, it was around this time that the Kangxi Emperor achieved full territorial consolidation of the formerly Ming part of his empire thanks to the Qing victory over rebellious “border commanderies” (fanzhen) in south China in the War of the Three Feudatories. The writing of the Ming History, which commenced in 1680, was Kangxi’s parallel victory in the ideological realm.

After 1680, the Qing court came to play an increasingly direct, centralizing, and overpowering role in patronage networks (Meyer-Fong 2004). During the 18th century, unofficial political discourse would lose much of its edge, and philology displaced statecraft as the dominant intellectual trend until the governance and foreign relations crises of the 19th century (Elman 1984). Eighteenth century statecraft thinkers in the 17th century mold—like Chen Hongmou—are in a sense the exceptions that prove the rule (Rowe 2001).

This article sketches out the contours of the early Qing constitutional contest between fengjian and junxian visions for the empire, pivoting on the central figure of Gu Yanwu. The methodological inspiration comes from the contextualist approach pioneered by J. G. A. Pocock, which seeks to reconstruct transformative discursive moments in the history of political thought based on culling a wide range of contemporaneous writings (Pocock 1973). To borrow Pocock’s famous phrase, early Qing China’s “Machiavellian moment” turns out to be the emergence of a novel synthesis in the perennial dialectic between fengjian and junxian, what I call the mixed model approach (Pocock 1975). The nature and significance of the mixed model, advocated by Gu Yanwu, Lu Shiyi, and Huang Zongxi, becomes clear when their writings are returned to the original historical and intellectual context, and juxtaposed with some of the arguments put forward by fengjian revivalists such as Lü Liuliang and Yan Yuan.

By mapping out the points of divergence in the early Qing constitutional debate, one crucial area of agreement also comes into focus—the common goal of strengthening the state under a powerful monarch and talented ruling elite. Rejuvenating the imperium was the bar against which the various approaches to
constitutional reform were to be measured. Most interestingly of all, revitalizing the “great authority” (da quan) of the emperor was a central focus across the different approaches—even in writings of fengjian fundamentalist and mixed model advocates that have been labeled in sinological literature, somewhat misleadingly, as Chinese “anti-despotism” (de Bary 1967). Rather than falling neatly into the concept of “anti-despotism,” the writings of statecraft reformers were closer to a Chinese search for Leviathan—a quest that continued even into the twentieth century, despite what Peter Zarrow terms the “desacralization” of monarchy in Chinese political thought in the late Qing (Zarrow 2012).

**Mixing Models**

The most notable and distinctive feature of the early Qing constitutional debate was the emergence of powerful arguments for a hybrid system that combined the strengths that had traditionally been theorized as mutually exclusive political models, fengjian and junxian. The purpose in concocting this new elixir was to create a potion that would rectify the profound weaknesses in the imperial system made manifest during the fall of the Ming Dynasty. The most systematic, rigorous, and practical mixed model proposal was that developed by Gu Yanwu in his masterpiece of statecraft classicism, Record of Daily Learning (first edition, 1670, revised edition 1695). The most philosophically interesting mixed model theory, and the best known in English-language scholarship, was that put forward by Huang Zongxi in Record of Waiting for the Dawn (Mingyi daifang lu) [1662]. And the least known version today, despite being influential at the time, was Lu Shiyi’s Record of Pondering Distinctions (Sibian lu) [1661].

The most succinct articulation that Gu Yanwu provided of his mixed model approach is found in a passage from “Discourse on Junxian,” a short essay that he wrote in the 1660s. “If one knows why the fengjian system changed into the junxian system,” Gu writes, “then one understands that the defects of the junxian system will result in another transformation. Will it then change back to fengjian? The answer is it will not. If a sage were to arise, he would embed the spirit of fengjian in the junxian structure, and the empire would be well-governed” (Gu Yanwu 1983, 12). Although Gu is typically characterized as a proponent of fengjian-style local autonomy and critic of junxian-esque centralized despotism, in fact what he sought was a higher synthesis of the two. He sought to reinvigorate—not diminish—the administrative state (junxian) by embedding the spirit of devolutionary governance (fengjian) within it.

Indeed, Gu proposed an expansion of the government, with the important caveat that it should expand at the bottom, and shrink—yet become stronger—at the top. “From antiquity to the present,” Gu observed, “when lower-level officials are numerous the world flourishes. When high officials are many, the world declines. The road to its rise or fall is nothing but this” (Gu Yanwu 1996, 283). Perhaps the most important political reform Gu proposed in Record of Daily Learning was to strengthen local government by giving local magistrates more authority, status, resources and staff, as well as the option to be reappointed for additional three-year stints in the same county before being reappointed someplace.
else. Although Gu wanted these newly empowered county officials to listen more to locals (a fengjian concern), the central government was to retain the power to appoint, transfer, promote, or dismiss local officials (the hallmark of a junxian rather than fengjian system). Gu's decentralization of the so-called “four authorities” (si quan) over personnel, justice, finance, and defense was a means to strengthen the dynasty and reinvigorate the bureaucracy as a whole.

Gu’s idea to use the fengjian spirit in order to strengthen the junxian state also caused him to rethink the role of the emperor, or what he referred to as “great authority” (da quan), drawing upon three interrelated, and somewhat unconventional, sources of authority—secular, populist, and devolutionary—for revitalizing the emperorship. He argued for the secular and populist basis of the emperor’s “great authority” by insisting on the performative legitimacy of the sovereign. In other words, the emperor’s power was contingent on his ability to improve the people’s welfare and thereby win the hearts and minds of the public, as opposed to relying on a sacral notion of kingly inheritance. Gu thus defined what was often framed as a transcendent source of legitimacy, the emperor’s “heavenly mandate” (tianming), in the secular and populist sense of winning the people’s hearts by filling their bellies. He scorned those who interpreted the meaning of emperor (tianzi) literally as the “son” (zi) of a transcendent source of authority, “heaven” (tian). Instead, drawing on a populist vein in Confucian thought going back to Mencius, Gu criticized vain rulers who in the end only weaken the throne by claiming divine right to rule.

The prince is established for the sake of the people. Therefore the idea of “establishing ranks” (Mencius 5.B.2) is that the emperor is the same as the dukes, lords, earls, viscounts, and barons. His status is not absolute or without match. Salaries are provided in place of cultivating the land. Therefore the idea behind “creating salaries” (Mencius 5.B.2) is that the prince is the same as the ministers, grand masters, servicemen, and commoners serving in office. They must all work for their keep. Because of this, he who understands the meaning of the emperor’s rank would not dare exploit the people in order to increase his own prestige. He who understands that salaries are provided in lieu of farming would not dare engross himself on the people to increase his own income. Since the Three Dynasties, many rulers who fail to understand this and who humiliate and oppress other men, have appeared (Gu 1996, 257-58).

Interestingly, Huang Zongxi cited exactly the same passage from Mencius to castigate the vanity of emperors, on whom he blamed the ruination of the ancien regime. Citing Mencius on “establishing ranks,” Huang Zongxi argued that “in later times princes were arrogant and ministers servile, so that for the first time the rank of emperor fell out of line with those of the chief ministers, great officers, and scholars” (Huang Zongxi 1993, 100-1). Huang insisted that in reality “prince and minister differ in name only, and are in substance the same … If I [as a minister] have regard for serving the people, then I am the prince’s mentor and colleague” (Huang 1993, 96).

Huang and Gu agreed that an enlightened emperor, who properly
understood the secular sources of his “great authority,” would find his power and authority greatly enhanced by popular support. Gu further counseled the sovereign to understand the devolutionary logic inherent in his position as supreme leader over a huge populace—again, a typically fengjian concern. But Gu emphasized that an emperor who understood that his “great authority” was grounded in the reality that ruling over a vast empire necessitated delegation of authority, would find his power enhanced, not diluted, by proper delegation to subordinates and localities. Here again was Gu’s attempt to strengthen junxian, embodied in the authority of the sovereign, by drawing upon the spirit of fengjian.

Like Gu, Huang Zongxi in life and thought was both a post-Ming and pre-Qing figure. Born in 1611 to a father who served in the Ming, Huang joined the Southern Ming resistance to Manchu conquest, heading first into the hills of Zhejiang and then to sea (including a brief trip to Japan) in the failed effort to create a Ming state in the south. By 1653 he was back in his native Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, where he dedicated the rest of his life to philosophy, history, and classical scholarship. Huang had drafted a short collection of statecraft essays in 1652, which he never published—partly due to their rabidly anti-“barbarian” (i.e., Manchu) sentiments. A decade later, in 1662, he completed Record of Waiting for the Dawn, a longer set of short “discourses” (lun) on statecraft topics. The initial chapters are theoretical inquiries into the origins of political authority and the concept of law. Later chapters feature historically informed discussions of specific institutions and systems—educational, financial and military—and how they should be reformed in the present age.

Gu Yanwu received a copy of Huang’s treatise in Beijing, brought to him by a pair of Huang’s students (Zhao Gang 1985). In return, Gu sent Huang a copy of his own Record of Daily Learning, published in 1670 (this first edition was only eight chapters, the final thirty-two-chapter edition, published posthumously, was considerably larger). In his accompanying letter to Huang, Gu expressed his expectation that Huang’s book would someday have a great influence, writing: “Those who understand the affairs of the empire do not necessarily come at the right time, while those whose time has come may have no understanding. The noble men of antiquity wrote books to await the coming of a king who would make it his teacher. However, as the Book of Changes says: ‘When a series of changes has run its course, another change ensues. When it obtains free course, it will long continue’” (Gu 1983, 238-39).

Like Gu, Huang proposed a mixed model that would check the excesses and correct the weaknesses of fengjian and junxian. In one key passage, for example, Huang suggested reviving the Tang Dynasty system of semi-autonomous military commanderies along the empire’s bordering territory. The Tang court hoped that this neo-fengjian innovation would solve the typical junxian problem of weak borders. Huang thought it would be again useful in his own time to defend against aggressive neighbors. In the context of defending his proposal for a frontier commandaries system, Huang made a broader argument about the need to mix constitutional models. “The trouble with the fengjian system,” he wrote, “was that the strong devoured the weak, and there were areas in which the authority of the
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The emperor did not apply. The trouble with the *junxian* system is that there is no end to the ravages suffered by the border regions. If we wish to eliminate the defects of both and blend the two together, a system of frontier commanderies is perhaps the solution” (Huang 1993, 125-26—slightly modified).

Gu wrote in his letter to Huang that he read *Waiting for the Dawn* multiple times, and agreed with “60 or 70 percent” of it. Indeed, Huang’s treatise shares the same basic mixed constitution approach that Gu proposed in the *Record of Daily Learning*. But the other 30 or 40 percent of differences is also revealing. Huang proclaimed, “he who does the greatest harm in the world is none other than the prince,” and was severe in his attack on autocratic rulers like the founders of the Qin and Ming dynasties (Huang 1993, 92; 99-100). Huang also wanted local elites to exercise enhanced political power through the school system, and designed a plan to give scholars at court formal authority to act as a check on the potential abuse of power even by the emperor (Huang, 104-07; Jiang 2012). Gu, by contrast, frequently cast local elites in a negative light, as much part of the problem as the solution, and even referred to “gentry” (*shidafu*) as the “shame of the dynasty” (Gu 1996, 482). He was thus sympathetic to autocratic leaders like the Qin and Ming dynastic founders since they had used their power to rein in corruption and predatory behavior by local elites. Gu and Huang both developed mixed model approaches, but Gu leaned toward the *junxian* side in wanting a strong emperor who could restrain local gentry, whereas Huang leaned toward the *fengjian* position of empowering local elites to censor and constrain the state—both local officials and even the Son of Heaven himself.

Gu did not hear back from Huang. He queried one of the disciples who had given him a copy of Huang’s *Waiting for the Dawn*, writing: “I sent Master Huang a letter the year before last. I still do not know if it reached him or not” (Gu 1983, 211). Eventually Gu learned from Huang’s son that in fact his father had received Gu’s note, along with the copy of the *Record of Daily Learning* and another of his statecraft essays, *Discourse on Taxation* (Xia Xiaohong 1999). Although there is no evidence that Huang ever wrote back to Gu, he did quote Gu’s letter in full in a brief biographical sketch of Gu for his book *Record of Thinking on the Past* (*Sijiu lu*, ca. 1692-1693, Huang Zongxi 2002, 1: 393-94). Huang deemed Gu’s praise for *Waiting for the Dawn* important enough to quote it again in the preface to his last major treatise on politics, *Discourse against Heterodoxy* (*Poxie lun* 1692; Huang 2002, 1: 192).

Gu and Huang were not the only early Qing scholars reading each other’s proposals for how to infuse the bureaucratic *junxian* structure of the polity with the spirit of *fengjian* devolution. Around the time that the first edition of Gu’s *Record of Daily Learning* was going into print in 1670, he received a copy of the neo-Confucian philosopher Lu Shiyi’s *Record of Pondering Distinctions*, brought to Beijing by Lu’s students (Ge Rongjin and Wang Juncai 1996, 281). Gu wrote to Lu—most likely in 1672—to praise him as a “true Confucian” (*zheng ru*) who demonstrated the Mencian wisdom of “knowing when to serve” (Gu 1983, 170-71). As with his letter to Huang, Gu enclosed a copy of the *Record of Daily Learning*, inviting Lu to “make refutations for every point of disagreement, and send it back to the capital so
that I can make the corrections” (Gu 1983, 170). But Lu Shiyi died in his hometown of Taicang, Jiangsu Province, early in 1672.

By the time of his death, Lu Shiyi was a major figure in early Qing neo-
Confucian thought, of the brand traced back to Song Dynasty masters Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. Lu studied as a youth under Huang Zongxī’s teacher, the famous late Ming philosopher Liu Zongzhou, but he subsequently rejected Liu’s attempt to synthesize “the school of the heart-mind” (xinxue) and “the school of principle” (lixue) traditions. Instead, Lu became a leading exponent of Cheng-Zhu lixue orthodoxy (Ge Rongjin and Wang Juncai 1996). In 1661, just as Huang Zongxi was finishing Waiting for the Dawn, Lu published his major work, the Record for Pondering Distinctions, which he had begun in 1637, just before the fall of the Ming. As with Gu’s first edition of Daily Learning, a Qing district magistrate (for whom Lu was then working as a private secretary) financed the printing—prime examples of how local Qing patronage supported early Qing critical political discourse (Ge Rongjin and Wang Juncai 1996, 38-41). Written in the form of an exegesis on the Great Learning (one of the so-called Four Books at the center of the neo-Confucian canon), Lu’s Pondering Distinctions used that text as a launching ground from which to explore a wide range of topics from morals and metaphysics to statecraft and economics.

Like Gu and Huang, Lu was trying to develop a mixed model approach to the imperial political system. Lu examined the best arguments for the junxian system by the Tang dynasty scholar-official Liu Zongyuan, and what he considered to be the most thorough critique of it, by Song Dynasty thinker Hu Hong. He saw truth on both sides. Since ancient times, the fengjian order gave too much power and authority to local lords, whose rivalries ended up destroying the entire system—the centrifugal path to dynastic collapse. The junxian system, meanwhile, enervated everyone in the system, even the formally all-powerful emperor, who in the end was unable to contain social disorder—the centripetal route to imperial decline. Lu’s solution was to strengthen officialdom and strengthen local power-holders. “One who is good at ruling the empire should get rid of the shortcomings of the two while concentrating their strengths. While maintaining the junxian system of the present, he would revive the ancient peerage of the various lords, enhance administrative authority, loosen prohibitions, increase salaries, and extend the length of terms of office. There would be fengjian in actuality without fengjian in name. There would be the benefits of fengjian without the harm” (Lu Shiyi 1985, 183-84).

Cloaking his rather novel mixed model approach in the garb of antiquity, Lu suggested that the ancient Sage-Kings (Yao and Shun) who forged Chinese civilization had in fact managed to combine a decentralized fengjian system with proto-junxian administration—for example, by centrally appointing local men to local offices based on merit rather than birth. Based on that ancient precedent, Lu recommended reestablishing peerages filled by locals in each prefecture and district, but replacing “succession to one’s son” (chuan zi) with “transmission to the most worthy” (chuan xian). Peerages were part of a complex scheme Lu devised to re-integrate local “literati” (shiren) into the administration of the realm by
granting them titles, salaries, authority and offices—although he was careful not to concentrate all four privileges in any one position, thus preventing the creation of excessive local power.

Like Gu, Lu drew attention to the problem of the empire’s vast extent, and insisted that an orderly society had to be rooted in effective small-scale governance at the village level. “Ordering the empire must begin with ordering each principality (guo). Ordering a principality must start from ordering each village” (Lu 1985, 189). Like Gu, he looked for ways to strengthen the authority of local officials, and proposed extending district magistrate and prefects’ terms from three years to ten, and letting them select their own staff, while forcing clerks to change assignments every three years.

One important point on which Lu and Gu disagreed was in regards to the two competing models for maintaining social order and promoting community welfare at the village level. One model was the “ward and neighborhood” (baojia) or “community and neighborhood” (lijia) system of mutual surveillance, which primarily served the state’s interest in maintaining law and order, as well as ensuring a steady flow of revenue (Wiens 1976). The other model was a voluntary practice of creating “community compacts” (xiangyue or sheyue), which strengthened social order in the absence of the state—sometimes even as a form of mild resistance to state intrusion (Hymes 1989). Lu preferred voluntary compacts to mutual surveillance. In Record of Pondering Distinctions, he drew on his personal experience organizing a village compact to criticize other political thinkers who treated compacts in the same category as top-down instruments of the state, including not only mutual surveillance (baojia), but also community granaries (shecang) and community schools (shexue). Lu was adamant that community compacts should take precedence over these other kinds of local institutions (Lu 1985, 189).

Gu, on the other hand, strongly praised Song Dynasty reformer Wang Anshi’s “ward and neighborhood” (baojia) system and the Ming dynastic founder’s “community and neighborhood” (lijia) system, as means to maintain order and guarantee tax collection at the village level. Gu quoted approvingly the writings of his former neighbor Chen Mei (1580-1650), who defended these systems for enabling the district to control the village, for the village to control the ward (a “bao” of 1,000 households), and for the ward to control the neighborhood (a “jia” of 100 households) (Gu 1996, 286). Baojia and lijia helped centralized authority reach all the way down into local society—the ultimate goal of Gu’s mixed model approach.

**Fengjian Fundamentalism**

The mixed model theorists saw constitutional issues, including the authority of the emperor and the efficacy of the administrative bureaucracy, in practical and structural terms. They hoped their new synthesis could enhance the legitimacy and performance of the state at the local and central level. The prominent fengjian revivalist Lü Liuliang (1629-1683) presents a striking contrast. Rather than attempt to restructure and recalibrate the workings of the imperial system, he framed the constitutional question of fengjian or junxian as a moral choice between public-
interestedness and selfishness. Curiously, Lü was even more fixated on the role of the emperor, since in his view the difference between fengjian and junxian had almost entirely to do with the moral cultivation of the sovereign. Thus, despite being a critic of over-centralization and over-bureaucratization, Lü's concept of political reform was undergirded by an absolutist concept of imperial power.

Lü drew an absolute line between the ancient sage kings of the fengjian era during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties—whose rule, he asserted, was based entirely on selfless motives—and emperors of the junxian era that commenced with the First Emperor of the Qin in 221 BC. Ever since the reliance on junxian under the Qin and Han dynasties, he asserted, the basic motivation behind all statecraft was the ruler’s "selfish self-interest" (zisi zili). Any benefit brought to the people by particular laws and institutions was accidental to the junxian project of promoting the emperor's self-interest. It was because of this, Lü explained, that Song Dynasty philosopher Zhu Xi said the way of sage kings had not been practiced for a single day in over two thousand years. To defend junxian was therefore morally and intellectually inexcusable. Contemporary scholars (like Gu and Huang, though Lü did not name names) who argued that it was impractical to think the fengjian era could be restored were merely indulging the emperor in his selfishness (Lü 1995, 585).

Lü lamented that ever since the junxian order replaced fengjian, with one all-powerful leader controlling the empire, the proper relationship between prince and minister had been lost. Echoing the point made by Huang and Gu in their commentary on Mencius, Lü described how the emperor-minister relationship was originally one of near equals, more like two friends than a father and son or elder and younger brother, but had deteriorated into an absolute hierarchy (Lü 1995, 633-34). But Lü's solution to this problem hinged entirely on the moral transformation of the ruler himself. By educating the emperor to act in the common interest rather than out of self-interest, he would naturally treat his ministers as equals, and the empire would be well governed. And that, for Lü, was the meaning of fengjian.

Like Gu and Huang, Lü was briefly involved in the Southern Ming resistance. Unlike them, he capitulated early on to the pressures and temptations of an official career in the Qing state, testing successfully for the county-level licentiate (xiucai) degree in 1653 and then studying for the provincial examination. Lü met Huang in this period, and hired him to tutor his sons. But then in the mid-1660s, Lü reverted rather suddenly to uncompromising Ming loyalism, even giving up his degree in 1666 (Fisher 1977-1978). Lü and Huang had a falling out, caused in part by Lü's disdain for Huang's drift toward accommodation of the Qing order (philosophical differences were as important—like Lu Shiyi, Lü adopted Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy whereas Huang continued his teacher Liu Zongzhou's attempt to combine Cheng-Zhu lixue teachings with Wang Yangming's xinxue approach) (Fisher 1984).

The irony of Lü's career—an irony typical of early Qing political thought—was that throughout this time, including after he renounced his own degree and criticized others as collaborators, Lü made his living as a publisher of study guides for the imperial examinations, in other words, aiding and abetting the next
generation of Qing scholar-officials. Given his professional success as a publisher, it is perhaps not surprising that Lü illustrated his point about the primacy of “correcting the heart-mind” of the emperor with a metaphor befitting his occupation as printing house owner. The ruler’s heart-mind is like the woodblock of the world, Lü wrote in a diatribe against the imperial self-interest inherent in junxian. To transform the empire, one must correct the heart of the ruler, as Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi taught. If, instead, one discusses reform of institutions, rites, policies, punishments, finance, and appointments (like the mixed model theorists tended to do), while ignoring the moral transformation of the ruler, it was like trying to print an accurate text from uncorrected blocks (Lü 1995, 392-93). For Lü, fengjian was a metonym for the political manifestation of the ancient rulers’ moral perfection, rather than a historical or theoretical arrangement of political authority in offices and institutions to be adapted to current conditions. In seeking to bring back fengjian, Lü hoped for a magic bullet to revive the moral charisma of the Son of Heaven and restore moral order in the Empire.

Another important early Qing fengjian restorationist was the iconoclastic scholar Yan Yuan (1635-1704). In terms of Confucian ideology, Yan’s evolution led him in the opposite direction of Lü Liuliang and Lu Shiyi—he began as an orthodox follower of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian teachings, but then switched to the so-called “utilitarian” (gongli) school pioneered by Song Dynasty thinkers Ye Shi and Chen Liang. One position that Yan did not change, however, was his fervent commitment to radical fengjian ideals. As he explained in correspondence with Lu Shiyi in the years before Lu’s death in 1672, Yan considered junxian to be a violation of “the way of the true king” (Yan Yuan 1987, 119).

“The Kingly Way” (Wang dao), in fact, was the title of Yan’s first major treatise on politics when he began work on it in 1658. He substantially revised “The Kingly Way” in subsequent years, and published the result in 1689 under the new title “On the Preservation of Order” Cun zhi pian, complementing his 1669 essays “On the Preservation of Learning” and “On the Preservation of Human Nature” (Chen Shanbang 2004, 80, 282). In “Preservation of Order,” Yan called for a full restoration of the fengjian-era political, economic and intellectual order during China’s ancient Three Dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), including the so-called “well field” (jingtian) land system, according to which each farming family received an individual portion of land to sustain themselves, and then collectively worked a shared plot of “public land” (gongtian) with fellow villagers (Yan 1987, 103). Whereas Lu Shiyi looked for the strengths and weaknesses in the best argument for junxian and the best argument for fengjian, Yan thought, like Lü Liuliang, that defending junxian was morally depraved. He considered the most famous piece of junxian apologia, written by Liu Zongyuan during the Tang Dynasty, to be an act of malevolence in the annals of political thought (Yan 1987, 113).

Yan’s “utilitarian” bent, however, led him to a more practical approach to fengjian revival than Lü Liuliang. Some of Yan’s most interesting arguments in favor of fengjian, for example, dealt with land reform, a major priority for the new Qing rulers. In south China, excessive rents on private land and corrupt practices in the use of public land were pressing economic and political dilemmas. At the northern
end of the empire, the Qing state was struggling to put abandoned land and fallow fields back into productivity in order to generate more tax revenues. The court had parceled out some 150,000 hectares of land to members of the Eight Banner military organization created by the Manchus in the late 16th century (Elliott 2001, 191-97). But much arable land, albeit poor in quality, remained unclaimed. An official estimate in 1652 calculated annual tax deficits due to unreclaimed land at 4 million taels (Wakeman 1985, 2: 919). Even for land that had been resettled, the problem was that reclamation was capital intensive and slow to turn profits. Settlers needed assistance with tools, work-animals, engineering, and hydraulics, not to mention time to make abandoned land productive once again. But the state wanted to rapidly generate revenues by increasing the tax rolls.

Mixed model theorists paid close attention to the land question, and looked upon the unclaimed lands in the north as a rare chance to implement a modified version of well fields associated with the fengjian era, without proposing an empire-wide reversion to the well field system in toto. Gu Yanwu for example saw the empty borderlands as a chance to create “an order to last for centuries” by equalizing land ownership (Gu 1996, 358). Lu Shiyi, in typical mixed model fashion, criticized those who made simplistic calls for well-field revival, since it presupposed state ownership of the land, something that had not existed since before the Qin dynasty. But Lu allowed for one exception: well fields should be created in the wastelands left over from the devastation caused by Ming collapse and Qing conquest (Lu 1985, 197).

Yan Yuan on the other hand argued in favor of full-scale reversion to the well field system, and pointed to the Manchus’ appropriation of land for Banner households as proof that land could be redistributed without creating rebellion and chaos. “If we discuss the matter in terms of real circumstances, then who created disorder when our dynasty seized possession of half of the capital region?” (Yan 1987, 104). If the Qing could dispossess people of their land and give it to conquering Manchus, then they could presumably just as easily take it from private hands and redistribute it on an equitable basis. Critics of well field reform argued that population increases made it impossible to do what the ancients had done, but Yan’s rebutted them by pointing to the “20 or 30 percent of land not under cultivation” (Yan 1987, 104). It was precisely this kind of argument that Huang Zongxi, who thought well field revival was impractical, derided in Waiting for the Dawn. “These people seem to regard the massacre of the people as something fortunate, because this makes it possible for them to advance their own projects,” Huang wrote scathingly (Huang 2002, 1: 25).

**Ming History and the End of Constitutional Debate**

In early 1678, the court of the Kangxi Emperor announced a one-time, empire-wide special examination in search of scholars who could demonstrate “breadth and erudition in learning and letters” (boxue hongci). The examination itself was held early the following year in Beijing, and was carefully designed to serve key symbolic and practical purposes for the Qing state. The court’s hope was that eminent scholars, like Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi, who had maintained a certain distance
from the regime, would acknowledge the Qing's cultural legitimacy by taking the examination. In exchange, they would gain editorial control over the writing of the official history of the Ming Dynasty. At the same time, talented men from the younger generation would be selected to staff, research, and write the Ming History. By recruiting scholars from the lower Yangtze River region, the dynasty hoped to draw more widely on the literary and administrative talent concentrated in the wealthy, well-educated delta area. The attempt to recruit Gu Yanwu is illustrative of how the special examination co-opted the statecraft scholarly community, and closed its distance from the regime. Without that distance, the next generation of thinkers abandoned the rich 17th century constitutional debate carried out by their teachers and mentors.

The Manchus had hoped to start the writing of the official history of the Ming Dynasty, symbolic of their own legitimacy as its successors, as early as 1645, just after taking control of Beijing, but those efforts were continually frustrated in the decades that followed (Struve 1982, 239-44). In 1671, the new Chancellor of the Hanlin Academy, Xiong Cili, made another push at the idea, and asked his protégé Xu Qianxue to invite Xu's uncle, Gu Yanwu, to a banquet in Beijing to float the idea. Gu told Xiong it was premature because the factional divisions of the late Ming period had not yet dissipated, and thus qualified historians like him were not yet willing to cooperate in writing the Ming History. Any attempt to write the dynastic history would inevitably fall into the trap of representing one partisan account against the other. Indeed, around the time of his meeting with Xiong, Gu was complaining in the Record of Daily Learning about biased, partisan histories being written of the late Ming period. “It is because of this that the debate over the dynasty is unsettled, and posterity will have a hard time trusting history,” he commented (Gu 1996, 646). According to Gu, he convinced Xiong to put his idea on hold (Gu 1983, 196).

Gu presumably still thought it was a bad idea in 1678, and when rumors reached him that his name had been put on the list for special invitation to sit for the special examination, he wrote to one of the directors of the exam and explained that if forced to answer a summons to court, he would slit his own throat. The Qing official to whom he wrote (Ye Fang'ai) was close to his nephews, who were themselves rising stars in the Kangxi court. In other words, even in refusing to serve the Qing, Gu relied on his political ties to the state. In his letter, Gu justified his refusal to take the examination by citing the oath he swore as his mother lay dying from her refusal to eat out of loyalty to the fallen Ming, when she made him promise he would never serve any dynasty other than the Ming. Gu was carefully invoking the priority of filial obligation before public service—a principle generally granted in Confucian theory. It was his mother's dying wish that put Gu under special constraints. But he explicitly granted that such constraints did not apply to all men of his generation, let alone younger scholars. “Everyone else can serve, but not me,” Gu explained (Gu 1983, 52). In a separate letter to his disciple Pan Lei, who opted to take the special examination, Gu quoted a line from the Book of Changes that “the way of the gentleman is sometimes to withdraw and sometimes to go forward.” Then, again citing his mother's dying commandment, he added, “My
situation is not like others” (Gu 1983, 77).

After Gu’s suicide threat, the court backed down, sparing him an invitation. Yet he ended up intimately involved in the project, short of direct participation. Gu claimed to know at least half of the men who sat for the special examination, and actively corresponded with members of the editorial board of the Ming History project, offering historiographical advice and lobbying for his mother’s inclusion in the section on virtuous women (Delury 2007, 104). Gu was closely connected to the director-general of the project, chaired first by his nephew Xu Yuanwen from 1679-1682, followed by his other nephew Xu Qianxue from 1682-1689 (Struve 1982). In 1680 Gu formally addressed a “Letter to Various Gentlemen of the Historiography Bureau,” in which he praised their empire-wide search for sources on Ming history. “The draft edict that Hanlin academicians compile books in the Hanlin Academy and that the writings of the entire dynasty be submitted to the staff of the history project is a great blessing indeed,” Gu declared (Gu 1983, 53). Huang Zongxi’s case was similar to Gu’s. He too was given special dispensation to avoid taking the examination (Wilson 1994). But his disciple Wan Sitong not only took the test, he emerged as one of the leading authors of the Ming History (Zhu Duanqiang 2004). Huang advised his student Wan and other members of the project, much as Gu encouraged his disciple Pan Lei and others.

Both Gu and Huang were able to maintain a certain critical distance from the Qing all the way until their deaths. It was in the space opened up by that unique status as “remnants” (yimin) of the preceding dynasty that they—along with Lu Shiyi, Lü Liuliang, Yan Yuan, and others—were inspired to rethink the basic constitutional elements of the late imperial order. However, after the 1679 special examination drew their disciples into direct government service, and as patronage coming from the center grew through the late Kangxi years and into the 18th century, that space for a constitutional debate shrank, and even disappeared.

**Conclusion**

In reconstructing the contours of early Qing constitutional debate, and identifying the Ming History project as a marker of its demise, we should be careful not to draw that line too definitively. Statecraft writing did not suddenly cease altogether. One notable example of a thinker who began developing his political critique after 1679 was the essayist Tang Zhen (1630-1704), who echoed the themes of both fengjian revivalists and mixed model theories in his trenchant attacks on bureaucratic mismanagement at the local level and self-interestedness of the court, which he combined with a faith that political salvation would only come under the auspices of an enlightened monarch.

Tang was born in Sichuan Province in 1630, and joined in the scramble for examination success and a government post in the early days of the Qing. He was fortunate to be posted as magistrate to a district in Shanxi Province in 1657, even though he had only just passed the examination for the provincial juren degree, but he abruptly left government after serving less than a year. Upon retirement, he chose to settle in Jiangsu, rather than return to his native Sichuan. In fact, he moved to a town not far from Gu Yanwu’s native Kunshan—although by that time
Gu had relocated to north China, and the two never met. Tang lived in relative poverty and obscurity, but he left behind a book of reflections on political, social, and economic issues that eventually became recognized as a classic. It began as a slim volume of a dozen essays called *Hengshu* (A Book of Judgments), which Tang finished in 1679. Over the years, he revised and expanded it into close to a hundred short pieces that became known as *Qianshu* (Hidden Writings), published posthumously by his son-in-law in 1704 (Gernet 1991; Gernet 1981). Gu Yanwu's disciple Pan Lei wrote a preface in which he praised Tang's writing, despite not knowing the author well (Tang 1963, 5). But it was not until the return of statecraft reformism in the 19th century that Tang was really “discovered,” most influentially, when Wei Yuan chose twenty-three of the vivid essays from *Hidden Writings* for inclusion in the widely read *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* (Anthology of Statecraft Writings from Our Dynasty, 1826). Tang's popularity surged again toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, when political reformers were in search of Chinese roots to their ideas. A kind of canonization occurred when the influential 20th century scholar Xiao Gongquan classed Tang along with Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, Wang Fuzhi, and Lü Liuliang as the five major “critics of despotism” (Xiao Gongquan 1980, 566).

In *Hidden Writings*, Tang did not directly broach the debate between *junxian* and *fengjian*. In his biting criticism of the centralized bureaucracy, however, he sounded like a critic of *junxian*, such as when he wrote tartly: “Everyone thinks it is the people who are hard to govern. They fail to realize what is difficult to govern is not the people, but rather the officials” (Tang Zhen 1963, 154). Raising another classic attack on the *junxian* system for alienating officialdom from local people and society, he described the mentality of centrally appointed local officials as no different from travelers at an inn. “The land is not my property, what is in the treasury is not my money, and the people are not my clan or party—what has any of this to do with me!” Tang described them saying to themselves (Tang 1963, 154).

Perhaps Tang was closest to Lü Liuliang's morally charged view that selfish *junxian* era emperors were the source of all the empire's troubles, and, therefore, virtuous emperors in a neo-*fengjian* future could set things right. This idea emerges out of Tang's fascinating essay, “A Conversation at Home” (*Shiyu*). Writing in a colloquial first-person style, Tang describes himself enjoying a dinner of fried fish and wine with his wife, daughter, and concubine, during which he suddenly loses himself in meditation on the injustice of dynastic conquest. He bemoans having no one with whom to discuss his “shocking” ideas, but—in a fleeting glimpse of how marital relations could work in late imperial China—his wife invites him to reveal his thoughts to her. Tang's thesis is indeed rather startling. Presumably familiar with the massacres in nearby towns like Yangzhou and Jiading during the Manchu conquest in 1645, Tang, who does not dispute the legitimacy of the Manchu Qing state, concludes that every dynastic transition since the rise of the Qin and the *junxian* model has probably been much the same. “It was truly benevolent of the Great Qing to take the empire. Indeed, since the Qin dynasty, every king and emperor has been a criminal,” he tells her (Tang 1963, 196). His wife seems perfectly able to handle the “shock” of his argument, and comes back with a rather
“modern” question—Was it really any better, she asks, back in the fengjian days preceding the Qin? Tang admits that even the ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun had no choice but to kill murderers and enemies in battle, but they did not ruin whole villages, create a flood of refugees, or massacre the populations of cities that resisted, and they were morally repulsed by the violence they were forced to commit. Every emperor since the Qin, however, delights in the pleasures of ruling over the empire even after spilling so much blood to acquire it. “Many hands do the killing, but in reality it is done by the one great hand of the emperor,” he tells her. The emperor should treat the empire like a concubine who raises another’s son as her own. But instead, he is worse than a murderer, who at least in accepting the death penalty can compensate for his crime (Tang 1963, 196-97).

Tang traces the source of everything that has gone wrong since the Qin Dynasty—but also the possibility for everything to be put right in the future—to one man, the emperor. If the emperor would only “follow the way” (you dao), Tang assures his readers in another essay from Hidden Writings, then officials will stop oppressing the people, who will in turn be able to return to their lives pursuing contentment and avoiding misery (Tang 1963, 66).

Tang’s critique was no less stinging than that of the mixed model advocates and fengjian revivalists who came before him. But already in his writings, the systematic, constitutional reform language of junxian versus fengjian is receding. And Tang’s essays were not part of a broader discussion—unlike the statecraft writings of Gu, Huang, Lu, Yan, and Lü, who knew one another and were known by the Qing court. As Tang was working on Hidden Writings in the 1680s and 1690s, many of the best minds in the empire were busy writing the Ming History, not completed until 1724, or would participate in a series of large-scale imperial scholarly projects in the early 17th century like the Da Qing yitong zhi (Comprehensive Qing Gazetteer), Gujin tushu jicheng (Complete Collection of Books and Illustrations Ancient and Modern), and Kangxi zidian (Kangxi Dictionary).

By the start of the 18th century, bold statecraft arguments for restoring fengjian or devising some fengjian-junxian hybrid became few and far between. The Qing had firmly consolidated power over an expansive territorial empire and vibrant early modern economy. The Qing court was also consolidating authority in the realm of ideas—by supplying patronage to scholars and enforcing orthodoxy over ideological questions. Political thinkers turned from fundamental, constitutional questions about the system itself to functional topics in making the system work, and the scholarly community turned from “statecraft” discussion of politics and economics to the scholastic, textual concerns of the “empirical research” (kaozheng) movement that came to dominate the Qianlong period.

We are left, then, with this wonderful outpouring of critical Chinese political thought in the latter 17th century, when the basic constitution of the empire was called into question and subjected to diverse viewpoints. This period and its representative thinkers have been lauded as the golden age of “critics of despotism” (de Bary 1967). But one of the ironies that emerges from mapping out some of the arguments over fengjian and junxian is that the various reformers all
wanted a strong emperor—they just had very different ideas about how to get him, and what he should do once in place. Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, Tang Zhen, and others may have been critics of despotism, but they were quite authoritarian ones. This was partly a legacy of the lesson of the decline and fall of the Ming Dynasty, and partly due the perennial soft spot Chinese political theory had for a wise all-powerful ruler. Not until the center's hold started to slip in the 19th century would constitutional questions be raised again, and only in the 20th century would the "enlightened authoritarian" tendency in Chinese political thinking begin to be called into question (Whitbeck 1983; Kuhn 2002; Rowe 2012; Zarrow 2012).

GLOSSARY

baojia 保甲
boxue hongci 博學鴻詞
Chen Liang 陈亮 (1143-1194)
Chen Mei 陈梅 (1580-1650)
chuan xian 傳賢
chuan zi 傳子
Cun zhi pian 存治篇
Da Qing yitong zhi 大清一統志
Da quan 大權
da ru 大儒
fanzhen 藩鎮
fengjian 封建
gongli 功利
gongtian 公田
Gu Jin tusu jicheng 古今圖書集成
guo 國
Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682)
Hengshu 衡書
Huangchao jingshi wenbian 皇朝經世文編
Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695)
Hu Hong 胡宏 (ca. 1106-1161)
Hu Yi 夏邑
Hu Sheng 夏生
Kangzi zidian 康熙字典
kaozheng 考證
lijia 里甲
Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819)
Liu Zongzhuo 劉宗周 (1578-1645)
lun 論
Lu Shiyi 陸世儀 (1611-1672)
Lü Liuliang 呂留良 (1629-1683)
Mingyi daifang lu 明夷待訪錄
Poxie lun 破邪論
Qianshu 潛書
Rizhi lu 日知錄
shecang 社倉
Shiyu 社約
shieren 士人
sibian lu 社學
Sijiu lu 思舊錄
si quan 四權
Tang Zhen 唐甄 (1630-1704)
tian 天
tianming 天命
tianzi 天子
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