

CHAPTER 15

Striving for Democracy

Confucian Political Philosophy in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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CONFUCIAN PHILOSOPHERS LAUNCHED a political philosophy movement from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the early Qing dynasty (1600–1700). The core idea of this movement was opposition to the royal tyranny that had lasted for over two thousand years. This movement promoted the idea of a division of political power and allowed more freedom for the people. Chinese Marxists early in the twentieth century called it the “Early Enlightenment,” while Mizoguchi Yūzō and John King Fairbank both agreed that late Ming and early Qing Chinese society were trending toward modernization. I believe that this movement was in pursuit of political democracy, but I understand that “democracy” in modern English is quite different from *minzhu* 民主 in modern Chinese. In modern Chinese, democracy is the opposite of autocracy. Any expression of opposition to autocracy is regarded as democratic, although it may not include actual details about democratic institutions. In any case, with regard to these details, I do not think that the separation of powers practiced in the West should be the only model; any idea that promotes the limitation of royal power may be considered democratic. Therefore, I believe that there is a continuity of thought from the Ming to the Qing in the criticism by the literati of those times of any concentration of royal power. It may seem that the demise of the Ming and the establishment of the Qing were a direct cause of this movement, but it may be more accurate to say that it was a result of the transition to modernization in China. My reason for this claim is as follows. When the Qing government became stable and the whole society became

politically and economically more developed than the previous dynasty, a few Confucian philosophers, such as Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797), continued to argue for the same political reforms. What Yuan Mei and other thinkers of the Qing period attempted to do was in part a continuation of what Gu Yanwu 顾炎武 (1613–1682), Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲 (1610–1695), and Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) had been doing in the late Ming.

The central idea behind this movement was that the monopolization of power by the throne was the source of social and political turmoil. During that period in China's history this was a revolutionary idea. Philosopher Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777) argued that “those who hold political position lack virtue and are good at deceiving people. They are a disaster for the people.” Furthermore, he made the revolutionary claim that “Social chaos originates from the top, which hurts the people.”¹ Historian Qian Daxin 钱大昕 (1728–1804) argued against this kind of despotism, saying that it was wrong to infer that loyalty to family was equivalent to loyalty to the government. He made a clear distinction between the private life of the family and public life, where loyalties were impartial, arguing that the filial piety valued in family life was not applicable to the relation between a subordinate and a superior in the affairs of state.² Public officials should be loyal to the people, rather than to an emperor. And emperors should not take away the rights of the people, such as the right to free speech. Qian's distinction between the public and private domains and between loyalty to the emperor and to the people was representative of the anti-despotism movement of the late Ming.

In this chapter I will discuss the political thought of four philosophers of the early Qing period: Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, Wang Fuzhi, and Yuan Mei. I will argue that these four Confucian thinkers are consistent in voicing their opposition to despotism and calling for political reform and democracy.

Gu Yanwu's Idea of Political Reform and Democracy

Gu Yanwu proposes that “We should combine the feudalistic system of dukes with the system of counties.”³ He argues that the sharing of power among the feudal dukes implemented in the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 B.C.E.) could be duplicated by absorbing each feudal state into a centralized county system, which would enable the people to overcome the monopolization of power by the throne. Gu sees the feudal state system as what we today would call a “division of power,” while the county system would be a “centralization of power.” Combining the two systems would create a better system.

There were problems with each of the two systems in Gu's time. In the feudal state system, Gu points out, the dukes have more powers than county magistrates and easily become dictators of a region. In the county system, a

county magistrate does not have enough power to oversee his district. Gu was concerned with the critical problems of the county system of his day. He claims that under this system, an emperor is always thinking that his territories are not large enough, that he does not trust his local officials, and that he wants to regulate every detail of local administration. Thus, there would be more paperwork and regulations. Then the local government agency would become too large to be run effectively, and local county magistrates would constantly be worrying more about whether they might break any rules than about how they might better serve the people. Gu believes that under this system, the people have become poorer and the state weaker. There is no way out of this dire situation without changing the system itself.⁴

According to Gu, the solution to this predicament would be to increase the power of the county magistrates by giving them the necessary financial support and administrative authority. For example, the emperor should give county magistrates the same authority to collect taxes and appoint lower-ranking government officials that is allowed in the feudal state system. Gu argues that the central government should abolish the government agencies that spy on local magistrates and also allow magistrates with exemplary records of achievement to pass their positions on to their competent descendants. Furthermore, in selecting magistrates there should be alternatives to accepting those who pass the national examinations.⁵ All these measures would be justified by the argument that the division of power in the feudal state system could be introduced into the county system. Gu is confident that the emperor would endorse his view if the emperor wanted a powerful country.

Gu's understanding of the division of power is quite different from that of a liberal democracy. The system of checks and balances in modern democracy is best seen as a process on the horizontal level, but Gu's division of power is more vertical. In Gu's ideal, the regional governments share power with the central government. But on the horizontal level, there are no checks and balances among the local government agencies. Nonetheless, Gu's proposal is innovative and significant compared to the dominant county system in existence at that time. The following discussion explains why.

First of all, Gu's idea of a division of power is motivated by his view of human nature. Gu believes that humans are selfish; everyone works for him/herself. In contrast, the county system is based on the idea that everyone should work for the emperor, the representative of the public good. In the county system, the whole nation actually works for the royal family. For example, during the Tang dynasty the people worked for the Li royal family; during the Song dynasty they worked for the Zhao royal family; and during the Ming dynasty they worked for the Zhu royal family. Although these royal families established political order in the name of the national interest, in reality they only worked for their own fam-

ily interests. They endorsed Confucianism, especially Mengzi's idea that human nature is basically good. They condemned the view that human beings by nature are selfish and that it is good to be selfish. But Gu argues that everyone should to some degree express love for their family and recognize that this is natural and even normative. Gu believes that the ancient sage-kings did not forbid or condemn this ideal but encouraged it. The sage-kings divided the land, awarded it to the dukes, and finally established the "sage-king government," which motivated the dukes to serve for the good of the nation by letting them pursue their own legitimate interests.⁶ According to Gu, what the sage-kings did not do was teach people to be selfless. What motivates Gu's political reforms is a different theory of human nature from the one that underlies the county system.

Second, Gu's proposal for a division of power includes the distinction between the management of the local governments and the ownership of the central government. He proposes that a magistrate (*zhixian* 知县) should not only be given more managerial power and be promoted from the political rank of the seventh level to the fifth level, but also be given a new name: county commander (*xianling* 县令). Furthermore, every three years there would be an assessment of the achievement of any commander. Gradually, the commander would have managerial autonomy. Finally, the commander's position could be passed on to his capable descendants. It is believed that this tenure system could motivate the commander to be more responsible for the welfare of the public. The commander could lease mining rights, which would increase local revenue.⁷ For Gu, the commander is in a political contract with the emperor. Gu's design definitely would cause new problems, such as unintentionally creating space that would allow separatist regimes to arise. Nonetheless, his design is meant to weaken the centralization of the county system.

Finally, these political reforms come with Gu's proposal to reform the imperial examination system. He suggests that the exams should not be the only way to select government officials. There should be alternatives, such as what was practiced during the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.); that is, candidates for political positions could be recommended by the people. Another alternative would be to select officials based on certain talents, such as public speaking, calligraphy, and legal knowledge—a method that was practiced in the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.).⁸ Both alternatives would avoid the limitation of one single examination to determine eligibility for political office. Furthermore, this might motivate some scholars who did not have these talents to pursue other career tracks, such as teaching. If becoming an official were the only recognized career track for scholars, then it would be a wasted effort for those scholars who did not have the politically relevant talents to pursue this career.

Overall, I believe that Gu's proposal for political reform was meant to alleviate the monopolization of power in the county system. His proposal also

implies a new political ideal, one that shares some similarity with modern liberal democracy, which recognizes the importance of the division of power. To some extent, Gu's proposal can be seen as a seventeenth-century Chinese appeal for liberal democracy.

Huang Zongxi's Political Ideal and the Prototype of Chinese Liberal Democracy

Compared to Gu's proposal for political reform, Huang Zongxi elaborates a more comprehensive and intensive criticism against monarchy. Huang is the first Chinese philosopher to propose a clear democratic ideal. He argues that promoting people's well-being should be the only aim of political activity. He further argues that the rise and fall of different dynasties has nothing to do with the aim or essence of politics.⁹

How is this political ideal different from the traditional idea that the people are the "root" of a country (*minben* 民本)? I believe that there are five differences.

First of all, Huang proposes a political arrangement that would establish a new type of relationship between the emperor and his ministers. From the standpoint of the division of power, the emperor and his ministers are equal. They all serve the people. However, the traditional idea that the people are the root of a country takes the people as the only means to keep the country at peace. The end is the stability of the country. The emperor and his ministers are not equal. The emperor has an absolute power that cannot be challenged by the ministers. However, Huang believes that since the country is so big and the population so large, one man cannot rule it all. A division of power is necessary.¹⁰ Furthermore, Huang uses a metaphor to describe the relationship between the emperor and his ministers: all of them are working to pull a log forward. The only difference is in the division of labor.¹¹ Thus, Huang believes that the traditional metaphor of a father and sons is not an accurate way to capture the relationship. Huang perceives the relationship from the standpoint of serving the people. If a minister resigns from his position, then he is like a stranger to the emperor without any further duty to serve. If a scholar who holds a political position does not serve the public, then he is merely a servant of the emperor. However, if he is to serve the public, then he is either a teacher or a friend to the emperor.¹² What Huang proposes about the relationship between the emperor and the ministers is quite different from the traditional idea that people are the root of the country.

Second, Huang argues that there is a difference between public law and private law. Public law refers to law made by the people. Private law refers to law made by the emperor. Furthermore, Huang argues that public law should

replace private law, and that public law should regulate the following aspects of life: farming, herding, schooling, marriage, and taxation. The spirit of the law does not show itself in private law. Huang offers the criticism that, since the establishment of the county system in the Han and later the Qing, there has been no real system of laws. All the laws practiced were made by and for royal families.¹³

Third, Huang proposes that a prime minister (*zaixiang* 宰相) should be reinstated to assist the emperor or even to substitute for the emperor. The reasoning is that since the purpose of an emperor is to manage the public affairs of the whole country, a responsibility that cannot be handled by just one man, additional positions should be established. Thus, various political positions are set up for deputies of the emperor. An emperor is only one public official among others. There is no barrier between him and other public officials. He can even be replaced. An emperor is more of a symbol of the highest power. Thus, in Huang's political design, a prime minister is different from the traditional official who must obey the emperor unconditionally. A prime minister should be equal to the emperor and be able to replace the emperor and carry out executive power if the emperor is incompetent.¹⁴ Huang's political design is not compatible with the traditional idea that the emperor as the son of heaven has absolute power over everything.

In the historical context, when the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty abolished the position of prime minister, all officials reported to the emperor, which resulted in a monopoly of power in his person. Furthermore, in political practice the emperor was not able to manage the government by himself, and it was then possible for a few corrupt ministers or persons close to the emperor to seize power, as in the eunuch period of the Ming dynasty. Huang proposes that the prime minister should be given more authority so that power would not fall into the hands of royal relatives or royal servants. Since royal relatives and servants lack political knowledge or training, they would not be expected to act in the interests of the country. Rather, they would act in the interest of the emperor or even in their own interests. Thus, government becomes a tool for a group of people to gain benefits for themselves. Huang points out that if the prime minister can work with the emperor, the emperor does not need to deal with public affairs alone. To some extent, the power of the emperor is weakened or divided.¹⁵ This political design is very similar to what happened in the constitutional monarchies of some early modern European countries.

Fourth, Huang argues that the function of schools should be expanded and that schools should also be made into places for training officials. Emperors and officeholders alike should be educated as culturally informed intellectuals. But what the emperor affirms is not necessarily right, and thus the emperor should leave judgments to places like schools, where scholars can discuss and debate.

Obviously, this design is very different from the reality in which the emperor determines what is right or wrong. Huang even suggests that the emperor should go to listen to the critics from the royal academy, and that officials should do the same.¹⁶ This proposal can be traced back to the traditional idea that local schools should participate in local politics. But according to Huang, the political involvement of schools should be more extensive. This might strengthen the political function of schools, but it could also jeopardize the academic independence of the schools from politics, since schools are supposed to be politically neutral.

Fifth, Huang suggests that there should be different methods of selecting officials, that the royal examinations cannot be the only way; other methods such as recommendations should be included. Furthermore, the government should also employ those with special talents and a strong commitment to serve the country.¹⁷

Overall, Huang's political design is quite different from the traditional idea that the emperor alone should hold absolute power. Huang believed that the purpose of a government is to function for the good of the people.

Wang Fuzhi's "Gong Tian Xia" (The Good of the Country)

With regard to the criticism of monopolization of power in the county system, Wang Fuzhi shares a similar view with Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi. Wang criticizes King Wen of the Zhou dynasty (1152–1106 B.C.E.), who was well respected by Confucians. Wang points out that in both the Xia and Shang dynasties there was the position of prime minister. But starting with King Wen of the Zhou, the position of prime minister was abolished and absolute monarchy in China began.¹⁸ Wang argues that the power of the emperor should henceforth be shared.

Wang proposes the political ideal of "*gong tian xia*" (the good of the country). His principle is that the well-being of the people is more important than the power of the royal family. This principle is similar to Huang Zongxi's idea that the well-being of a country depends on the life of the people rather than the power of the royal family. Wang also compares the county system with the feudal state system, arguing that the county system is much better for the country. However, Wang also points out that since the county system assumes the monopoly of power by the emperor, it is not good for the well-being of the people. Furthermore, the length of rule of a royal family has nothing to do with whether or not the people are well cared for. Wang believes that the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (259–210 B.C.E.) was overthrown because the royal family was interested only in passing the royal line to its descendants. However, afterward many royal families did not see this as the reason for the

failure of the Qin royal family.¹⁹ Wang argues that the good of the people should be the only criterion of political legitimacy.

However, regarding the best way to restrain the power of the emperor, Wang's view is different from Gu's and Huang's. Huang argues that the emperor and the ministers should share power and suggests that a senior minister can even exercise executive authority when the emperor is incompetent. Wang disagrees. He proposes that the position of the emperor should be more like a symbol of power and that a set of laws and regulations are the basis for government policies to be made and carried out. Wang even argues that the early sage-kings were humble and never used power to dominate others. They acted in accord with the spirit of Daoism, *wuwei* 无为, letting the ministers perform their duties according to the laws and regulations.²⁰ In this way are the political institution and the existing laws and regulations the key to good government.

Wang also proposes that there are three ways to transfer the power of the emperor: inheritance, recommendation, and revolution. He points out that when the security of the nation is at stake, those who can defend it should be leaders so that the nation does not fall into the hands of foreigners.²¹

With regard to how to achieve a balance of power, based on his research of Chinese political history Wang proposes that the emperor, the prime minister, and the counselors should form the core of the government. According to Wang, they have different duties. The duty of the emperor is to appoint the prime minister. If the prime minister is incompetent, then the emperor can determine whether to discharge him. And the counselors are supposed to point out the mistakes made by the emperor, rather than those by the prime minister. And the prime minister should weigh in on significant issues, such as national security and important appointments. Counselors can participate in the deliberation of less significant issues.²² Thus, Wang's proposal is different from those of Huang and Gu with regard to the balance of power. Overall, the emperor appoints the prime minister, the prime minister appoints counselors, and the counselors evaluate the political performance of the emperor. Wang believes that this arrangement of the balance of power could keep the government stable.

Compared to Huang's proposal, Wang's idea of the balance of power is less radical. It is much closer to the traditional political setup in the Tang dynasty. Compared to Gu's proposal to balance power vertically by increasing the power of the county magistrates, Wang's idea is to balance power horizontally at the highest level. Nevertheless, the balance of power is the goal of both, and both are drawn to the spirit of modern liberal democracy. Their proposals present different alternatives for early Chinese democratic ideals. In fact, Gu and Huang did communicate with each other about their political ideals, but Wang did not participate. However, they all targeted the problems of the county system.

In addition to the balance of power, Wang also discusses the issue of land

property rights. Wang argues that the right to land ownership should be protected; the replacement of one royal family by another one should not affect people's rights to their land since the land was not given to them by the new emperor.²³ Thus, people's property rights are immune from political change. This is a huge challenge to the idea that the land is owned by the royal government under the county system. This idea is similar to what modern philosophers hold concerning the legitimacy of private property.

Political Thought of the Middle Qing Period and the Modern Transformation of Confucian Political Thought

Even under the tight literary inquisition during the rule of the Qianlong Emperor in the Qing dynasty, philosopher Yuan Mei made a comparison of the county and feudal state systems and pointed toward the direction of modern democracy.

With regard to political reform, Yuan Mei's proposal is close to Gu's. Yuan argues that the county system does not carry out the ancient sages' idea of "the good of the country," and that the feudal state system does a better job. Here is Yuan's argument: as the ancient sages pointed out, since the emperor cannot govern the country by himself, in the feudal state system the dukes would share power with the emperor, and this would serve the country better. As there are many dukes, they would challenge and even overthrow any emperor who is incompetent and corrupt.²⁴

Furthermore, Yuan argues for the feudal state system from the perspective of personal liberty. First of all, Yuan argues that the feudal state system would prevent a corrupt emperor from abusing power since the dukes share some of the power. A local riot against a duke would not jeopardize the stability of the whole country. But it would in the county system, as it did in the peasant riot against the Qin dynasty, which rapidly resulted in its overthrow.²⁵

Second, under the feudal state system, scholars have more freedom. What Kongzi, Mengzi, and other early Chinese philosophers achieved occurred during the time of the feudal states. If a scholar was not welcomed or valued by one duke, he could move and make proposals to another duke, as Kongzi and Mengzi did in their times. However, under the county system, the standard examination was implemented nationwide. If a scholar failed this exam twice, he would not be given credentials to move to another county and find a job there. Therefore, under the feudal state system, scholars would have more space to exercise their capacities.²⁶

Yuan shares many arguments with Gu. But Yuan has some distinct views of his own. For example, Yuan perceives the space for scholars to exercise their capacities as intrinsically valuable, and he believes that a diversity of profes-

sional skills is also good in itself. This view is compatible with the value given to diversity in modern society.

I believe that what Gu Yanwu, Huang Zongxi, Wang Fuzhi, and Yuan Mei each argue for, and sometimes disagree about, in their stated political ideals and designs is far from liberal democracy, but what I have tried to explain up to this point is something that has been ignored by many philosophers: they miss the significance of the anticipation by these four thinkers of political modernization in China. Gu, Huang, Wang, and Yuan should not be perceived as classical Confucians, such as the New Confucians during the Song and Ming periods. However, they are still Confucians and are inspired by Confucianism. Therefore, I believe that Confucian political thought has the potential to contribute to modernization in China today. During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries there was no Western political democracy in theory or practice that developed from the native Confucian tradition. However, this does not imply that during these three centuries that no Chinese political democracy, at least in theory, emerged from the Confucian tradition. Probably due to the influence of this newly emergent thought, many Confucian scholars during the transition from the Qing to the Republic endorsed Western political democracy. The political reform launched by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao was an experiment that resulted from this endorsement. Even if it did not last long and ultimately failed, it marked the official beginning of the pursuit of real political democracy, an experiment that continues today.

Notes

1. Dai Zhen 戴震, "Yuan shan" 原善, in *Dai Zhen quanji* 戴震全集, vol. 2 (Beijing: Qinghua Daxue Chubanshe, 1999), p. 27.
2. Qian Daxin 钱大昕, "Yuan xiao" 原孝, in *Qian Yan Tang ji* 潜研堂集, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1989), p. 281.
3. Gu Yanwu, "Junxien lun yi" 郡县论一, in *Gu Tinglin shi wenji* 顾亭林诗文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983), p. 12. Hereafter, "feudalistic system of dukes" will be referred to as "feudal state system," and "system of counties" as "county system."
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Gu Yanwu 顾炎武, "Yan si qi cong" 言私其縱, in *Ri zhi lu ji shi* 日知录集释, (Changsha: Yue Lu Chubanshe, 1994), p. 92.
7. Gu Yanwu, "Junxien lun yi."
8. Ibid., p. 17.
9. Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲, "Yuan Chen" 原臣, in *Huang Zongxi quanji* 黄宗羲全集, vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe, 1985), p. 5.
10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲, "Yuan Fa" 原法, in *Huang Zongxi quanji*, vol. 1, pp. 6–8.
14. Ibid., p. 8.
15. Ibid., p. 9.
16. Huang Zongxi, "Xue Xiao" 学校, in *Huang Zongxi quanji*, vol. 1, p. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, "Shangshu yin yi" 尚书引义, in *Wang Fuzhi quanji* 王夫之全集, vol. 5, book 2 (Changsha: Yue Lu Chubanshe, 1996), p. 397.
19. Wang Fuzhi, "Du tong jian lun" 读通鉴论, in *Wang Fuzhi quanji*, vol. 1, book 10, p. 68.
20. Ibid., p. 474.
21. Wang Fuzhi, "Huangshu yuanji di yi" 黄书原极第一, in *Wang Fuzhi quanji*, vol. 1, book 12, p. 503.
22. Wang Fuzhi, "Song lun" 宋论, in *Wang Fuzhi quanji*, vol. 4, book 11, pp. 121–122.
23. Wang Fuzhi, "E meng" 恶梦, in *Wang Fuzhi quanji*, vol. 4, book 12, p. 551.
24. Yuan Mei 袁枚, "Shu Liuqi fengjian lun hou" 书柳子封建论后, in *Xiao Cang Shan Fang shi wenji* 小仓山房诗文集, book 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1988), pp. 1634–1636.
25. Ibid., p. 1636.
26. Yuan Mei, "Zai shu fengjian lun hou" 再书封建论后, in *Xiao Cang Shan Fang shi wenji* 小仓山房诗文集, book 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1988), p. 1638.