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THE "AUTOCRATIC HERITAGE" AND CHINA'S POLITICAL FUTURE: A VIEW FROM A QING SPECIALIST

Helen Dunstan

Introduction

In a substantial large-character poster displayed at People's University in Beijing in May 1989, an anonymous member of that institution's academic staff claimed that the contemporary Chinese "autocratic political system" was "essentially identical to that of feudal China," except that Marxism-Leninism had been substituted for Confucianism, and that state ownership of the means of production had given the new autocracy a degree of power *vis-à-vis* society that the old did not enjoy. Later in the poster, the author linked the persistence of autocracy in China with the defects of a "national character" dominated by two traits: "slavishness and sectarianism" (the latter meaning a propensity to act according to mere individual self-will). The author's dissection of the Chinese "national character" ended with a call for "all Chinese citizens" to assess how far their being was permeated by the politically negative features of the "quintessence of Chinese culture." Only if the "national character" were "improved" could there be durable political reform.[1]

This poster-writer has been alone neither in perceiving continuity between the "autocratic" "feudal" (that is, imperial) past and post-1949 dictatorship, nor in expressing concern about the political fitness of the Chinese psyche and the culture in which it is nurtured. A book-length exposition of the thesis that the post-1949 régime represents a "revitalized restoration of Chinese traditional autocracy" has been published in English by the *émigré* scholar, Fu Zhengyuan. Although he argues that "[t]he long continuity of Chinese imperial autocracy and its extension into the modern era were due not only to cultural inertia ... but also to a consciously pursued policy of the state," his book may stand as a representative expression of recent Chinese concern with the continuing oppressive power of the Chinese autocratic heritage.[2] The historian Jin Guantao, proposing a "cybernetic" approach to the puzzle of the perceived

This article draws on material presented in my forthcoming book, *State or merchant? political economy and political process in 1740s China* (in preparation). A fuller and more fully documented version of the case-study summarized here will be found in that work. Both book and article are based substantially on archival material collected in the First Historical Archives, Beijing, during the summer of 1993 with financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (U.S.A.), an independent federal agency. I thank both institutions and their staffs for making my research possible, and Mark Elvin, convenor of *East Asian History*'s Editorial Board, and the anonymous referees, for their helpful suggestions.

[1] Anon., "Why does China need democracy? An analysis of the current Chinese power structure," translated in *Cries for democracy: writings and speeches from the 1989 Chinese democracy movement*, ed. Han Minzhu (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.151–62, esp.154–5 and 157–9.

[2] Zhengyuan Fu, *Autocratic tradition and Chinese politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For the quotations, see pp.2 and 354. In the penultimate paragraph of the book (p.356), Fu suggests that although pressure for democratizing change is on the rise in China, the two-thousand-year-old autocratic heritage will remain a considerable obstacle.

tenacity of "Chinese feudalism," had earlier gone so far as to allege that China's "only mode of existence is to relive the past." Sun Longji, in a book which generated much interest in China, was explicit in blaming Chinese culture for "stagnation" not only in the political domain, but also at the level of personality development.[3] Can a whole people whose development as individuals has been stunted (according to Sun) be expected to exercise democratic rights in mature fashion? It seems that many Chinese intellectuals would be inclined to answer "no." According to Andrew Nathan, concern about "national character" and a political culture formed during the "autocratic" past have dominated mainland intellectuals' misgivings about the prospects for democracy in China.[4]

This kind of "cultural despair" is, of course, nothing new in twentieth-century Chinese history. To the contrary, it was more than a decade before the beginning of the May Fourth Movement when Liang Qichao rhetorically complained that the "slave mentality" of a people controlled "for thousands of years ... by a people-ravaging government" precluded their responding positively to the notion of popular rights, and doomed them to extinction in the struggle for survival with the Europeans.[5] It is equally obvious that a desire to repudiate the indigenous tradition is only one recent Chinese approach to the issue of cultural heritage. Both within China and in the Chinese diaspora, the negative evaluation discussed so far contrasts with a strong interest, on the part of other commentators, in rediscovering the virtues of (mainly) Confucian culture, and demonstrating their relevance to contemporary concerns of Chinese people.[6] This movement can be seen, to some extent, as part of a broader tradition, going back to Gandhi and beyond, of non-Western resistance to the hegemony of Western models, although some of its manifestations have a utilitarian ring which is entirely at odds with Gandhi's views. It is possibly a reflection of the materialistic aspects of Confucianism that economic success (in Japan, Singapore, and elsewhere) is viewed, among some Chinese commentators of the "positive" persuasion, as an acceptable validation of Confucian culture. With this un-Gandhian premise, certain Chinese scholars have joined in the well-known transnational attempt to analyze the putative links between Confucian ideals and East Asian economic dynamism (a pursuit in which some Western scholars have played major roles).[7] The mainland Chinese government, meanwhile, in an odd *volte face*, has attempted to revive Confucian values, and even ceremonies, in the hope that cultural orientations

[3] See the paragraphs from Jin's book, *Zai lishi biaoxiang de beihou* [Behind the phenomena of history] and Sun's book, *Zhongguo wenhua de "shenceng jiegou"* [The deep structure of Chinese culture] (both published in the early 1980s) presented in Geremie Barmé and John Minford, eds., *Seeds of fire: Chinese voices of conscience* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), pp.131–3 and 136. On the impact that both books had among mainland Chinese intellectuals, see the editorial notes on ibid., pp.30 and 132.

[4] Andrew J. Nathan, *China's crisis: dilemmas of reform and prospects for democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p.196. Although Nathan does not specify that he is referring to the perceptions of intellectuals, this is a reasonable inference from the fact that he uses the example of the television series *He shang* [River elegy], which he says elsewhere (ibid., p.123) may be taken "as representing the thinking of many Chinese intellectuals today [late 1980s]." For his own critical discussion of *He shang*, see ibid., pp.123–5.

[5] See passage from an article by Liang in an early issue (c. 1899) of *Qingyi bao* [Journal of honest criticism] translated in James R. Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1983), p.185; cf. Nathan, *China's crisis*, p.124. The expression "cultural despair" has been used by Thomas A. Metzger, who is critical of this concept as applied to modern Chinese intellectual history. See his *Escape from predicament: neo-Confucianism and China's evolving political culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p.223.

[6] For a brief account of strands in the mainland re-evaluation of the Confucian heritage other than that emphasized below, see Gilbert Rozman, "Comparisons of modern Confucian values in China and Japan," in *The East Asian region: Confucian heritage and its modern adaptation*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp.196–7. On the "neoconservative" movement and its invocation of Confucian values to promote political stability, see Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese politics in the age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp.328–30. Baum traces the origins of neoconservatism to a conference held in 1990, /but a more telling antecedent was surely the "highly publicized and grandly promoted" gathering to mark the putative birthday of Confucius shortly after 4 June 1989. Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp.106–8.

[7] For a list of representative English-language writings of the "economic vindication of Confucianism" school (including a set of conference proceedings from Taiwan), see Ezra Vogel, *The four little dragons: the spread of industrialization in East Asia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.128, n.1. A central Chinese proponent of studies addressing the role of Confucianism in East

which have supposedly borne economic fruit in the outlying polities will have the same effect in their homeland.[8]

The eager, if not always uncritical, Western participation in what we may call the "economic vindication of Confucianism" discourse contrasts with a general lack of interest, on the part of Western scholars, in the thesis that the cultural legacy of imperial autocracy is substantially to blame for modern China's failure to escape dictatorship. There is scant enthusiasm even for rebutting the idea.[9] This is understandable. Reminiscent of the long-discredited "oriental despotism" theory, the notion of autocracy as quasi-destiny is probably perceived as so simplistic and historically wrong-headed that it would be embarrassing to seem to take it seriously. The present author has no interest in defending it. However, the recent influx of mainland intellectuals into Western universities makes it likely that what might otherwise have been marginalized as a discourse limited to Chinese scholars will be pursued at Western academic gatherings and in the Western academic press (as has already happened with the publication of Fu Zhengyuan's book).[10] The confrontation between positive economic and negative political evaluations of the cultural heritage would seem to pose some dangers from the point of view of Chinese democrats. "Cultural despair" may, one suspects, give way to acceptance of the compromise position (already reflected in some East Asian practice and recognized by certain authors) that the authoritarianism sanctioned by Confucianism is the political price that must be paid for economic progress sustained by Confucian values.[11]

If such a debate indeed occurs on Western soil, Western scholars have certainly an entitlement, and arguably also a responsibility, to participate, constructively and non-dismissively. Even if it does not, Western scholars of Chinese politics or history may legitimately offer reflections, drawn from their specialist knowledge, on the "autocratic heritage" position to thinking Chinese people who believe in it. This article, a case-study based on my research into political economy in the mid-Qing period, attempts to sketch a middle way between, on one hand, outright repudiation of the "autocratic" past, and, on the other, utilitarian subservience to potentially anti-democratic cultural prescriptions for economic growth (or, for that matter, nativist desire to resurrect the moral glories of a doctrine of altruistic power-holders and the supremacy of righteousness in public life). The article is addressed not only to Chinese victims of cultural self-doubt, but also to scholars of any nationality who wish to gain new insights into the varieties of political process that in fact existed under Chinese (or, in this case, Sino-Manchu) imperial "autocracy."[12]

It is no part of the purpose of this paper to review the existing literature on cultural continuities in modern China, the fortunes of democracy in China since the idea was introduced in the late nineteenth century, or the prospects for democracy in future. Suffice it to make three observations. First, Thomas Metzger has offered a rich and interesting argument that an understanding of democracy rooted in classical Confucian political philosophy must necessarily be so different from that deriving from the Western intellectual tradition that,

/Asian success stories has been Tu Wei-ming, one of whose latest contributions lies in his editorship of a volume entitled *Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity: moral education and economic culture in Japan and the four mini-dragons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[8] For footage of purportedly Confucian ceremonial at Qufu, revived by the Chinese government in the name of economic development, see the Pacific Basin Institute's 1992 video "Big Business and the Ghost of Confucius" in the Annenberg/CPB educational series *The Pacific century* (South Burlington, Vermont). For perspective on the economistic approach to cultural tradition, cf. the sections entitled "Civilization" and "What is true civilization?" in Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind swaraj, or Indian home rule* (1909).

[9] Nathan, for example, dismisses the message of *River elegy* with the brief observation that "If [China] has indeed achieved less than it should have and paid an exorbitant price, the fault does not lie with Chinese civilization but with the political structure of Chinese socialism and the policy mistakes of the leaders." *China's crisis*, p.125.

[10] One notices the exchange between Fu and his American reviewers in *The Journal of Asian Studies* (*JAS*) 54.2 (May 1995): 482–4. The original review, by Anita Andrew and John Rapp, appeared in *JAS* 53.4 (Nov. 1994): 1,237–9.

[11] Cf. Tu's editorial introduction to *Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity*, p.7, and Vogel, *The four little dragons*, pp.95 and 99. Tu, indeed, writes of "the compatibility of a market economy and an authoritarian state" in positive terms, suggesting that it provides part of the basis for a valid and culturally acceptable "alternative vision of modernity." One notices that he uses the expression "general will" in the next paragraph.

[12] For a classic analysis of "political process" and "political struggle" under the Chinese and other "historical bureaucratic empires," see S. N. Eisenstadt, *The political systems of empires* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), part 2. Unfortunately, Eisenstadt's discussion is so broad and loosely-documented that it is extremely difficult to evaluate or use. In the 1990s, with the benefits of archival research, it is possible to aspire to much greater precision, although some uncertainties remain.

if Western-style democracy is true democracy, "Chinese democracy" cannot be properly so called.[13] In other words, the cultural legacy not of autocracy but of the broader moral ideology which justified it has acted, for better or for worse, to inhibit Chinese intellectuals from conceptualizing democracy correctly. It is not obvious that politically-conscious mainlanders are likely to be as imbued with classical Confucian political philosophy as the Taiwan- and Hong Kong-based "humanists" and "liberals" whom Metzger cites. Nonetheless, his analysis may serve as a warning to Chinese people who wish to see Western democratic principles established in China to become conscious of the differences and, arguably, incompatibilities between Confucian and Western political assumptions. The making of informed choices, based upon such consciousness, perhaps offers the best hope of liberation from the conceptual legacy of past political culture.

Second, invocations, not all of them simplistic, of cultural continuity to help explain this or that feature of political life in China under communism are far from absent from Western professional scholarship. The general approach adopted here (closer examination of the past) is by no means the only, or always the most effective, way of addressing such invocations critically.[14] Third (and this is further to my second observation), historical approaches to the project of relieving "Chinese doubts about their own capacity for democracy"[15] need not be confined to re-evaluations of imperial "autocracy." Studies of late Qing urban history have shown that members of the merchant (or merchant-gentry) élite were capable of performing many of the functions of a modern city government, and that, once formally constituted (in the case of Shanghai) in a largely Western-style city council, they observed some key democratic principles, such as election of the councillors and decision-making by majority vote.[16] Admittedly, no more than about 25 per cent of the early twentieth-century Chinese adult male population in Shanghai was eligible to participate in the council elections, but the history of the railway rights recovery movement suggests that the urban franchise could have been extended without political catastrophe. Whatever the subsequent difficulties of the Guangzhou–Hankou Railway Company, it is not self-evident that the low-waged and presumably ill-educated shop assistants who participated in the rallies leading to its foundation (and who may have bought some of the deliberately low-priced shares) were showing less political commitment or awareness than is expected of the average voter in Western democracies today.[17] Further examples could be added, but enough has been said to demonstrate the obvious: this article addresses but one corner of a large and multi-faceted topic.

I will conclude this introduction by comparing my approach with that of two previous authors who have addressed the broad question of democracy in China. Unlike Metzger, I do not venture to express an opinion as to which political philosophy should guide China's future development. I assume only

[13] Thomas A. Metzger, "Developmental criteria and indigenously conceptualized options: a normative approach to China's modernization in recent times," *Issues and Studies* 23.2 (1987): 33–47, esp.44–5.

[14] Compare the two following approaches to explaining the emergence and survival of the hereditary principle in politically-guided social stratification in communist China. For Sulamith Heins Potter and Jack M. Potter, it suffices to claim (with a quotation from William Hinton's *Fanshen* in support) that "The idea that membership in a class status category is inherited is present at the level of an assumption in Chinese society." By contrast, Jonathan Unger, addressing the problem of peasant receptiveness to heredity-based "class-line" policies during the 1960s and beyond, had earlier propounded an ingenious argument that, in subtle but important ways, the existence of a hereditary pariah group within village society served the political and material interests of the "good-class" majority. His analysis makes the cultural explanation look somewhat lazy. See Potter and Potter, *China's peasants: the anthropology of a revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.296, and Unger, "The class system in rural China: a case study," in *Class and social stratification in post-revolution China*, ed. James L. Watson (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.124–7 and 129–34. For one of the more thoughtful discussions of the role of the Confucian legacy in Maoist China, see Rozman, "Comparisons of modern Confucian values," pp.188–91. Rozman distinguishes between different aspects of the Confucian tradition, and argues that some flourished at the expense of other, more valuable ones, especially during 1967–76.

[15] Nathan, *China's crisis*, p.196.

[16] The most detailed case-study of the evolution of (in this case *de facto*) merchant municipal government out of guild, philanthropic, and public-security organizations and community subscription schemes will be found in William T. Rowe, *Hankow: conflict and community in a Chinese city: 1796-1895* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989), chs.3, 4, 8, and 9, supplemented by Rowe, *Hankow: commerce and society in a Chinese city, 1796-1889* (Stan-

that democracy, however loosely defined, is an option strongly favoured in some Chinese quarters, and that beneficiaries of Western democratic institutions should at least look sympathetically on Chinese efforts to make similar advantages available to Chinese people. However, I concur with Metzger in declining to put democracy on a pedestal.[18] It is a problematic form of government, even if "the best obtainable." With Nathan I agree that there is nothing inappropriate in identifying a list of defining characteristics of democracy, and assessing how far these criteria are met by the political structure of a contemporary nation in which some degree of democratization has been on the government's agenda.[19] However, not only would such an approach be pointless when evaluating China's political structure at a time (such as the mid-eighteenth century) when the concept of democracy was effectively unknown there, but it also ignores the possibility that there are other criteria, besides compliance with democratic principles, by which a governmental system should be judged.

When, later in the article, I have occasion to compare mid-eighteenth-century Chinese political process with that of modern Western democratic countries, it will be Western democracies as they actually exist that are invoked in the comparison. I assume that it is worth assessing how far different forms of government, including democracy, have proved conducive to the successful handling of common fundamental problems, such as intelligent decision-making upon complex issues, ensuring that radical critiques are appropriately addressed, negotiating between opposing visions of political economy, and responding to the existence of sectional interests, some of which may seek, and have the means, to influence the government. The case-study presented below is hardly a ringing affirmation of the soundness of mid-Qing political process. However, by demonstrating that this process can be productively discussed in light of the above criteria, it illustrates that, although the mid-Qing governmental system was in no sense democratic, it was far from being mere autocracy.

A Case-Study in Context

To be sure, it is already well established among Western scholars that the concept of autocracy is inadequate for understanding mid-Qing government. In one recent, substantial discussion, Beatrice Bartlett, who holds that the Sino-Manchu political system evolved from autocracy to a "monarchical-conciliar form of government" after 1735, applies the concept of "checks and balances" to the relationship between ruler and ministers in the mature Qing system. A careful overview of policy-determination procedures in the Qianlong (1735–96) and later reigns leads her to the conclusion that although post-Yongzheng emperors had autocratic powers, they generally refrained

/ford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1984), ch.10, esp. pp.330–4. On the city council of Chinese Shanghai, see Mark Elvin, "The gentry democracy in Chinese Shanghai, 1905–14," in *Modern China's search for a political form*, ed. Jack Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), esp. pp.53–4 and "The administration of Shanghai, 1905–1914," in *The Chinese city between two worlds* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), esp. p.251. A generally positive assessment of the progress of democracy nationwide down to the establishment of Yuan Shikai's dictatorship will be found in John H. Fincher, *Chinese democracy: the self-government movement in local, provincial and national politics, 1905–1914* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm and the Australian National University Press, 1981). However, "the other" *Chinese democracy* (by Andrew J. Nathan, published by the University of California Press in 1985) gives a much more chequered impression of the extent to which democracy has ever been correctly understood in China.

[17] Elvin, "The administration of Shanghai," p.261; Wellington K. K. Chan, "Government, merchants and industry to 1911," in *The Cambridge history of China*, vol.11, *Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, part 2, ed. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-ching Liu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp.439–40.

[18] Metzger, "Developmental criteria and indigenously conceptualized options," pp. 31–3, 74–5.

from exercising them. The initiative in proposing policy departures was typically left to others; when proposals arrived, they were commonly referred to competent bodies within the upper echelons of government for deliberation; the recommendations of these bodies were usually accepted; and there were ample opportunities for senior officials, especially the emperor's closest advisers, to influence decision-making, neutralize the emperor's mistakes, and pursue their own vision of desirable administrative action. The emperor could always say them nay, but he relied substantially on their collective wisdom.[20]

Bartlett is undoubtedly broadly correct in claiming that "No one who studies mid-[Qing] decision making can fail to be impressed by the care with which major policies were researched and deliberated."[21] However, the very strengths of the Qing governmental system create potential problems of bias in historiography. The mass of documentation testifying to detailed and sophisticated policy deliberation makes it natural for scholars to portray eighteenth-century Sino-Manchu decision-making as basically an administrative, as opposed to political, process. The major recent English-language studies of mid-Qing government depict respect-worthy mid-Qing senior officials as technicians of political economy, striving under imperial leadership to devise the fairest, most rational, or most efficient means of pursuing fiscal reform or other public policy objectives. At central-government level, it appears, the scope for politics was narrow, and political activity at that level was confined within the governing élite. There could be intra-élite debates as to which policy should be pursued, and there could be competition for advancement and power among individuals (including the emperor) or factions. Essentially absent were those processes of vicarious negotiation between extra-governmental interest groups which, for better or for worse, are one of the hallmarks of Western parliamentary government as we actually know it.[22]

I do not think that the above approach is fundamentally mistaken, but only that it would be regrettable if we failed to notice instances in which extra-governmental interest groups may in fact have been able to obtain representation for their views in the normal processes of policy discussion.[23] The case-study material presented here—an account of the first half of a fifteen-year controversy on famine-relief policy during the early Qianlong period—can be interpreted as showing the negotiation of sectional interests carried out vicariously and semi-openly in a debate conducted according to regular intra-government procedures. Three sections of the population were involved (two of them extra-governmental), and the interests of each were represented in a different fashion. These sections are the poor, who were not necessarily entirely politically passive; the county magistrates and their colleagues at the lower levels of the territorial bureaucracy, who were men with personal career interests as well as servants of the government; and the community of grain merchants, who may have had their bureaucratic spokesmen, although direct

[19] Andrew J. Nathan, "The place of values in cross-cultural studies: the example of democracy and China," in *Ideas across cultures: essays on Chinese thought in honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Goldman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1990), pp.305–6.

[20] Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and ministers: the Grand Council in mid-Ch'ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1991), pp.199 and 269–78, esp. p.270. For a contrasting view, see Fu, *Autocratic tradition and Chinese politics*, p.80.

[21] Bartlett, *Monarchs and ministers*, p.275. The statement is only "broadly" correct because it leaves out of account those cases in which ill-considered policies were in fact put into effect, as exemplified below and in my "'Orders go forth in the morning and are changed by nightfall': a monetary policy cycle in Qing China, November 1744–June 1745," *T'oung Pao* 82 (1996): 66–136.

[22] See, for example, Madeleine Zelin, *The magistrate's tael: rationalizing fiscal reform in eighteenth-century Ch'ing China* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984); Pierre-Étienne Will, *Bureaucracy and famine in eighteenth-century China*, trans. Elborg Forster (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990); and Pierre-Étienne Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the people: the state civilian granary system in China, 1650–1850* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1991). Bartlett's *Monarchs and ministers*, although centrally concerned with the question of imperial power, seems to reflect a similar understanding of Qing government as in other senses apolitical.

lobbying cannot be proved. The central issue in the debate, which was quite polarized, was how far the state should involve itself in the management and redistribution of grain surpluses, understood as being fundamentally the work of merchants. In the background were, on one hand, powerful traditions of government paternalism, and, on the other, a growing, if rudimentary, belief in the efficacy of what we today call market mechanisms, as I have discussed elsewhere.[24]

The civil servants who drew up sophisticated documents arguably reflecting the interests of one or more of the above groups were not the only participants in the debate. There was, in addition, the Board of Revenue, which had overall administrative responsibility for anti-famine projects, but which was also highly attentive to fiscal considerations; and there was the young Qianlong emperor himself. The story told below does not match with Bartlett's account of abstinent autocracy: although the sources I have used would not permit a researcher to discern any behind-the-scenes input into Qianlong's policy decisions from his closest (Grand Council) advisers, the testimony of these sources is consistent with the image of an inexperienced monarch deciding his own policies, with unfortunate results.[25] However, "autocracy" in the style of the young Qianlong did not imply the suppression of criticism or suggestions from below. The problem was not that, under Qianlong, no one dared express dissent or new ideas; radical ideas were eagerly expressed, especially by censorial personnel, and Qianlong's problem lay in being swayed by them.[26] In our case-study, we see the emperor first embracing the proposal of a radical expansion of the state's existing grain stockpiles; subsequently allowing the new policy to be eroded, stalled, and to some extent reversed in response to the complaints of critics; and finally (after further twists and turns of policy) consenting to a short-lived *coup de main* by the Board of Revenue that potentially implied complete elimination of the government stockpiles. Whatever his power may have been, it is hard to believe that he emerged from the debate with his authority unscathed, at least in the eyes of senior officials.

Before proceeding with the case-study, let me issue one *caveat*. There is reason to suspect that political process under Qing so-called autocracy had in common with actually-existing democratic political process not only the potential for vicarious negotiation between sectional interests, but also the deliberate creation and manipulation of plausible images. A contemporary example from the side of the democracies would be the creation of the image of young unmarried women tempted to have babies by the prospect of state benefits. A government can use the image to gain public support for the abolition or restriction of the benefits; but a sociologist cannot use allegations of such an abuse in politicians' speeches as evidence that it is in fact widespread. Plausible images evoked in the debate considered here include, first, that of the effect on grain markets of large-scale official buying; and,

[23] This is a quite different matter from the informal, irregular, and sometimes covert influence exerted by persons with links to the bureaucracy to defend their own class or kin-group interests in their home communities. See, e.g., Hilary J. Beattie, *Land and lineage in China: a study of T'ung-ch'eng county, Anhwei, in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp.71–84; and Fuma Susumu, "Minmatsu no toshi kaikaku to Kōshū minpen" [Late Ming urban reforms and the popular disturbance in Hangzhou], *Tōhō gakubō* (Kyoto) 49 (1977): 238–9, 243–7.

[24] Helen Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels to confuse the age: a documentary study of political economy in Qing China, 1644–1840* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1996), chs.1, 2, and 5–7, and (on consciousness of market mechanisms) pp.7–9, 77–8, 256–7, 293–4, 298, 304–7, etc.

[25] Admittedly, the Grand Councillors would have had an opportunity to influence the emperor in drafting the edicts through which his decisions were formally communicated (Bartlett, *Monarchs and ministers*, pp.217–19, 274–5). One could allow for the possibility that their influence was substantial by using the expression "the Qianlong emperor" to designate a collective entity comprising Qianlong and his closest counsellors. I have not done this because it would involve making unwarranted assumptions about the policy orientations of the latter.

[26] Cf. Fu, *Autocratic tradition and Chinese politics*, pp.80–1.

second, that of unconscientious local officials resenting their duty of maintaining grain stockpiles because of the personal liability imposed on them by central government control procedures. Because the images are plausible, the historian must consider the possibility that they may have corresponded with reality, at least to some extent. At the same time, it would be a pity if one were misled by the deliberate fabrications or entrenched prejudices (or even search for scapegoats) of parties to a political debate.

The Ostensible Issues in the 1738–53 Debate on Famine Relief Policy

The debate concerned the size of holdings in the so-called "ever-normal granaries," which in Qing times were both stockpiles of grain for the relief of actual famine, and reserves upon which local magistrates could draw for operations known as "stabilizing sales" (*pingtiao* 平糶). When grain prices were high, officialdom could try to pull them down by releasing its own stocks at a price somewhat below the market rate. This technique was thought to work partly because of the crude increase in supply, but also because it gave over-charging shopkeepers the challenge of competition. The state's ability to sell grain at sub-market rates was perceived as a useful weapon in its perennial fight against grain speculators. The Qing version of the system had been founded in the seventeenth century, but it was only in the reign of Qianlong's father, the supremely interventionist Yongzheng (*r.* 1722–35), that a real attempt was made to build the system up through the investment of state funds.[27]

Qianlong came to the throne in 1735 at the age of twenty-four, with an apparent wish to be a sagely ruler.[28] This, at the time, he seems to have understood to mean doing the kind of things his father might have done, but taking Yongzheng-style policies to a new extreme. In 1737, he was persuaded by the senior Confucian scholar Fang Bao 方苞 to start a campaign to wipe out liquor distillation in North China, and thus save vast amounts of grain each year for popular subsistence.[29] The following year, ignoring the opinion of a competent deliberative body, he adopted a proposal by the investigating censor Chang Lu 常祿, the first of several censors to influence imperial policy with radical ideas about the granaries. Chang's proposal was that the state try to build up the granary reserves still further by renewing the policy of selling titular studentships in the Imperial Academy (hereafter, *jiansheng* titles) for grain delivered to the county ever-normal granaries.[30] All provincial administrations were ordered to set targets for the amount of extra grain to be collected in this way. The target-setting process took place during 1738–39; its result was that the *total* target for grain storage empire-wide rose from about 28 million *shi* 石 (Chinese bushels) of unhusked grain to something

[27] For a good introduction to the Qing ever-normal system, see Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, pp.182–99. For the early history and Yongzheng-period build-up of this system, see Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.27–33; Hoshi Ayao, *Chūgoku shakai fukushi seisaku shi no kenkyū—Shindai no shinzaisō o chūshin ni* [A history of social welfare policy in China, with special reference to the relief granary system under the Qing dynasty] (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1985), pp.80–3; and Yamamoto Susumu, "Shindai zenki no heichō seisaku: saibai, sōcho seisaku no suii" [The stabilizing sales policy in the first half of the Qing dynasty: the shift from purchasing to granary storage], *Shirin* 71.5 (1988): 51–2. The above works by Hoshi and, more especially, Will and Wong are major studies of the Qing granary system.

[28] On the young Qianlong's written expression of the understanding of excellence in ruling which he brought to the throne from his Confucian schooling, see Harold L. Kahn, *Monarchy in the emperor's eyes: image and reality in the Ch'ien-lung reign* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), ch.9. It is particularly ironic, in view of the story told below, that Qianlong had apparently deeply absorbed the lesson that a sage ruler listens to remonstrance and advice (ibid., p.171). What the schoolroom could not teach him was maturity in weighing the advice received.

[29] Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels*, pp.205–6.

[30] The advantages of possessing a *jiansheng* title included a range of legal, fiscal, and social privileges, accelerated access to the provincial-level civil service examinations, and eligibility to purchase various medium- and low-ranking bureaucratic posts.

approaching 60 million *shi*.[31] At about the same time, rules for the administration of the granary reserves were made tighter and more systematic.[32]

Criticism began almost immediately, focussing not directly on the proposed expansion of the grain stockpiles, but rather on the alleged effects of buying for the granaries on the level of grain prices. Large amounts of grain had to be bought each year, not only to replace what had been distributed to famine victims, but also because grain is a perishable commodity and cannot be stored indefinitely. A certain proportion of the stocks—nominally 30 per cent—was supposed to be sold in the period of peak prices every spring, and then replaced when prices fell after the autumn harvest.[33] As long as the amount in store was only 28 million *shi* or less, the minimum amount to be bought annually was relatively modest. The resulting rise in prices could theoretically have been accepted as part of the desired effect of ever-normal operations, which (as their name suggests) were intended to adjust post-harvest prices in the interests of the farmers, as well as favouring consumers in the annual time of difficulty in the spring. If the amount in store had suddenly been raised to anything approaching 60 million *shi*, the implied annual purchase quota might indeed have overstrained post-harvest markets, especially as the pressure of demand was regionally concentrated. The question of the likely impact of such major purchases (theoretically, perhaps 18 million *shi* per annum) is academic: the targets set in 1738–39 were abandoned as chimerical within a few years. However, the beginnings of the well-known eighteenth-century inflationary trend were already in evidence by the late 1730s and early 1740s.[34] Ignorant of the complex, multi-causal explanations which twentieth-century economic historians were later to devise, many contemporary officials blamed the build-up of state grain stocks.[35]

So far, my account has offered little that is new. Indeed, it is already possible to gain a broad outline of the debate by combining material from the published work of several scholars.[36] This material suggests that the debate had three peaks: a date in the early 1740s, probably 1743, when concern over rising prices led to some sort of moratorium on buying for the granaries; 1748–49, when the emperor consulted the provincial chief administrators on the cause of the continuing inflation, and then reduced the global storage target; and 1752–53, when the debate fizzled out after what look like unprecedentedly radical proposals for drastic curtailment of the ever-normal system. The events of 1748–49 have generally received the most attention. It is almost obligatory, in accounts of Qing grain storage, to mention that the empire-wide storage target underwent an almost 30 per cent cut, in early 1749, from a figure which

31 The standard *shi* used in granary administration was equivalent to approximately 103.6 litres. Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, p.236.

32 Lü Xiaoxian, comp., "Qianlong sannian zhi sanshiyi nian nagu juanjian shiliao" [Materials on the selling of *jiansheng* tiles for grain, 1738–/1766], part I, *Lishi dang'an* 44 (1991, no. 4): 3–5; and, e.g., First Historical Archives, *Zhupi zouzhe, Caizheng, Cangchu* [Rescripted palace memorials, Fiscal matters, Granary reserves] (hereafter First Historical Archives, *CC*), Grand Secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly, Qianlong (QL) 8/R4/6. The available provincial supplementary and revised total targets are tabulated in Dunstan, *State or merchant?*, where the problems with determining the new empire-wide total target are discussed at length. For the provincial-level tightening of granary administration rules in 1738, see Hoshi, *Chūgoku shakai fukushi seisaku*, pp.96–102.

33 Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, p.183; Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.33–4, 53–6.

34 For example, according to Wang Yeh-chien's calculations, after 1736 (and with a break in 1740), the annual price for husked rice at Suzhou (a central grain market of supra-regional importance) was progressively moving upwards from the conventionally recognized "normal" level of 1.0 tael per *shi*, which happened to be the annual price in 1735 and 1736. It reached a first peak of 1.6 tl./*shi* in 1743. Wang Yeh-chien, "Secular trends of rice prices in the Yangzi Delta, 1638–1935," in *Chinese history in economic perspective*, ed. Thomas G. Rawski and Lillian M. Li (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992), Table 1.1.

35 For Wang Yeh-chien's explanation of the eighteenth-century inflation, see ibid., pp.64–5, and preceding discussion.

36 See especially Gao Wangling, "Yige wei wanjie de changshi: Qingdai Qianlong shiqi de liangzheng he liangshi wenti" [An incomplete experiment: provisioning policy and grain-supply problems in the Qianlong period of the Qing dynasty], *Jiuzhou xuekan* 2.3 (1988): 16, 20–40; Kishimoto Mio, "Shinchō chūki keizai seisaku no kichō—1740 nendai no shokuryō mondai o chūshin ni" [The tone of mid-Qing economic policy as seen in the 1740s food grain crisis], *Chikaki ni arite—kin-gendai Chūgoku o meguru tōron no hiroba* 11 (1987): 24–5; Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, pp.191–2; and Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.142–7.

everyone agrees is 48 million *shi* or so, to about 33.8 million.[37]

That portion of my own research which is summarized here focusses rather on the earlier years of the debate (1739–45). Besides clarifying various details, such as the origin of the 48 million *shi* target, it sets out to uncover the true issues, pattern and dynamics of the whole debate, using archival sources. In fact, the discussions held in 1748, while highly interesting, are not outstandingly important. This is partly because the emperor's decision was probably not deeply influenced by the diverse and generally thoughtful advice submitted from the provinces; it is also because the basic arguments had been repeated many times before, and must have been well-known throughout the upper levels of the civil service. It any case, a 30 per cent cut in the global storage target does not necessarily imply a 30 per cent cut in actual reserves. The 48 million *shi* target, established mainly during 1743–44, was certainly more realistic than the 60 million one, but it is most unlikely that it had ever been reached. It would be going too far to describe the 1748–49 target-reduction as a non-event: storage levels did rise during the 1740s, and it is conceivable that they peaked at 85 per cent, or even more, of the 48 million *shi* target.[38] However, viewed as a whole, the debate about the optimum level of official grain stockpiling was to some extent an exercise in unreality, in its early stages reminiscent of the Great Leap Forward. The interpretative challenge that it poses is to penetrate the shell of seemingly responsible public policy discussion and discern the real interests, motives, and issues activating the participants—a risky enterprise indeed. Before embarking on it, let me first complete the story.

How Qianlong First Became Disillusioned with his High-Level Storage Policy

Here, in outline, is the pattern of events during the early years of the debate. In 1738, as mentioned, the emperor, responding to one investigating censor's proposal, took the initiative which led to the high-level storage target (up to 60 million *shi*). During 1739–42, there was a spate of critical memorials, several of them by censorial personnel. All focussed, geographically, on the vast area whose cities were routinely fed by the long-distance grain trade carried on the River Yangzi; all claimed that official buying harmed the interests of consumers by pushing up grain prices. Two of the authors went further to suggest that the whole ever-normal system was pernicious. These were Wu Wei 吳煒, who would ideally have liked to see the existing stockpiles sold off at less than the current market price, and Yang Eryou 楊二酉, for whom the state was a more heinous speculator and monopolist than any of those whom it sought to control. Especially notable (that is, especially often mentioned in subsequent years) were four memorials calling for the limitation

[37] E.g., Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, pp.192–3; Gao, "Yige wei wanjie de changshi," pp.24–5; Kuroda Akinobu, "Shindai bichiku kō: shisan keitai yori mita keizai kōzō ron" [Grain storage under the Qing dynasty: an economic structural approach in terms of asset forms], *Shirin* 71.6 (1988): 4–5. In fact, scholars using the Western calendar habitually, but erroneously, refer to the target revision as having taken place in 1748. The emperor indeed ordered the new policy direction in 1748, but the detailed recommendations including actual new target figures were not presented until early 1749. *Da Qing Gaozong Chun Huangdi shilu* [Veritable records of the Qianlong period] (hereafter QSL/QL), 330:33b–35b (entry for 30 January 1749).

[38] My present estimate of the maximum amount of grain ever likely to have been held in the granaries at any one time in the 1740s is between 40 and 42 million *shi*. Unfortunately, although this estimate is based largely on a set of provincial-level figures, it has also been necessary to make a number of assumptions owing to gaps in, and other problems with, these data. See Dunstan, *State or merchant?*, for an explanation of the estimate, as well as an analysis of the opinions submitted to the emperor in 1748–49 and a discussion of the real motivation for the cutting of the targets.

[39] First Historical Archives, *CC*, Lu Zhuo, QL 4/6/12; Grand Secretaries and Board of Revenue, QL 4/2/5; Ji Huang, QL 6/7/16; Yang Eryou, QL 7/4/18 (translated in Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels*, pp.85–8); First Historical Archives, *Huke hongben, Cangchu* [Copies of routine memorials made for the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue: Granary reserves] (hereafter First Historical Archives, *HHCC*), Bundle 93, Board of Revenue, QL 8/6/3.

[40] Sun came from the Hangzhou region, and comparison of the past and present Zhejiang rice prices cited in his memorial with Wang's time series for nearby Xiaoshan suggests that Sun was selecting data in such

or cessation of state buying for the granaries, at least to the extent that it involved official buyers from the downstream Yangzi Valley provinces enjoying preferential access to the rich grain surpluses of Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei. All four proposals were rejected, although two of them elicited concessions. The more important of the two concessions came in early 1742, when provincial chief administrators were ordered to survey their provinces' existing granary reserves, and identify any granaries which could be deemed sufficiently full to need no further purchasing for the time being. This set a precedent, and indicated that the central government was weakening.[39]

The next stage came in the early summer of 1742, when an investigating censor called Sun Hao 孫灝 submitted a memorial claiming, with data that look somewhat massaged in the light of Wang Yeh-chien's research, that the "daily rising" price of rice was an alarming threat to popular well-being in the Yangzi Delta provinces.[40] Sun proposed that the high-level storage targets be reduced. This was partly in the name of realism—for, sure enough, only three provinces were making anything like significant progress towards meeting their high targets—and partly because lower targets would, in the long run, mean less official buying. The grand secretaries and the Nine Ministries Assembly, called on to consider Sun's proposal jointly, could only recognize the voice of common sense, and recommend that all provincial chief administrators be ordered to reset their targets.[41] They gave a strong hint that the new targets need not be greatly in excess of the original, pre-1738 ones (which, for convenience, I shall hereafter call the "basic targets"). The emperor accepted their proposals.[42] The process of resetting targets took over two years, and was influenced by two successive policy changes. To make a complex story simple, those provinces whose revised targets were approved *before* the second change of policy generally ended up with very modest targets; those provinces which waited until *after* the second change of policy tended to have targets which were almost as ambitious as those set in 1738–39, or even more so. Explanation of this strange phenomenon will be found below; for now, suffice it to remark that the fact that such a thing could happen illustrates the wildness of the policy shifts and the confusion they produced in the bureaucracy.

It was these revised targets, approved mostly in 1743--44, whose total was probably 48 million *shi*. Certainty as to the total is elusive partly because the archival document setting out the detailed figures is torn near the end, and also because the authorities of one province (Fujian) were playing their own game, and did not set a target when the others did.[43] However, 48 million *shi* would be a plausible total. As envisaged by the joint recommendations of the grand

/a way as to exaggerate the sharpness of the price rise. Wang, "Secular trends of rice prices in the Yangzi Delta," Table 1.1.

[41] The Nine Ministries Assembly (literally, Nine Chief Ministers, *jiu qing* 九卿) was a large, high-level deliberative body comprising all the senior officials of the nine major "outer court" departments of the central government /(that is, the six administrative boards, the Censorate, the Office of Transmission, and the Court of Judicial Review). Joint sessions involving this body could include over fifty people. In this article, I use the term "grand secretaries" despite Bartlett's warning (*Monarchs and ministers*, p.174) that in the early Qianlong period, these words often in fact designate "the topmost echelon of grand councillors." It is true that the leading "inner-court grand secretaries" also headed the Grand Council, but it does not necessarily follow that referring a matter to them was seen as referring it to the Grand Council (as Bartlett tends to imply). It is clear from the arrangement of the list of "signatories" to a joint report of the grand secretaries and the Nine Ministries Assembly in 1743 that those grand secretaries present (three of whom were not grand councillors) attended in their capacity as grand secretaries, and that although all but one of the grand councillors were there, they were present more in their capacity as grand secretaries or board presidents than as grand councillors. First Historical Archives, *CC*, Grand Secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly, QL 8/R4/6.

[42] Both Sun's memorial and the deliberators' response are transcribed in First Historical Archives, *HHCC*, Bundle 87, Zhang Yunsui, QL 8/2/28 and similar "routine memorials" written in response to the new orders.

[43] Most of the 1743--44 targets may be extracted from a list originally appended to the early 1749 memorial presenting detailed recommendations for the cutting of these targets (see n.37 above). See First Historical Archives, *CC*, "Ge sheng changping cang gu ding'e qingdan" [List of established provincial targets for ever-normal granary grain holdings]. This fragment, which may be ascribed with some certainty to 1749, has been erroneously entered under 1744 in the published catalogue. See Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'an Guan, comp., *Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'an Guan guancang Qingdai zhupi zouzhe caizheng lei mulu* [Catalogue of Qing imperially-rescripted palace memorials relating to fiscal matters held by the First Historical Archives of China], vol.3, *Kuchu cangchu* [Treasury and granary reserves] (Beijing: Zhongguo Caizheng Jingji Chubanshe, 1992), p.612, document no. 1132-016. The story of target resetting in Fujian is complex; an attempt to unravel it is made in Dunstan, *State or merchant?*

secretaries and the Nine Ministries Assembly, any additional stocks needed to meet the new, compromise targets were still to be acquired by selling *jiansheng* titles in return for grain.

What were the two changes of policy? First, in May 1743, another investigating censor (Wei Tingpu 衛廷璞) requested a one-year moratorium on buying for the granaries, so that the economy's "health" (*yuanqi* 元氣) could recover from the alleged inflationary consequences of state buying.[44] The very next day, the emperor sent down an edict suspending the attempt to collect grain by selling *jiansheng* titles, and also all buying for the granaries which took place across provincial borders. Explaining the rationale for this decision, he commented that only 6 of the 32 million bushels to be acquired for the granaries under the plan of 1738–39 had so far been received, "and yet the price of grain is rising everywhere." The new policy departure is generally referred to in the sources simply as a "halt to buying," which reflects the implementational details drawn up by the grand secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly. These implied a complete suspension of all buying, even that done on local markets, and even in cases in which the existing granary reserves had been used up completely. Buying was to take place only when "there has been an abundant harvest, the grain price has fallen, and the farmers have surplus grain."[45] There was an ambiguity here, which may have been deliberate. Would buying be acceptable once a good harvest had brought prices down from the most recent seasonal peak, or only when *annual* prices had resumed the accustomed lower levels of past years? It is the latter interpretation which the radical critics of the ever-normal system would have preferred.

The summer of 1743 saw an intense debate between defenders of the ever-normal system, who worried about depletion of the granaries and the risks of unpreparedness in the event of famine; and the system's attackers, who argued that, as the inflation had been gradual, the moratorium intended to reverse it would have to be prolonged. The attackers did not win the day; to the contrary, between June and November the emperor reassured a number of worried provincial chief administrators by indicating that careful, limited grain purchases within provincial boundaries could be approved provided that harvest conditions were suitable. In August, he explicitly told the new governor-general of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu that provincial chief administrators were expected to use their discretion, and that buying should "naturally" be done if a given area had had a good harvest and prices were normal.[46] The attackers had failed to convince the emperor, and yet their arguments, however unsuccessful, are most interesting. In the second half of August, Wu Wei made a renewed, impassioned plea for the court to save society from the sickness of high grain prices by having the empire's granary reserves sold off in their entirety, at greatly reduced prices. In future, he

[44] First Historical Archives, *CC*, Wei Tingpu, QL 8/4/15

[45] QSL/QL, 189:1b–3a; First Historical Archives, *CC*, Grand Secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly, QL 8/R4/6.

[46] See Qianlong's rescripts to the following memorials: First Historical Archives, *CC*, Ya'ertu, QL 8/R4/25; Chen Hongmou, QL 8/7/20; Chen Dashou, QL 8/7/22; Yan Sisheng, QL 8/8/3; Ka'erjishan, QL 8/8/19; and Shise, QL 8/10/3. His remarks to the Sichuan (etc.) governor-general are quoted in *CC*, Board of Revenue, QL 8/11/3. Shise even secured permission to carry out limited restocking of Henan's badly depleted granaries although parts of the province had suffered harvest failures.

suggested, famine relief should be distributed in monetary form (that is, in silver). Outright abolition of the whole granary system was an extreme proposal, even by the standards of the radicals; yet Sun Hao and an "academician expositor-in-waiting" called Li Qingzhi 李清植 had argued two months earlier for at least the partial use of silver in relief distributions. "Issuing relief in a mixture of grain and silver" (*yin gu jianzhen* 銀穀兼賑) was a tolerated expedient at the time; its existence made it possible to argue that it was not necessary to keep the granaries stocked even up to basic target level, provided that silver was held instead.[47]

Distributing silver to famine victims is, of course, defensible only given the assumptions (a) that there is grain available somewhere; and (b) that the hungry will have access to it if their purchasing power is high enough for them to compete successfully both for the stocks remaining in their own community, and for external supplies whose destination is controlled by profit-minded merchants. The ghost of an argument that this would be the case is faintly visible when one combines wording from Sun's memorial with an idea expressed by Li and Wu. Sun expressed recognition that not all grain supplies would be exhausted even in a famine year; Li and Wu made the point that if only famine victims had the money to buy grain, the merchants would be eager to bring grain to sell to them. Without speaking, as a modern economist might have done, of the peasants' "market power" or "market command," these mid-eighteenth-century "Confucian bureaucrats" had basically grasped the thought behind these concepts.[48] The possible significance of their ideas will be discussed below.

[47] For the three memorials, see First Historical Archives, *CC*, Wu Wei, QL 8/7/2; Sun Hao, n.d. (presumably QL 8/5; catalogue no. 1125-032); and Li Qingzhi, QL 8/5/3.

[48] Cf. Amartya Sen's use of these terms in his analysis of the Ethiopian famine of 1972–74. According to Sen, famine victims in the Ethiopian province of Wollo could have been saved had they possessed "the market power to pull food into Wollo." Sen, *Poverty and famines: an essay on entitlement and deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.96.

A Dream Comes Back to Life (Transformed): from Moratorium to the Painless Method of Granary Restocking

The 1743 moratorium was the first of the two changes of policy mentioned above. The second was a renewed lease of life given to the title-selling programme (that is, the attempt to sell *jiansheng* titles specifically for grain) in the spring of 1744.[49] It is here that the story becomes truly complicated; yet the sources provide sufficient hints for us to begin to unravel the motives of the proponents of the policy departure. These motives were not necessarily creditable, at least by the standards of traditional thought about the responsibility of emperors and their servants to cherish the people. The following pages narrate first how the moratorium came to be abandoned, and then how, during 1744–45, the central government (with advice from two provincial chief administrators) tried to edge the provinces into arrangements which would putatively obviate the need for buying grain for granary restocking, while raising funds for the state treasury.

[49] For the sake of conciseness, in what follows the term "title-selling programme" will be used to refer to the attempt to acquire stocks for the ever-normal granaries by selling *jiansheng* titles. The reader should be aware, however, that (as explained below) there existed a second way of selling *jiansheng* titles: in exchange for silver, payable at the Board of Revenue. Sales of *jiansheng* titles for silver had not been suspended in May 1743.

By the spring of 1744, the emperor had grown dissatisfied with the moratorium policy, which had not yielded significant results in terms of lowering grain prices. What, according to the emperor, the policy had done was encourage negligence among provincial chief administrators, who, he alleged, had taken advantage of the moratorium to let granary reserves run down because it meant less bother. This was not completely fair: some governors had been most anxious for permission to buy grain, despite the moratorium, because their provinces had recently had natural disasters, and they wanted to restock the granaries before the next emergency.[50] The ambiguity of the original instructions, moreover, would seem to have provided an excuse; with widespread references to a simple "halt to buying," provincial chief administrators could, one would have thought, have been forgiven for assuming that this was in fact the policy. However, as we shall see, there was good reason for the duties of buying and storing grain to be unpopular with the territorial bureaucracy, and the emperor's suspicion may not have been entirely without foundation in some cases. He himself (following suggestions from concerned officials) had done his part to see that granary reserves were not excessively depleted by the moratorium. He had authorized the reallocation of the equivalent of almost 2 million *shi* unhusked from the tribute grain to help restock the granaries of nine provinces; and he had arranged for smaller amounts of grain to be bought on the markets of Sichuan and Shaanxi, which were well-stocked at the time, and sent to other provinces to help with granary replenishment.[51] For the purposes of rhetoric, provincial governors-general and governors could be taken to task for failing to match his commitment.

In March 1744, the emperor cancelled the moratorium, replacing it with the injunction that in future, the responsible officials should "buy when buying is appropriate, and cease when ceasing is appropriate."[52] This was no innovation: guidelines to protect local markets from the rigid buying requirements implicit in the ever-normal stock rotation system had been in place for several years.[53] At this point, the emperor had no positive policy in view, a fact surely reflected in his eagerness to castigate the provincial chief administrators. What induced him to adopt the second actual change of policy, which came during the following month (April 1744), was an ingenious and well-crafted memorial by Anning 安寧, a Manchu who had until recently been the provincial administration commissioner for Jiangsu, but who was now on mourning leave. Anning's starting-point was the opinion that purchasing for the granaries must be suspended for a period of years if there was to be any real impact on the annual level of grain prices. The purpose of his memorial was to argue that the sale of *jiansheng* titles for grain should be revived as a non-inflationary *alternative* for restocking the granaries.

When the title-selling programme had been suspended as part of the moratorium, the rationale had been that grain used to pay for *jiansheng* titles

[50] See the memorials cited in n.46 above.

[51] QSL/QL, 196:18a–b, 203:16a–b; First Historical Archives, *CC*, Board of Revenue, QL 8/11/3.

[52] QSL/QL, 209:8a–9a.

[53] See Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.149–50, and e.g., First Historical Archives, *HHCC*, Bundle 93, Board of Revenue, QL 8/6/3. The latter source cites a 1740 recommendation of the grand secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly (in response to one of the early attacks on the ever-normal system) that the territorial bureaucracy be ordered to be sensitive to market conditions in fulfilling the annual grain purchase requirements. Buying was to be suspended as soon as market prices rose, and carried out gradually and cautiously thereafter.

had to come out of the total stock available for commercial distribution; immobilizing it in the state granaries therefore contributed to depleting markets and provoking higher prices in the same way as state buying did.[54] To overcome this objection, Anning had to argue that what made state buying inflationary was not the sheer quantity bought, but rather certain specific features of the official buying process. Having done this at some length, he went on to claim that the title-selling programme, by contrast, would not be inflationary. As the emperor had observed in the moratorium edict, grain delivered to the granaries in exchange for *jiansheng* titles either came out of the private stocks of local wealthy families, or else was purchased on the market. Anning had an answer for each possibility. Grain held in private storage might well be destined for commercial distribution, but only after a period of speculative hoarding. Presumably (although Anning did not spell this out), acquiring for state management grain which might otherwise have been deliberately held off the market would put a check on price increases. Meanwhile, aspirants to *jiansheng* status who had to buy the grain they needed to pay the authorities would do so only while the price was low. When markets were at risk of depletion, the high prices would deter grain-buying for this non-essential purpose. Shortage would therefore not result.[55]

This sufficed to persuade the emperor. In early April, he issued an edict restoring the policy of selling *jiansheng* titles for grain deliveries to the ever-normal granaries. He also ordered a reduction in the amount of grain payable per title; without some such concession, the policy would have been totally incredible, since sales had been so disappointing during 1738–43. Although he did not yet require the provinces to rely entirely on selling *jiansheng* titles to fill their granaries, he did hold out the possibility that if enough grain were collected through these sales, the purchase system could be stopped indefinitely.[56]

Not only is the argumentation of this edict indebted to Anning's memorial: there are actually some small traces of plagiarism.[57] Reprehensible as this may seem, there was poetic justice; it is likely that Anning himself had made conceptual borrowings from an earlier memorial by the governor and governor-general for Jiangxi, and done his share of unacknowledged paraphrase. When the moratorium was declared in May 1743, Jiangxi and Fujian had been granted permission to continue selling *jiansheng* titles at cut-price rates for the rest of a previously authorized experimental year; at about the beginning of 1744, the Jiangxi authorities reported considerable success with this approach.[58] The Jiangxi document on which Anning probably drew was a request for further extension of Jiangxi's title-selling programme, not as a means of enabling the province to meet some higher storage target, but rather as a potentially almost complete substitute for the annual routine buying process. The authors held out a fiscal incentive: if the granaries were restocked using grain "contributed" in exchange for *jiansheng* titles, the proceeds of each

[54] QSL/QL, 189:2b–3a.

[55] First Historical Archives, *CC*, Anning, QL 9/2/10.

[56] QSL/QL, 211:16b–18a.

[57] Bartlett (*Monarchs and ministers*, p.275) sets an important challenge for other historians where she mentions that "we cannot identify for sure all the sources of the ideas expressed in ... court letters"; one might add "or other eighteenth-century edicts." Case studies such as that presented here should permit progress on this question, while illustrating that it was not only the grand councillors whose thought informed the wording of imperial decrees.

[58] QSL/QL, 189:4b and 209:4a–b. For a fuller transcription of the Jiangxi authorities' report, see First Historical Archives, *CC*, Grand Secretaries, n.d. (presumably QL 9/1; catalogue no.1148-039). The catalogue (p.648) erroneously dates this document 1749.

spring's "stablizing sales" would not, as now, be needed for buying grain after harvest, but could instead be allocated to military purposes.[59]

Even the Jiangxi authorities had insufficient reason to believe that selling titles could almost entirely replace state purchases as a means of annually replenishing the granaries. What was their motive for proposing so unreliable a strategy? Desire to show commitment to the court's fiscal interests may have played a part, but the real point is revealed in their observation that selling *jiansheng* titles provided the only means of promptly restocking the granaries without incurring the "burden of buying" (*caimai zhi lei* 採買之累). That concern to eliminate the onerous annual buying process was indeed uppermost is strongly suggested by two earlier directives from the Jiangxi governor explaining the cut-price sales policy to the people of Jiangxi and his subordinates. He urges both to cooperate in making the policy work, so that purchasing can at least be reduced, and perhaps eventually (if enough titles are sold) indefinitely ended. Ending the purchase system would benefit the people of Jiangxi by eliminating high market prices and forced sales; it would benefit officialdom by sparing it the chore of annual buying. The governor responsible for this legitimation of officialdom's proverbial aversion to onerous tasks was that putative paragon of conscientious Confucian administration, Chen Hongmou 陳弘謀.[60]

By the mid-1740s, it was commonplace to allege that local magistrates so resented the personal liability that being responsible for large amounts of grain imposed on them that they deliberately sabotaged the title-selling policy.[61] During 1738–43, it might have been highly rational for a county magistrate to try to deter would-be purchasers of *jiansheng* titles with various irritations and unofficial fees. By doing so, he might hope to avoid finding himself financially responsible for a stockpile twice as large as that which was already giving him considerable worry. The naive policy of seeking to double reserves flew in the face of the personal interests of granary administrators. After the potential nightmare of doubled stockpiles had been removed, it was far from irrational for the relieved territorial bureaucracy to try to consolidate its gains by whittling down the size of stocks still further. Advocacy of the principle of issuing famine relief in the form of silver can arguably be seen, in part, as an indirect expression of the interest of county magistrates in minimizing their liability for actual grain. Similarly, encouraging county magistrates to believe that if only they could sell sufficient *jiansheng* titles, they could be relieved of the headache of annual buying may have been the only way to elicit their sincere cooperation with the title-selling policy. Yet if buying were indeed abandoned, and the size of the reserves did therefore shrink, the average non-activist administrator would have shed few tears. After all, one could give famine victims silver.

I mentioned earlier that when the provincial storage targets were reset in 1743–44, those targets which were set after the second change of policy (that

[59] First Historical Archives, *CC*, Yinjishan and Chen Hongmou, QL 8/12/16. The authors envisaged that "if there happen to be places where no one contributes," in good years grain could be purchased to restock their granaries, while in bad years transfers could be made from the surplus "contributed" grain of more fortunate jurisdictions nearby. In other words, purchasing would become the exception, not the norm.

[60] Chen Hongmou, *Peiyuan Tang oucun gao: wenxi* [Chance survivals from the Peiyuan Hall: Directives] (n.d.), 15:9a–12b (esp.12a), and 16:18a–20b (esp. 19b–20a).

[61] See, e.g., Chen Dashou, QL 9/4/24, transcribed in Lü, comp., "Qianlong sannian zhi shanshiyi nian nagu juanjian shiliao," part II, *Lishi dang'an* 45 (1992, no.1): 15. Chen hinted that extortion by county magistrates from applicants for *jiansheng* titles was motivated less by greed than by desire to discourage applications.

is, the revival of the title-selling programme) were typically high ones, in three cases actually higher than those of 1738--43. In principle, a revised target was, by definition, the old basic target plus a target for supplementary grain to be raised by selling *jiansheng* titles. At first sight, it appears that the reason for the high targets of 1744 must have been simply that, now that the title-selling policy had been restored, provincial officials took the opportunity to set ambitious targets, either because they really believed that their provinces needed larger grain reserves, or because setting ambitious targets was a harmless way of showing one's commitment to preparedness for famine. However, there are grounds for suspecting that the Fujian authorities were scheming to produce a situation in which their target for grain raised by selling *jiansheng* titles would be accepted not as a supplement to their basic target, but rather as a replacement for it.[62] It is conceivable that some other governors were thinking along similar lines. If so, the 48 million *shi* total compromise target of c.1744--49 is not only most unlikely ever to have been reached in practice; it was also unreal from the start.

The true intent (or at least, full implications) of the new policy of 1744 did not become manifest until the late summer of 1745. At that time, the Board of Revenue issued a memorandum to all provinces ordering that no grain be purchased for the granaries during the coming harvest season. The stated rationale was that the title-selling programme could be relied on for the gradual restocking of the granaries; there was, therefore, no need to spend the proceeds of past "stabilizing sales" on buying grain. Instead, the provincial administrations were required to send the Board detailed statements of the amounts of unexpended purchase funds in store within their jurisdictions. The Board would then be able to consider how best to reallocate these monies. There is nothing in the memorandum to suggest that the Board intended to restrict their use to famine preparedness or indeed relief; indeed, the wording justifies a fair degree of confidence that the Board did not intend such a restriction.[63]

It is obvious that the fiscal interests represented by the Board were now overtly influencing policy. The revival of the policy of selling *jiansheng* titles for grain had entailed a loss in central government revenue because it had meant discontinuation of the alternative approach of selling the titles for silver. Such silver had been paid directly to the Board. Selling *jiansheng* titles for silver was the normal policy; accepting payment in grain was, so to speak, a variant practice already used before the Qianlong period, but emphasized much more in the early Qianlong-period experiments.[64] Until 1741, the first experiment (use of title sales to attempt to double granary reserves) had been at the expense of the Board's silver income: payment for titles was accepted only in the form of grain deliveries to local (mainly county-level) granaries. In March 1741, however, the option of paying in silver at the Board had been restored as a concession to the Board president Haiwang 海望. Haiwang had

62 The case of Fujian is too complicated for discussion here. The reader is therefore referred to Dunstan, *State or merchant?*

63 The Board's memorandum is quoted in, e.g., First Historical Archives, *CC*, Chen Dashou, QL 10/8/16 and Yan Sisheng, QL 10/9/8. The Board required the detailed figures to be reported before the "winter allocations" (*dongbo* 冬撥). This strongly suggests that the monies in question were to be drawn into the general revenue allocation process, and might be budgeted for the upkeep of the armed forces, administrative salaries, subsidies to revenue-deficient provinces, or other categories of government expenditure. Cf. Iwai Shigeki, "Shindai kokka zaisei ni okeru chūō to chihō--shakuhatsu seido o chūshin ni shite" [Centre and provinces in fiscal administration in the Qing dynasty, with special reference to the *zhuobo* (allocation) system], *Tōyōshi kenkyū* 42.2 (1983): 141–2.

64 On the pre-Qianlong use of title-selling as a means of building granary reserves, see Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.28–30.

expressed regret at the sacrifice of (he said) up to 1.3 million taels per year for an experiment whose results so far had been quite disappointing.[65]

According to an opinion prevalent among responsible officials, allowing applicants to pay in silver guaranteed the failure of attempts to raise large quantities of grain by selling *jiansheng* titles. Most applicants who had the choice preferred to pay in silver. Not only were transactions at the Board simple and swift compared with the unpleasantness of dealing with obstructive county magistrates; but with grain prices on an upward trend, the advantage of paying a fixed price in silver also far outweighed the inconvenience of having to make the payment in Beijing.[66] Thus when in April 1744 the court embarked on the second experiment (selling *jiansheng* titles as a substitute for buying grain), it cancelled the option of paying in silver at the Board of Revenue.[67]

This new reversal cannot have sat well with Board officials, who would have watched the revenue flow in since 1741, and especially during the moratorium year, when paying silver was the only way of buying *jiansheng* status. It is true that, in principle, the monetary proceeds of *jiansheng* titles were earmarked for famine relief. Haiwang may have been sincere, in 1741, in arguing that the cause of preparedness for famine would be better served by selling *jiansheng* titles for silver than by selling them for grain.[68] However, there may have been those at the Board who would have wished to see the silver revenue from title sales released for other governmental purposes. The Board memorandum of late summer 1745 may be seen in part as the Board's attempt to compensate for its revenue loss the previous year: if the central government treasury was not to benefit directly from *jiansheng* title sales, it could at least lay claim to funds in local treasuries which the new policy experiment had freed (or would have freed, if it had been successful). The fact that the substitute revenue now requisitioned by the Board came from a different source than the earmarked original would no doubt facilitate its diversion to uses unrelated to famine relief.

That such diversion was intended was the view of Wan Nianmao 萬年茂, a censorial official who wrote a sharp critical response to the Board memorandum. Wan admitted that he was puzzled by the memorandum's wording, but expressed the suspicion that the Board planned to use the funds for army pay. His guess was reasonable and may have been accurate: by the summer of 1745, the Qing state was embroiled in an ill-fated military adventure in western Sichuan. Although minor compared with the ensuing first Jinchuan 金川 campaign, the operations lasted longer, and proved more costly, than was at first anticipated.[69] Wan was further almost certainly correct in arguing that the implication of the Board's new policy, if upheld for a few years, was the complete annihilation of the granary system. Not only would the reserves dwindle, as the hollowness of the title-selling policy was yet again revealed, but local magistrates would also have lost the means to replenish them

[65] QSL/QL, 136:8b–10a: and Haiwang, QL 6/2/8, transcribed in Lü, comp., "Qianlong sannian zhi sanshiyi nian," part I, pp.14–15.

[66] In any case, special courier services made it possible to buy a *jiansheng* certificate with silver without travelling in person to Beijing. Huang You, QL 3/7/13 (date of rescript), transcribed in ibid., part I, pp.7–8. See First Historical Archives, *CC*, Depei, QL 8/3/27 for one of many expositions of the difficulty of selling *jiansheng* titles for grain when high grain prices raised the real cost per title far above the set price in silver. In this example, applicants were being asked to pay grain worth up to about 200 taels for a title which they could have bought in Beijing for 108 taels (the standard charge).

[67] QSL/QL, 211:17b.

[68] See, e.g., QSL/QL, 61/2a–b; and, for Haiwang's discussion, the memorial cited in n.65 above.

[69] Dai Yi, *Qianlong di ji qi shidai* [The Qianlong emperor and his times] (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 1992), pp.169–70. "1735" on p.169 is a misprint for "1745."

through purchase. (Wan failed to mention that they would also have lost the capacity to give famine victims silver.) He went so far as to suggest that the disappearance of the reserves would be accelerated by the local magistrates' distaste for the entire system. The magistrates, he hinted, would be so pleased at the idea of losing the capacity to buy grain for the granaries that they would promptly sell off their existing stocks and have the proceeds added to the funds reported for reallocation. No funds for buying grain would mean no granaries.[70]

Although this last point may have been far-fetched, the reversal of imperial policy was by now complete. In 1738–39, the Qianlong emperor had, so to speak, sought to go down in history as the emperor who finally gave his subject "babes" security against harvest failures by doubling the granary reserves. In 1745, he acquiesced in a policy decision which released funds for the treasury while gambling on the successful sale of *jiansheng* titles to fill the granaries. He had come as close as any "high Qing" ruler ever did to authorizing Wu Wei's extreme proposal that the granary system be abolished.[71] Some hint as to how Qianlong justified his apostasy towards the poor is given by a highly rhetorical edict issued in May 1744, after the adoption of Anning's beguiling notion had prepared the way for the Board of Revenue's attempt to seize the granary restocking funds. This edict lectures the territorial bureaucracy on its duty to combat the mentality, alleged to be widespread among the common people, of "basking in [the willingness of] those above to make good what they lack and save and succour them, so that they depend upon it permanently as their strategy for the support of life." Officials who genuinely love the poor, suggests the edict, will concentrate on setting them on work.[72] It was common, at the time, to say that state grain stockpiling was necessary because the poor were unable to store grain for themselves; such inability to save was often explained as the result of popular improvidence.[73] This ruling-class perception left the poor quite vulnerable to withdrawals of sympathy by bureaucratic and imperial patrons. The Qianlong emperor was probably frustrated by the failure of his grand policy initiative of 1738–39; he may already have been turning his ambitions towards the military glory for which he later sought to be remembered. By 1744, it seems, it was convenient for him to lose sympathy with people allegedly too feckless to stand on their own feet. Moralism could therefore replace material assistance.

Of Arguments and Interests

Apart from mentioning that the policy of complete reliance on *jiansheng* title sales was abandoned within a few months (and that the Board of Revenue's *démarche* was successful only in the sense that, simultaneously with the abandonment, the Board recovered the power to sell *jiansheng* titles

[70] He Changling and Wei Yuan, comps, *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* [A statecraft anthology of our august dynasty] (1827; reprint of the 1873 edition, Taibei: Shijie Shuju, 1964), 40:3b–4b.

[71] The felicitous expression "high Qing" was originally Frederic Wakeman's, although he applies it to a longer period than seems appropriate to me. See his essay "High Ch'ing: 1683–1839," in *Modern East Asia: essays in interpretation*, ed. James B. Crowley (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), pp.1–28.

[72] QSL/QL, 213:10a–12b; translated in Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels*, pp.89–92.

[73] See, e.g., First Historical Archives, *CC*, Zhu Lunhan, QL 6/7/20, and Ya'ertu, QL 9/4/12; and Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, p.181.

for silver), I will end the narrative part of this article here.[74] Enough has been said, by the way, to suggest that a partial explanation for the decline of imperial power in China by the early nineteenth century may be sought quite simply in the contrasting competence as rulers of Yongzheng and the young Qianlong. The portrayal given above of Qianlong, repeatedly deciding policy according to the views of the most recent contributor to the debate, looks pitiful beside Yongzheng's masterly use of consultation to secure his fiscal reform objectives, as Madeleine Zelin has described.[75] Yongzheng led; Qianlong was led. Even allowing for Qianlong's youth, the episode augured poorly for the future.[76] However, I earlier promised an analysis transcending the parochial concerns of Qing historians. It is time to consider the story of the first half of the ever-normal granaries debate as, arguably, a case-study of the vicarious negotiation of conflicting interests.

As mentioned in the introductory part of this article, there were three sections of the population whose interests were at stake in this controversy: the lower levels of the territorial bureaucracy, the poor, and the community of grain merchants. The way in which the interests of the territorial bureaucracy were involved has already been made clear. The real interests of the poor were, ostensibly, the central topic of debate; the interests of the merchants were not openly addressed. The conventional assumption, to which many territorial administrators paid at least lip service, was that the interests of the poor were best served by the maintenance of substantial grain stockpiles in the ever-normal granaries. The occasional disturbances which took place when poor people's hopes or expectations of relief were not promptly fulfilled provide a crude, and not entirely unproblematic, validation of this view from the perspective of the poor themselves.[77] The claim of the critics of the granary system was, by contrast, that excessive buying for the granaries harmed the poor by pushing up grain prices. One could object that the true conflict was between different sections of the poor: the peasant producers who were the intended recipients of relief distributions, versus the urban consumers who were not entitled to receive relief but did need to buy food all through the year with limited cash incomes. However, one should not excessively fault participants in the debate for tending to speak simply of "the people," without differentiating between these two broad groups. The urban poor were conventionally thought to need assistance from "stabilizing sales" of granary grain in times of *cherté*, while contemporary observers lamented that too many peasants were at least partly dependent on the market for their food.[78] The granary reserves were of potential interest to most poor people; keeping grain affordable was important to more of the poor than those who lived in cities.

It was to some extent the more simplistic documents (such as imperial edicts) which tended to argue in crude quantitative terms that putting grain into the granaries caused high prices by depleting markets. Other writers

[74] For the *de facto* termination of the policy of reliance upon *jiansheng* title sales, see QSL/QL, 250:17a–b.

[75] Zelin, *The magistrate's tael*, chs 3–5.

[76] Qianlong reached the age of twenty-seven in 1738, and thirty-four in 1745.

[77] See, for example, the sources collected under the titles "Assembling to clamour for relief" and "Demands that granaries be opened and stabilizing sales made; seizures of grain" in Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, Qingshi yanjiusuo and Dang'anxi Zhongguo zhengzhi zhidu shi jiaoyanshi, comps, *Kang Yong Qian shiqi chengxiang renmin fankang douzheng ziliao* [Materials on the resistance struggle of the people in town and countryside during the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong periods] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1979), pp.562–86. These official sources commonly attribute such disturbances to the work of improperly motivated instigators, whether *diaomin* 刁民 (disreputable persons) or persons with government "student" status (*shengyuan* or *jiansheng*). This makes for difficulties of interpretation, but does not necessarily invalidate the suggestion that many of the disturbances did reflect the feelings of the ordinary poor. The women who assembled in Xiaoxian 蕭縣 (northern Jiangsu) to clamour for relief in February 1748, for instance, were probably expressing genuine anxieties, even though it suited officialdom to claim that there had been disreputable instigators. Blaming instigators exculpated local officials who could otherwise have been accused of taking inadequate measures. Ibid., p.566.

[78] See e.g., Will and Wong, *Nourish the people*, pp.53–4 (citing a 1738 memorial by the Liang-Jiang governor-general Nasutu 那蘇圖); and Zelin, *The magistrate's tael*, p.295 (citing the well-known 1748 memorial by Yang Xifu 楊錫紱 proposing explanations for the rise in grain prices).

understood full well that the basic issue was not whether large amounts of grain should be bought in the autumn, but rather, who should do the buying, state or merchant, and in what proportions. Anning was not the first to suggest that it was specific features of official buying that made it inflationary in a way that commercial purchasing was not. To the contrary, several versions of this argument had been put forward since the beginning of the debate in 1739, and not only by censorial critics seeking radical reform. The basic problem recognized by the memorial-writers was that, unlike merchants, official purchasers were under pressure to buy a predetermined large amount within a deadline. Not only did this make them vulnerable to the machinations of unscrupulous grain brokers, who put the prices up as soon as the all-too-visible contingents of official buyers started to arrive. It could also be claimed that the presence in the market of so many large and potentially dangerous competitors increased the anxiety of merchants to buy quickly, before the price rose any higher. Given that local consumers were also panic-buying, controllers of large stocks were naturally provoked to hold them off the market, pushing up the price still further. Thus was the price raised in supplier markets, such as those of the grain-rich Middle Yangzi provinces. The higher prices which long-distance merchants therefore had to pay were naturally passed on to consumers in importing provinces, such as Zhejiang and Jiangsu. This was, or course, assuming that the merchants who normally served these markets did not lose heart, and limit their participation in the trade until conditions had improved.[79]

Two radical critics, Wu Wei and Yang Eryou, were especially ingenious in framing arguments that the ever-normal system was positively harmful to the people. As I have introduced Yang's views elsewhere, suffice it to present Wu's accusation. In one of the earliest salvos of the debate, he suggested that local officials, having bought grain for the granaries at the elevated prices now prevailing, would not wish to part with it at cut-price rates. Rather, Wu alleged, they would charge market prices, even in so-called stabilizing sales. This would give merchant speculators a most unfortunate signal. If the "low" official price were actually high, merchants would set their sights on prices which were higher still, and (presumably) manipulate the market until they obtained them. Official grain transactions, so far from restraining speculators, would have given them an "excuse" for escalation.

In Wu's memorial, this allegation is made directly after the following more abstract statement about the difference between official and commercial management of the grain surplus:

> With commercial buying, the accumulated stocks of one region are taken and distributed in all directions, for which reason grain is daily observed to flow more freely. However, with official buying, stocks from the four directions are taken and accumulated in one place, for which reason grain is daily seen to be more insufficient.[80]

[79] See First Historical Archives, *CC*, Lu Zhuo, QL 4/6/12; Tian Mao, QL 8/6/21; and A'ersai, QL 8/8/10.

[80] Wu's memorial is quoted in First Historical Archives, *CC*, Grand Secretaries and Board of Revenue, QL 4/2/5. For Yang Eryou's allegations, see Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels*, pp.66–9 (and pp.85–8 for a translation of his memorial).

Similarly, Anning, in his 1744 memorial, represented the profit-motivated operations of commercial grain dealers as "natural," and official grain-trade operations as violating nature:

> In sum, the flowing of grain should [be permitted to] accord with nature. When merchants make their calculations, it is not that they are not actuated by [the thought of] profit, and yet, when they converge on Jiangxi and the Huguang provinces [Hunan and Hubei], the market price does not go up. The fact that, even though official purchases do not amount to one per cent of mercantile ones, they promptly cause a rise in grain prices, is not a natural outcome.[81]

The arguments were generally plausible; it does not follow that all of their makers were disinterested. The teasing possibility is that what was driving the most radical opponents of the granary system was agreement to defend the interests of grain merchants, in terms that would not be excessively transparent. The very purpose of the classic ever-normal system was to control merchant profiteering; the state was, in this sense, the merchant's adversary, but it was normally an adversary which knew its place. It was conventionally assumed that the bulk of the work of managing grain surpluses would be done by the private sector; as long as the state kept only small reserves, its threat to merchant profit margins remained insubstantial. However, the increase in state buying that resulted from Yongzheng's determination to build up the system was potentially of some concern to merchants; Qianlong's quixotic early policy of further doubling reserves implied substantial state encroachment on the merchants' market share. If indeed state purchasing pushed up cost prices for the merchants, this may have caused short-term disruption to their trading patterns, and an intensification of their "moral pariah" status once the disruption problems had been solved by passing on the higher prices to consumers. A merchant seeking to defend a certain profit margin had no interest in an increase in the general level of grain prices. To the contrary, grain merchants were the frequent targets of popular hostility, and were likely to be scapegoated when prices rose.[82]

Wu Wei's ideal of abolishing the granary reserves and giving famine victims only monetary help could have been precisely calculated to serve merchant interests. Not only would it remove state competition and its ill-effects; it would also transform famine victims into paying customers for grain sold at the higher-than-normal prices of a famine year.

Can we find any hints in the biographical data on the most radical critics (down to 1744) to suggest that they may indeed have had grain-trade connections? In an article published in 1987, Kishimoto Mio noticed that those radicals of whom she was aware had links with Zhejiang province, and speculated that they may have had connections with each other.[83] On the basis of my broader archival enquiries, I can confirm the link with Zhejiang, and specifically the Hangzhou area, but I must also admit that the places of

[81] First Historical Archives, *CC*, Anning, QL 9/2/10.

[82] Cf. R. Bin Wong, "Food riots in the Qing dynasty," *Journal of Asian Studies* 41.4 (1982): 771, 774–6, 779–80; Will, *Bureaucracy and famine*, p.215; and the materials collected in Zhongguo Renmin Daxue, Qingshi yanjiusuo and Zhongguo zhengzhi zhidu shi jiaoyanshi, comps, *Kang Yong Qian shiqi chengxiang renmin fankang douzheng ziliao*, pp.586–94.

[83] Kishimoto, "Shinchō chūki keizai seisaku no kichō," p.24.

[84] The arrangement, familiar to Qing specialists, by which there was a single governor-general for Zhejiang and Fujian, was finally stabilized only after 1738. Zhao Erxun et al., *Qingshi gao* [Draft standard history of the Qing dynasty], 48 vols (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuji, 1976–77), vol.8, p.2,127.

origin of some radicals were much farther afield. Wu Wei and Sun Hao were both either from the vicinity of Hangzhou, or from the city itself; another radical called Xu Yisheng 徐以升 came from a county (Deqing 德清) which was situated midway between Hangzhou and Huzhou. Ji Huang 嵇璜, who may conceivably have helped advance the radicals' cause in formal central government deliberations, came from Wuxi, but his father had been Zhejiang governor-general (*sic*) during 1736–38, in which capacity he would have been based in Hangzhou.[84] Wu, Sun, and Ji had all obtained the *jinshi* degree at the same examination (that of 1730).[85] However, in addition to at least two Manchus who were radically critical of the official purchase system, there were two notable Chinese exceptions to the Zhejiang connection. Yang Eryou was from Taiyuan County, just south of the city of Taiyuan, Shanxi; Wei Tingpu, the author of the moratorium proposal, was from Guangzhou (city or its vicinity).[86] Both may have been conversant with merchant ways of thinking, but there is no *prima facie* reason to link them with a putative network of Zhejiang grain trade interests.

Initial soundings of readily available biographical materials suggest that it may be worth searching for evidence of familial or other connections between Sun Hao, Wu Wei, Xu Yisheng, Ji Huang and the Zhejiang merchant community. For example, Xu Yisheng was a member of a relatively shallow local descent group the son of whose founding ancestor is likely at least to have had grain-trade connections, to judge by the philanthropic action for which he was remembered. Ji Huang wrote a biography of one of Xu's cousins.[87] These are, of course, at best small clues, of the kind typically furnished by pre-modern Chinese biographical sources. It may be possible to accumulate further suggestive data, but not to prove decisively that the particular individuals named above had links with grain merchants. Not only do those sources which aim to depict their subjects in a favourable light tend to be reticent about merchant connections, but it may also be that the contacts in question were of a clandestine nature, and would not have reached the written record unless exposed by other censors.

The arguments of radicals such as Sun Hao and Wu Wei went in the direction of upholding merchant interests. There was a strong Zhejiang connection, which the participation of "outsiders" such as Yang Eryou and Wei Tingpu may have been deliberately arranged to camouflage. The existence of a conspiracy to give Lower Yangzi grain-trade interests political representation that by the standards of the day was illegitimate has not been proved; however, it is still suggested. Even if there was no conspiracy, and even if the radicals did not deliberately set out to defend the interests of the grain merchants, they were still doing so by implication. Thus the episode considered in the present article need not be seen only as an early warning of Qianlong's underlying weakness as a ruler. It can also be interpreted as vicarious representation of grain-trade and low-level bureaucratic interests

[85] For the radicals' places of origin and *jinshi* dates, see Zhu Baojiong and Xie Peilin, comps, *Ming Qing jinshi timing beilu suoyin* [An index to Ming and Qing lists of successful candidates for the *jinshi* degree], 3 vols (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1980), vol.1, pp.564, 747, 875; vol.2, p.964; vol.3, pp.2,691, 2,698–9. On Ji Huang and his father Ji Zengyun, see Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing period (1644–1912)*, 2 vols (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943–44), vol.1, pp.119–20. Ji was the author of one of the four early memorials repeatedly cited as having originated the call for the reduction or cessation of official buying for the granaries (for reference, see n.39 above). By May 1743, when the moratorium on buying was declared, he had a place, however junior, in the Nine Ministries Assembly by virtue of his appointment as a vice-commissioner in the Office of Transmission. See his inclusion among the "signatories" to the joint advisory report which twisted the emperor's originally limited instructions into a general so-called "halt to buying." First Historical Archives, *CC*, Grand Secretaries and Nine Ministries Assembly, QL 8/R4/6.

[86] Zhu and Xie, comps, *Ming Qing jinshi timing beilu suoyin*, vol.1, p.689; vol.2, p.1,655.

[87] For mention of the virtuous second ancestor, see Min Erchang, comp., *Beizhuan ji bu* [A supplement to "Collected biographical inscriptions"] (Beijing: Yanjing Daxue, 1932), 11:3a, in the biography of Xu Yikun 徐以坤 of Deqing County. That Xu Yikun and Xu Yisheng were cousins (albeit not necessarily close ones) is established by the fact that they had a common great-grandfather, the metropolitan official Xu Zhuo 徐倬. Compare ibid., loc. cit., with 1932 *Deqing xian xinzhi* [New gazetteer of Deqing county], 8:9a (where Xu Zhuo is referred to by his *zi*, Fanghu 方虎). For Ji Huang's biography of Xu Yitai 徐以泰, a brother of Yikun, see *Deqing xian xinzhi*, 7:15a–16a.

(plus direct bureaucratic sabotage) combining first to frustrate an ill-conceived attempt to serve the interests of the poor by doubling their security against crop failures, and then to seek to beat down the level of reserves even from the *status quo* of the late Yongzheng period. In the long run, the quasi-alliance failed; by the end of the debate in the early 1750s, the global target for grain storage was some 5 million *shi* higher than the late Yongzheng *status quo*. There were forces within the system which could still defend the conventional interpretation of the best interests of the poor.

Conclusion

What lessons can be learned from the above complex and not altogether edifying story about the implications of China's political heritage for its political future? The first point to be made is that the choice for China today is not between an autocratic heritage and a democratic panacea: both concepts are inadequate. This may be illustrated by asking what difference it would have made if the episode had taken place under an actually-existing Western-style democracy. My answer is, less than a fervent democrat might have expected. Of course, any reform of the granary system requiring legislation would have been debated in the national assembly, and the issue would have been decided by the vote of the elected representatives of the people. However, the outcome of the vote would probably have been determined not (or not so much) by the debate but rather by pressures originating outside the debating chamber. The main *yang*陽 (openly acknowledged) pressure would have been party organization; but there might also have been *yin*陰 (covert) influence in the form of lobbying by interest groups (who might have offered improper inducements). It would be utterly naive to think that democratic process would unproblematically have given the majority of "the people" what they wanted.

It may be more to the point to suggest that the extremism shown by imperial policy at crucial points of the debate would have been more easily restrained in a democracy. While the sources of restraint in democratic systems vary from one country to another, generally speaking the combination of pressure from cabinet colleagues and knowledgeable civil servants, plus fear of lampooning in the press and rejection at the next election, surely give a greater measure of protection against opinionated prime ministers and heads of state than did the convention that Confucian rulers heed their counsellors. However, the sources of restraint available in the democracies are more effective with some heads of government than others, and in certain circumstances can arguably frustrate the will of the electorate (insofar as that can be known). There is no guarantee that the operation of Western-style checks would have secured either wiser decisions in the granaries debate, or decisions faithfully carrying out "the mandate of the people."

To argue that democracy might not have done much good in one particular debate does not entail belittling democracy's more general advantages. Democracy is a flawed and problematic form of government, but reasons for preferring it were set out well by E. M. Forster, whose "two cheers" *credo* is still worthy of attention.[88] What I would like to suggest, a little wryly, is that contemporary Chinese democrats might derive some cultural self-confidence from deeper examination of their "autocratic" past. On one hand, the story told above holds little comfort for those who place their trust in a revival of Confucian (and, therefore, if Metzger is right, non-democratic) values. Specifically Confucian values, largely irrelevant to the shaping of events, did not suffice to save the Qianlong emperor from ineptness and naivety. Confucian ideals (such as the Mencian notion that a sage would make basic foodstuffs abundant in the same way as fire and water are abundant)[89] were arguably dangerous in the mind of a ruler afflicted with these limitations. On the other hand, however, "autocratic" mid-eighteenth-century China did not necessarily constitute as poor a training-ground for the political skills routinely used in actually-existing democratic systems as some authors have assumed.

It is no doubt true, as Edward Shils has written, that "There is no place in the Confucian view for the entire institutional paraphernalia which has developed in modern liberal democratic societies for allowing divergent interests to be represented and pursued, and for protecting their pursuit while at the same time limiting it."[90] However, if the interpretation suggested in this article is correct, officials such as Wu Wei and Sun Hao made a place within the "autocratic" system for the representation of interests adversely affected by one extreme manifestation of imperial paternalism. They deployed plausible images as astutely as any modern Western politician; their arguments lost nothing in terms of persuasive power for being expounded on paper rather than in a parliamentary debating chamber; and, in the course of defending grain-trade interests, they made a rudimentary case for an opposite vision of political economy from that guiding imperial policy at the time. If, although effective, they were not entirely victorious, this reminds us that mid-Qing imperial institutions, by allowing the expression of a plurality of viewpoints, had their own way of limiting even the disguised pursuit of sectional interests.

In short, the evidence presented here says nothing about the preparedness or otherwise of the masses of the past or present Chinese population for universal suffrage.[91] However, it absolutely fails to support the view that the Chinese "national character" is unsuited to the practice of democracy. It also underlines the importance, if democracy is ever to flourish in China, of discarding one quite different legacy from the past: the notion that democracy brings unity. This misconception, although probably encouraged by certain East Asian values, is a legacy less of Chinese culture than of the impact in China of nineteenth-century Western imperialism. It arose in China and indeed Japan because the idea of democracy came to those countries at the same time as the pressures of imperialism forced East Asian statesmen and political

88 See the three relevant paragraphs (on pp.69–70) of Forster's essay "What I believe" (1939), reprinted in idem, *Two cheers for democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951).

89 *Mengzi* [The book of Mencius], 7A/23. Fang Bao alluded repeatedly to this Mencian ideal while pressing for the adoption and, later, extension of the liquor suppression policy (Dunstan, *Conflicting counsels*, p.204). It was available to provide scriptural support for any policy intended to address popular subsistence problems.

90 Edward Shils, "Reflections on civil society and civility in the Chinese intellectual tradition," in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *Confucian traditions in East Asian modernity*, p.55.

91 For a generally positive assessment of the readiness of the contemporary Chinese population for participation in a Western-style democratic system, see Nathan, *China's crisis*, pp.195 and 197–9.

activists into a preoccupation with national vitality. As Paul Cohen and others have shown, people such as Oka Senjin 岡千仞 and Liang Qichao helped propagate an instrumental understanding of the virtues of political participation, which they took to be a source of national solidarity, and therefore unity (or indeed unanimity) and strength, in Western countries.[92]

This perception, although understandable, was surely pernicious in China's early twentieth-century political development. Opinions may differ as to how far its persistence in more recent times is due to China's subsequent predicaments (national disunity, foreign invasion, the building of communism in a hostile international environment), and how far to the traditional East Asian esteem for harmony. Whatever the explanation, claims that under democracy the people "will share the same views and principles and have identical ideals"[93] may serve to inspire enthusiasm for democracy in China, but they will hardly help to build it. Rather, there is a need to recognise the legitimacy of conflict between interest groups, and to design institutions in which the representation of sectional interests can have a more public character than was the case under the Qing.

From a Qing historian's perspective, the challenge would thus seem to be not to repudiate the pre-Opium War past, but to improve on it. Let us conclude by recalling that the theory of mid-Qing Confucian governance had its share of unambiguously admirable features, from seriousness about the public interest to insistence on disciplined intellectual endeavour as a basis for good government. These ideals, which are not peculiar to Confucianism, may still prove their worth today.

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92 Paul A. Cohen, *Between tradition and modernity: Wang T'ao and reform in late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1987), p.122; Hao Chang, "Intellectual change and the reform movement, 1890–8," in *The Cambridge history of China*, vol.11, ed. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-ching Liu, pp.280–1, 295–6; and Nathan, *Chinese democracy*, pp.49–57.

93 See passage from the late 1970s democracy movement magazine *Enlightenment*, issue 2 (Nov. 1978), translated and quoted in Nathan, *Chinese democracy*, p.6.