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The State as the Celestial: Roots of Statism in Modern China, 1820-1893

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Abstract

This thesis aims to overcome the essentialist conception of Chinese politics as inherently authoritarian, the modernist view of statism as representing a rupture in Chinese political culture, and the teleological reconstruction of modern Chinese history toward a preordained end. To do so, I seek to trace the rise of statism in modern China back to the internal context of intellectual developments from the early nineteenth century to the eve of 1895. The ultimate question I raise is why statism, a strand of thought upholding the state as the worldly embodiment of cosmic authority and thus self-legitimizing, would prevail. I attempt to answer this question by reconstructing the evolution of statist thinking as a complex interaction between the two dimensions of transcendental visions on the state and mundane agendas of institutional reform in the late Qing. Through analyses of essays, letters, memorials and newspaper articles by scholars, officials, diplomatic ministers, treaty port intellectuals and merchant reformers, I pay special attention to the cosmological underpinnings of political thought that was constantly appropriated and reinvented by the literati, which greatly enhanced the tenacity of statism in modern China.

My findings suggest that intellectual precursors of Chinese statism crystallized from the statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship at the turn of the nineteenth century. By idealizing the Qing state as the embodiment of *dao* (道) and formulating a symbiotic relationship between the state and the literati, such a re-orientation facilitated growing calls for literati empowerment in politics against autocratic rulership when dynastic decline saw institutional breakdown in domestic governance and mounting pressures of Western intrusion. In the name of building a strong state, statism emboldened literati activists to advocate comprehensive reappraisals of the state as an institutional entity while upholding its idealization as the embodiment of *dao*, a

theoretical potential increasingly realized when the spread of Western learning profoundly reconfigured the late Qing intellectual landscape. Statism is thus inextricably tied with intellectual dynamics evolving over the last decades of imperial China, despite the unmistakable ruptures in China's political modernization after 1895.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 1911 revolution, competing visions for a modern Chinese state vied relentlessly for dominance on the rubbles of the disintegrated imperial order. It was during this period, as Zarrow observes, that statism as a political creed elevating a strong state as the ultimate source of legitimacy gained increasing currency among the Chinese people and crystallized its aspiration in the brutal revolutionary state-building under the communist regime. For Zarrow, statism sought to rebuild the political foundations of China detached from the Qing monarchy and its cosmological underpinnings. Accordingly, it was “an entirely secular enterprise” that envisioned the basis of the state as lying in equal membership of modern citizenry rather than the Confucian premise of a hierarchical cosmic order, and “the new Chinese state was thus inevitably secular.” The popularization of statism therefore signals the irreversibility of China’s modern state-building and represents a rupture in the historical evolution of Chinese political thought.¹ Nevertheless, history has played an unmistakable role in shaping the modern Chinese state and issues underlying domestic constitutional agendas, argues Kuhn, had been persistently addressed by Chinese thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² To fully comprehend the intellectual forces that had sustained the search for a strong state in modern China, it is thus both desirable and necessary to examine the roots of statism in China’s late imperial history. Such an examination, though not unprecedented, has been too entangled with the modernization narrative to delineate the intricacies of political thinking in late imperial China. That is, scholars readily label the impact of internal dynamics in the Chinese

¹ Peter Gue Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 290–3.

² Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); idem, “Ideas Behind China’s Modern State,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, no. 2 (1995): 295–337.

intellectual world as one's psychological attachment to the past. Consequently, they tend to gloss over how the lifeworld of Chinese intellectuals, shaped by both secular and cosmic visions of political order, had influenced their search for a modern Chinese state.³ More nuanced studies are needed to reappraise the intellectual history of Chinese political thought on its own terms.

In regard to the above-mentioned shortcoming, the cosmological foundation of Chinese political thought concretized since early China has arguably remained as the background against which China's political modernization unfolded, which defies the presupposed dichotomy between tradition and modernity.⁴ As one of the major civilizations in the Axial Age, imperial China has witnessed the lasting impact of transcendental visions on the political reordering of social organizations in the mundane realm.⁵ Due to the strong this-worldly orientation of Confucianism, such a reordering is inextricably tied with transcendental visions for proper cosmic order and human communities are deemed as the very site for these visions to be actualized.⁶ Yet the historical dynamics of these visions should not be neglected and the specific ways of mutual influence between cosmological assumptions and political thought need to be elaborated rather than taken for granted. An investigation of the historical evolution of statism in China's radical transformation into a modern state, with a focus on how this transformation took

³ E.g., Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, Volume One: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Benjamin I. Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964).

⁴ Yu Ying-shih, *Lun tianrenzhiji: Zhongguo gudai sixiang qiyan shitan* (Taipei: Lianjing, 2014), ch. 6. For an analysis of the gravity of cosmology in pre-modern Chinese thought, see John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology*, Neo-Confucian Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). For a discussion of the inextricable links between cosmology and political discourse in early China, see Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵ S.N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 195–217, 281–303; Benjamin I. Schwartz, "The Age of Transcendence," *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975): 1–7; idem, "Transcendence in Ancient China," *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975): 57–68.

⁶ Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 281–303; Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Transcendence in Ancient China;" Herbert Fingarette, "Human Community as Holy Rite: An Interpretation of Confucius' Analects," *The Harvard Theological Review* 59, no. 1 (1966): 53–67.

place in both the transcendental and mundane dimensions, is therefore warranted to interpret the logic of Chinese political thinking on its own terms. Such an interpretation will serve as a clue to unveil the nature of intellectual continuities in modern China, which cannot be adequately elucidated without highlighting the impact of cosmology on the Chinese political discourse.

This dissertation explores China's transformation into a modern state from the perspective of intellectual history. It argues that intellectual origins of the modern Chinese state can be traced back to the internal dynamics of Chinese political thought across the nineteenth century, instead of the radical reconfiguration of Chinese politics at the turn of the twentieth century propelled by foreign impact. The birth of statism, a strand of thought identified by Zarrow as upholding the state as "the ultimate locus of sovereignty, self-legitimizing, and the highest source of good," was accordingly rooted in the intellectual transformation of late imperial China rather than indicating a dissolution in the historical evolution of Chinese political thought.⁷ However, it does not see the modern Chinese state as being shaped by certain fixed agendas or inherent features in Chinese political culture either.⁸ Though concurring with Kuhn in stressing historical continuities of China's modern transformation, it interprets such continuities as complex interactions between the inner logic of ideas and external circumstances. Moreover, conceptual transformations on the state are not a one-dimensional process in modern China but predicated on changing dynamics of both transcendental and mundane visions of the human world. It therefore necessitates an investigation of the cosmological underpinnings of political thought in late imperial China to better understand what had sustained the search for a strong state by Qing literati. Contrary to the general belief that cosmology only seeks to answer questions of the ultimate after all the more

⁷ Zarrow, *After Empire*, 4, 272–96.

⁸ Kuhn, *Origins*, 1–26.

immediate and practical concerns,⁹ it is my assertion that cosmic visions acted as the starting point for Qing literati to construct a proper political and world order. In line with the Axial Age paradigm, I argue that the political thought of late imperial China can only be fully grasped by analyzing how evolving conceptions of the transcendental and the mundane had mutually influenced each other over time. An investigation of the intellectual precursors of statism in modern China thus serves as a case study to show in what ways our current understanding of late Qing political thought in mostly secular terms can be enriched by unveiling the cosmological foundations of an emerging discourse on the state. Situating the formation and transformation of statism within the broader intellectual landscape in nineteenth century China, I attempt to address the following questions:

- 1, What strands of thought in the cosmology of late imperial China generated the search for a strong state in the face of dynastic decline, constitutional crisis and the growing influence of Western learning?
- 2, How did these statist visions interact with statecraft agendas and self-strengthening proposals in various political thinkers across the nineteenth century and morph into concretized statist thinking?
- 3, To what extent did such a mode of thought shape the emergence of modern statism in the post 1895 era?

By seeking to answer these questions, I attempt to reveal the intellectual foundations of the modern Chinese state and the cosmological underpinnings of Chinese political thought, which

⁹ Such a belief is manifest in Paul A. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 77 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 137–9 and more recently Ori Sela, *China's Philological Turn: Scholars, Textualism, and the Dao in the Eighteenth Century*, Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 176–7.

would be conducive to understanding the historicity of the tenacious search for a strong China governed by a powerful state among Chinese intellectuals (and the general populace in the contemporary scene). In this way, I wish to situate the increasingly aggressive behavior of China's current regime within a larger historical context. When the nationalist narrative of humiliation and restoration begins to alienate the Chinese state and its people from the international community, it is vital for China to re-examine such self-imposed historical burdens.¹⁰ Exploring how ideas behind the modern Chinese state came into being constitutes an essential part of debunking the teleology in modern Chinese history wielded by political authority and helps to reveal a wider range of possibilities which could be constructive for China's future reform. And as long as the cosmological assumptions in Chinese political discourse are under-studied in modern scholarship, the rationale behind the seemingly secular enterprise of China's political modernization will remain obscured and the Chinese people will continue to be haunted by the specter of deep structures in Chinese political thinking from its imperial times. A preliminary venture into the issue can call for more scholarly attention to this inconspicuous aspect of modern Chinese thought and prompt further research to dissect the peculiarities of Chinese politics without falling into the abyss of cultural relativism.

Literature Review

Even if one might concur that “[h]istorical mind-sets are difficult to gauge,”¹¹ intellectual historians have endeavored to trace how the evolution of ideas unfolded in history for better understandings of the human mind in modern day. Therefore, when it comes to the emergence of

¹⁰ See Jude Blanchette, *China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), esp. 127–47; Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

¹¹ Benjamin A. Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-Chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), xxii.

China as a modern state, scholars since the mid-twentieth century have looked for intellectual origins of such a transformation in the history of the late Qing, which was deemed as the natural starting point for China's modernization. This modernist vein, articulated in Fairbank's analytical model of "Western impact, Chinese response," regarded the modern transformation of China as a tumultuous process of coming to terms with Western modernity in the political, economic, diplomatic and intellectual arenas, which saw the break away from old traditions and the incorporation of Chinese civilization into the modern world.¹² Accordingly, modern Chinese intellectual history was summed up by Levenson as "the progressive abandonment of tradition by iconoclasts and the petrification of tradition by traditionalists." For Levenson, though cultural diffusion had worked both ways for the West and China, foreign ideas inevitably displaced domestic ones when China fell prey to aggravating Western intrusion. As a result, Chinese thinkers eventually abandoned the Confucian tradition and transformed it into a communist version of the modern mind in hopes of re-establishing China's rightful place in the world.¹³ In such a narrative, dynamics of the Chinese intellectual world were sidelined and the entire civilization became a footnote to how Western Enlightenment had brought about the triumph of modernity on the global scene. Hence, Schwartz would measure his study of the late Qing intellectual and translator Yan Fu (嚴復, 1854-1921) against the evolution of Western intellectual trends in his age. Despite acknowledging the necessity of immersing "as deeply as possible in the specificities of both worlds simultaneously," Schwartz repeatedly dissected Yan's thought in a way as if he could offer a critical, non-Western perspective on the Western culture.¹⁴

¹² Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the Chinese Coast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

¹³ Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, Volume One, xxx, 157-63.

¹⁴ Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 2-3, 237-47.

The underlying logic of this narrative can also be found in more recent works on the intellectual history China's political modernization, such as Zarrow's investigation of various theories on the state during the conceptual transformation of late Qing political thought. For him, the utopian vision of Kang Youwei's (康有為, 1858-1927) reform agenda that stripped Qing emperorship of sagehood endowed by the Mandate of Heaven, when combined with revolutionary state-building to transform imperial subjects into modern citizens, fostered and consolidated the belief in a transcendent state serving a higher purpose above mundane sociopolitical order and irreducible to the aggregation of private interests. In the context of the Chinese Republic after 1911, such a belief rendered an educational state in cultivating a competent citizenry as self-legitimizing and indispensable to the construction of a strong China in the modern world. Chinese statism thus involves an inevitably secular project detached from traditional cosmology, despite being entangled with utopian ideals of evolution in human history or the mystical conception of an organic relation between the state and its people. Small wonder that the scope of Zarrow's analysis is limited to the turn of the twentieth century when the dire situations of political crisis at the Qing court, escalating foreign intrusion and the spread of Western ideas sparked radicalized thinking subversive to traditional imperial politics. Hence, the historicity of statism in modern China, as well as its intellectual precursors, are readily left out in his discussion.¹⁵ In reality, it is more often the case that generations of Chinese political thinkers domesticated the influence of foreign ideas and reinvented their own evolving traditions to tackle contemporary issues. The anti-traditionalist stance in constructing a modern Chinese state could also be said to fall well within traditionalist thinking, as do all tendencies to rebel against tradition which lie at the heart of tradition itself.¹⁶ A historical investigation of this kind is therefore constantly

¹⁵ Zarrow, *After Empire*, esp. 272–96.

¹⁶ Edward Shils, *Tradition*, rep. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 254–7.

haunted by West-centered presumptions and fails to grasp the inner logic of Chinese political thinking.

Another hidden danger of the modernist narrative is the inherently teleological interpretation of modern Chinese history. In an attempt to transcend the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, China and the West etc. in our understanding of Chinese intellectual history, Wang Hui's *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* takes on an ambitious task to reconstruct the historical process since the emergence of Neo-Confucianism that saw the reinvention of the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理) into “universal principle” (*gongli* 公理) by Chinese intellectuals in search for a modern Chinese identity. Wang focuses on how internal dynamics of intellectual transformation had set the stage for this reinvention and how certain transcendental ideals in Neo-Confucianism had survived therefrom despite a sea change in vocabulary. The scope of this dissertation precludes an overall appraisal of Wang's work, yet for his analysis of late Qing intellectual transformation across the nineteenth century, the preoccupation with world-systems theory leads Wang to view the transition from empire to nation as constituting the central concern of the period. Small wonder that his discussion is overwhelmingly focused on resurging scholarly interest in New Text classicism (*jinwen jingxue* 今文經學) since the early nineteenth century and how New Text conceptions of Confucian ritual order converged with Western ideas such as state sovereignty and international law, culminating in Kang Youwei's radical reinvention of Confucianism for institutional reform.¹⁷ The multiplicity of possibilities during China's modern transformation, especially the gestation period of the nineteenth century, is accordingly neglected. The same teleology can be found in some classical investigations on the modern transformation of Chinese thought by Chinese and Taiwanese scholars alike, in which the

¹⁷ Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi*, 4 vols (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004), esp. vol 2, 519–820.

underlying nationalist sentiment runs through the entirety of their discussions, often at the cost of the multitude of historical alternatives.¹⁸ In a recent publication on modern Chinese history by the joint effort of scholars from Taiwan and the Chinese Mainland, the bulk of sections on intellectual transformation is still fraught with similar frameworks of analysis, exhausting the platitude of official narratives while struggling to accommodate new sources and approaches.¹⁹ Through such a lens, the dynamics in the nineteenth century Chinese intellectual world especially the complex reactions to the Western impact are reduced to, in Jenny Day's words, "a series of halfhearted strides towards a preordained end."²⁰ To better analyze the intellectual dynamics in late imperial China and explore the roots of modern Chinese statism, we need not only to free ourselves from the teleological confines of nationalist ideologies, but to interpret China's political modernization in a way capable of catering to the peculiarities of Chinese political thinking that scholars have striven to delineate and express through modern political terms.²¹

At the same time, efforts to break away from the West-centered understanding of modern Chinese history have long been made by scholars who tend to reconstruct China's past as a history experienced by its direct participants. Paul Cohen's biographical study of the late Qing reformer Wang Tao (王韜, 1828-1897) and his subsequent proposal of a two-phase process of cultural change from littoral to hinterland signals the move toward a China-centered approach to

¹⁸ E.g., Xu Jilin, *Ji guo tianxia: Xiandai Zhongguo de geren, guojia yu shijie rentong* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2016); Wang Ermin, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun xuji* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005); idem, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2003), esp. 1–79.

¹⁹ Wang Jianlang and Huang Ko-wu, eds., *Liang'an xinbian Zhongguo jindai shi: Wan Qing juan*, vol. B (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2016), 871–1002.

²⁰ Jenny Huangfu Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West: Diplomacy and the Information Order in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 6.

²¹ For studies on deconstructing the nationalist narrative, see Joshua A. Fogel ed., *The Teleology of the Modern Nation-State: Japan and China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

interpreting the historical dynamics of modern China.²² Yet the general framework in Cohen's proposal still presupposes tradition and modernity as two discrete realms. The stasis of Chinese tradition, however implicit in his work, also functions unmistakably as an underlying assumption in Cohen's agenda of discovering history in China.²³ Building upon Cohen's pioneering studies and his ambitious agenda, scholars in recent decades have sought to interpret China's historical development on its own terms and in doing so identified similar patterns of empire building, colonial expansion, technological advancement and institutional innovation in the early modern period between China and the West.²⁴ Comparative history has also come up with new ways of looking at the diverging trajectories of political, socioeconomic and military developments in China and Europe, which replaces the cultural essentialist notion of West versus non-West with an emphasis on contingent, environmental and global factors in explaining the Western ascension.²⁵ Extricated from the myth of a universal path toward modernity, historians of translational studies in addition start to highlight the multifaceted process of intellectual exchanges facilitated by increasing Sino-Western communications, in which ideas had been domesticated and reinvented under a number of situations for various agendas propagated by diverse agents from government-sponsored translation bureaus to commercial enterprises and

²² Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, esp. 239–76. See also idem, *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past*, Critical Asian Scholarship (London: Routledge, 2003), 23–47.

²³ Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 57–96.

²⁴ Wenkai He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State: England, Japan and China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Benjamin A. Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

²⁵ Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong, *Before and beyond Divergence: The Politics of Economic Change in China and Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

individual activists.²⁶ The attention to external conditions of intellectual transformation has further led scholars to stress the role of a changing information order and diversified reading experience of Qing literati in shaping their complex perceptions of the West and Western learning, which was anything but a linear progression toward modernization.²⁷

The insights of these more recent developments are yet to be sufficiently applied to the study of modern Chinese intellectual history. Nevertheless, inquiries into historical continuities from a China-centered perspective have long been attempted by scholars who emphasized how the historical evolution of Chinese political culture had set the stage for China's modern transformation. Metzger, by identifying a perennial theme in Neo-Confucianism as the constant struggle to reconcile moral ideals with the actual world, argues that such a struggle had sustained the quest for proper political order in reverence to the good cosmic force by the literati in late imperial China. Chinese political culture of this period is accordingly shaped by this ardent search for solutions to moral predicaments. When Western ideas came to be understood and harnessed by Chinese intellectuals, it was because they were deemed as new ways to tackle the struggle and fueled increasing optimism in the twentieth century.²⁸ The basic element in Metzger's approach, namely the attention to the political and cosmological implications of Confucian moral cultivation, remains crucial to interpreting Chinese political thinking. However, he essentializes the Neo-Confucian tradition as canonized doctrines sanctioned by its Masters

²⁶ Theodore Hutters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005); Michael Lackner and Natascha Vittinghoff eds., *Mapping Meanings: The Field of New Learning in Late Qing China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Michael Lackner, Iwo Amelung, and Joachim Kurtz, eds., *New Terms for New Ideas: Western Knowledge and Lexical Change in Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

²⁷ Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*; Pan Kuang-che, *Wan Qing shiren de xixue yuedu shi, 1833–1898* (Taipei, Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo, 2014).

²⁸ Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 14–8; 167–235.

and followed by generations of docile students. Consequently, evolving conceptions of cosmic reality in late imperial China were treated as a homogenous given. His analyses of Neo-Confucian notions of morality and politics therefore jump between arguments made by Chinese literati and by advocates of New Confucianism in the twentieth century, as if they were all manifestations of an atemporal tradition.²⁹ The same preoccupation with the “Great Tradition” expressed through classical texts can be found in Hao Chang’s analysis of the statecraft orientation in Confucianism. Situating the resurgence of statecraft reformism in nineteenth century China within such a tradition, Chang argues that it merely represents a technical aspect of Confucian statecraft which sought to establish proper institutions in actualizing good governance. The intellectual dynamics behind such a transformation are therefore subsumed under the generalized notion of Confucian statecraft tradition and readily neglected.³⁰ In comparison, Kuhn stresses the role of historical dynamics behind the emergence of the modern Chinese state, which was arguably initiated by a continuous response, from late Qing literati to communist revolutionaries, to certain domestic constitutional agendas aimed at constructing a legitimate sociopolitical order.³¹ Though Kuhn was less ambitious in scope and more aware of such dynamics, his labelling of Chinese political culture as essentially authoritarian tends to gloss over the intricacies in Chinese political thought shaped by its late imperial history. The same essentializing tendency in addition leads Kuhn to regard the constitutional agendas identified by him as a distinct feature of Chinese politics, without much consideration of evolving intellectual trends behind these agendas. Inadvertently and paradoxically, his investigation would hint at the incompleteness of China’s political modernization compared with

²⁹ Ibid, 49–165.

³⁰ Chang Hao, *You’an Yishi Yu Minzhu Chuantong* (Beijing: Xinxing Chubanshe, 2006), esp. 89–93.

³¹ Kuhn, *Origins*, esp. ch. 4.

the Western model, since the enterprise could have been compromised by the resilience of “the inner core of Chinese authoritarianism.”³² To move beyond this essentialist vein, it is necessary to not only consider how the historical evolution of cosmic visions had unfolded and influenced the political discourse in late imperial China, but acknowledge the ingenuity of individual thinkers in their interpretation, appropriation and reinvention of ideas passed down to them as an integral part of their intellectual endeavors.

This dissertation thus seeks to challenge the modernist view of statism as representing a rupture in Chinese political culture by tracing the rise of statism in modern China back to the internal context of intellectual developments from the early nineteenth century to the eve of 1895. Stressing the role of history in shaping modern China, I intend to substantiate studies on historical continuities from late imperial to contemporary China from the perspective of intellectual history.³³ In doing so, I diverge from existing literature on the political thought of late imperial China by paying special attention to the cosmological legacy stemming from intellectual transformations since the seventeenth century that was bequeathed upon Qing literati, which greatly enhanced the tenacity of statism in Chinese political discourse. By treating changing notions of cosmic reality not as the end result but the starting point of political thinking in late imperial China, I aim to show how such notions came to be appropriated by Qing literati with various agendas in response to novel sociopolitical situations across the nineteenth century and morphed into underlying assumptions of an emerging discourse on a strong state. I therefore

³² Ibid, 48–53, 70–9.

³³ For a recent panoramic survey on this topic from an institutionalist perspective, see Klaus Mühlhahn, *Making China Modern: From the Great Qing to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019). A pathbreaking research on the continuity of economic ideas in modern China has been conducted by Margherita Zanasi in her *Economic Thought in Modern China: Market and Consumption, c.1500–1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). This dissertation attempts to explore similar continuities in the realm of political thinking in late imperial China.

also wish to overcome the essentialist conception of Chinese politics as inherently authoritarian, since modern Chinese statism was created through the continuous reinvention and domestication of ideas by individual thinkers under contingent historical circumstances. By the same token, the teleological reconstruction of modern Chinese history toward a preordained end is called into questions as well, as the intellectual transformation of modern China has been a process full of bifurcations and alternatives. The resilience of certain modes of thought ought to be interpreted as the outcome of complex interactions between transcendental visions and historical contingencies, instead of hardwired features in Chinese political culture.

Definition of Key Terms

A study of intellectual history would need to clarify definitions of key concepts that it aims to explore. Statism, according to Zarrow, means “the view that the state—the institutions of governance—is the ultimate locus of sovereignty, self-legitimizing, and the highest source of good.” By deeming statism as such, it is no wonder that Zarrow sees the emergence of statism in late Qing political discourse as closely tied with the “inevitably secular” mission of Chinese intellectuals to construct a national identity in the wake of imperial disintegration.³⁴ As discussed before, the peculiarities of Chinese political thought cannot be properly interpreted if the cosmological foundations of statism are eclipsed from our investigation. Nor is statism equal to a Chinese variation of modern political theories, since the latter is predominantly shaped by the logic and language of modern Western politics.³⁵ As this dissertation merely investigates the roots of statism prior to the watershed of 1895, it focuses on certain lines of thinking in late Qing intellectual transformation conducive to the crystallization of statism at the turn of the twentieth

³⁴ Zarrow, *After Empire*, 4, 317–8.

³⁵ E.g., Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

century. Accordingly, by treating statism or statist thinking as analytical terms, this dissertation uses them as essentially interchangeable notions to describe the underlying logic of literati political aspirations in nineteenth century China, which shared basic assumptions about the role of the state in the political realm and beyond, as well as literati identity vis-à-vis political authority. Nevertheless, statist thinking will be used more frequently especially when in comparison with post-1895 political thought. The gist of Zarrow's definition will not be repudiated either but modified for the pre-1895 context. Statism in this dissertation is then defined first and foremost as a mode of thought based on a materialist understanding of cosmic reality with the conviction that the cosmic authority of *dao* (道) must be manifested and sought in actual human establishments of the experiential world, epitomized by the central authority of a powerful state. Idealized as the embodiment of *dao*, the state is deemed as the pivot of an all-encompassing political order and thus representing the highest source of political legitimacy. Two logical deductions arise from such an idealization of the state: firstly, the state ought to actively assert its authority in domestic governance through the patronage of an increasing range of human activities by placing them under the direct regulation of its institutions, and in international politics by showcasing its superior ability to harbor *dao*. Both arenas serve as constant verifications of the state's mighty authority from which the statist line of thinking seeks its justification. Secondly, the state apparatus must be staffed with qualified literati whose moral rectitude and statecraft expertise would ensure their unwavering commitment to serving the state and transmitting *dao*. Statist thinking therefore also entails a symbiotic formulation of state-literati relation that calls for broadened literati political participation and regards their involvement in state affairs as indispensable to the mission of spreading the benevolence of *dao* to all under Heaven. Implicitly, such a formulation grants advocates of statism a superior status

in politics, since they play a crucial role in the hierarchical ordering of the world.³⁶ Statism defined as such invites us to think differently from a “propositional logic” which prioritizes the semantic analyses of propositions and statements in the hope of establishing meaningful connections between semantic similarities. Rather, such analyses should be considered in light of the questions their authors aim to answer apart from the specific terms they use, as Collingwood argues.³⁷ Though regrettably Collingwood did not elaborate on this point, Lao Sze-kwang took over the insight and composed an influential study on the history of Chinese philosophy.³⁸ By unveiling the statist logic underlying the writings of Qing literati, this dissertation also aims to borrow the insight and show how answers to proper political order had led to the consolidation of statist thinking, despite the stark variations of their specific agendas and rhetoric. An inquiry of this kind requires a conversation with the political thinking of Qing literati without losing sight of how evolving cosmic visions had contributed to the tenacity of certain modes of thought. In this way, the underlying logic deployed by Qing literati, whether consciously or unconsciously, in their political aspirations can be delineated and analyzed as a whole rather than in fractured pieces. Hence, this definition is able to cater to the intellectual ingenuity of individual thinkers, while capturing the commonalities of an emerging discourse on the state across the nineteenth century.

However, such a definition immediately problematizes the notion of the state itself. Over two centuries of empire building in the Qing dynasty had substantially reinvented China as an imperial state that intertwined Confucian political ideals with Manchu imperial visions, well before the impact of Western colonial powers. Institutional innovation and ideological

³⁶ On the impact of transcendental visions in politics, see S.N. Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 201–4.

³⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 36–7.

³⁸ Lao Sze-kwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhexue shi*, 3 vols. (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 2012).

transformation in response to continuous expansion and consolidation of Qing rule in East Asia also created a sociopolitical milieu that allowed much elasticity for the literati to tackle foreign impact at the onset of political modernization in nineteenth century China.³⁹ Appropriating Western techniques that maintained the rising dominance of the West on a global scale, the Qing managed to transform itself into a modern military-fiscal state with relative success, which prevented the total colonization of China by imperialist invaders compared to other states across Asia and Africa.⁴⁰ This dissertation draws insights from studies on the organizational, fiscal, technological and military aspects of the emergence of the modern Chinese state, while providing a glimpse into the intellectual dimension that had sustained this state-building project. As we shall see, statist thinkers across the nineteenth century idealized the image of a strong state as the bedrock and ultimate point of reference for their political agendas, though each promoting diverse and even conflicting visions of the nuts-and-bolts of the state apparatus. It is precisely where the beauty of statist thinking lies in the sense that through the idealization of a strong China, state authority became self-evident in directing human affairs and transcended actual political institutions or constitutional frameworks, which endowed statism with greater resilience in modern Chinese political discourse. For the nineteenth-century especially the pre-

³⁹ To name a few eminent studies in the rich corpus on this topic, see Brook, van Walt van Praag, and Boltjes, *Sacred Mandates*; Dittmar Schorkowitz and Ning Chia, eds., *Managing Frontiers in Qing China: The Lifanyuan and Libu Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Gang Zhao, “Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Modern China* 32, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 3–30; Perdue, *China Marches West*; Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise*; Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ Stephen R. Halsey, *Quest for Power: European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). For studies on military-fiscal states in Europe, see John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Charles Tilly and Wim P. Blockmans, eds., *Cities and the Rise of States in Europe* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and the European States, AD 990-1990* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). For a general survey of the rise of modern states, see Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

1895 era, it is hardly the case that the Chinese imperial model represented (and to a significant extent reinvented) by the Qing monarchy was fundamentally challenged.⁴¹ In their writings, Qing literati readily used *guo* (國), *guojia* (國家) and *Zhongguo* (中國, more often in juxtaposition with the West) to refer to the state and their ideological commitment to it. Lin Zexu (林則徐, 1785-1850), a leading nineteenth century statecraft reformer, summarizes this commitment in a poem on his exile to Xinjiang: “If it is for the good of the state, I will go about it regardless of my own life or death (苟利國家生死以).”⁴² As Yue Du notes, the term *guo* in classical Chinese was associated with both the ruling dynasty (*chao* 朝) and the state as an institutional and territorial entity. Although the multiple connotations of *guo* would become problematic for the nationalist reinvention of China, it was used interchangeably with dynasty or empire in the Qing context.⁴³ Hence, the state in this dissertation essentially overlaps with the Qing dynasty and its idealization as the embodiment of *dao*.

In political studies of the state, scholars have painstakingly searched for consensus on the exact connotation of the term, but often to no avail.⁴⁴ Timothy Mitchell has consequently proposed a conceptualization of the state as a set of structural effects which only obtains its meaning through concrete political processes.⁴⁵ This functionalist definition of the state points to the necessity of a

⁴¹ Though some would contend that reappraisals of the Qing constitutional framework had surfaced as early as in the early nineteenth century. See William T. Rowe, “Rewriting the Qing Constitution: Bao Shichen’s ‘On Wealth’ (Shuochu),” *T’oung Pao* 98, no. 1–3 (January 1, 2012): 178–216. For a brief discussion of the Qing monarchy, see Zarrow, *After Empire*, 8–16. See also Richard J. Smith, *The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

⁴² Cited in Yang Guozhen, *Lin Zexu zhuan* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), 462–3.

⁴³ Yue Du, “Sun Yat-sen as *Guofu*: Competition over Nationalist Party Orthodoxy in the Second Sino-Japanese War.” *Modern China* 45, no. 2 (2019): 201–35.

⁴⁴ Quentin Skinner, “A Genealogy of the Modern State,” in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 162, 2009, 325–70; Erika Cudworth, Timothy Hall, and John McGovern, *The Modern State: Theories and Ideologies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 1–10; John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 66–75.

⁴⁵ Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77–96.

historical and culture-oriented analysis of how the state has manifested itself or rather been appropriated in the political discourse differently in different time and space.⁴⁶ The notion of the state in this dissertation thus corresponds not only to the functionalist view on the state, but also to my definition of statism which facilitates a more nuanced approach to how literati harnessed the conception of the state and its idealization for their respective agendas in the late Qing context. As for statism articulated by radical reformers at the turn of the twentieth century, it undoubtedly discarded the Qing imperial polity when the search for a strong China had rendered the old political establishment as obsolete and opened up new possibilities. Yet statist thinking retained its currency and continued to inspire political and intellectual elites in the construction of modern China, which this dissertation seeks to explain.

Another concept concerns the common identity that protagonists in this dissertation had assumed, namely the title of literati (*shi* 士). Scholars have suggested the inadequacy of using literati as the identity marker for Qing intellectual elites and instead proposed to replace it with *Ru* (儒, often translated as Confucian) in the study of Qing intellectual history.⁴⁷ Yet as a distinct social class in pre-modern China, literati identity had undergone complex transformations in history alongside the evolution of Confucianism and preserved its core elements through political patronage and cultural prestige.⁴⁸ In the writings to be surveyed in subsequent chapters, *shi* (or *shi dafu* 士大夫) remains a frequent self-reference that denotes a common cultural identity at the national level. Moreover, as disciples of sagely teachings that harbored *dao*, the literati in Qing

⁴⁶ For a discussion of functionalism, see Patrick Dunleavy and Brendan O’Leary, *Theories of the State: The Politics of Liberal Democracy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 1–11.

⁴⁷ Sela, *China’s Philological Turn*, 5–7.

⁴⁸ A classic study on the literati in Chinese history is Yu Ying-shih, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua*, 2nd ed. (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2013). See also Christoph Harbsmeier, “The Birth of Confucianism from Competition with Organized Mohism,” *Journal of Chinese Studies* 56 (January 2013): 1–19; Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 307 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008).

China grounded their identity in the mission of propagating such transcendental visions under the aegis of political authority, which transcended mere scholarly pursuits guided by a single intellectual orientation.⁴⁹ The search for *dao* as the overriding preoccupation in the Chinese intellectual tradition had risen to dominance since pre-imperial China.⁵⁰ Evolving over time, *dao* was transformed into a notion that signifies the realm of the ultimate in Chinese philosophical thinking, while being a virtual placeholder itself that defies a clear definition.⁵¹ As will be seen in my investigation, agendas aimed at materializing the statist aspiration for a strong state were repeatedly formulated in the name of bulwarking *dao*, which in turn justified the ascending role of literati in imperial politics. Therefore, this dissertation will use the term literati in describing the common identity of statist thinkers, as it better reflects the commitment to beliefs in cosmic authority that shaped the self-image of exponents of statist thinking.

Methodology

The above discussion further begs the methodological question of how we might study the historical evolution of political ideas. In the field of intellectual history, scholars have aspired to delineate certain “unspoken assumptions” that had guided the thought and action of politicians, bureaucrats and political thinkers in different historical settings.⁵² Such an aspiration is reminiscent of Collingwood’s distinction of an event as having an outside “in terms of bodies and their movements” and an inside that can only be perceived “in terms of thought.”

⁴⁹ For transcendental vision vis-à-vis elite identity formation, see Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 201–2, 249–64.

⁵⁰ A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 3.

⁵¹ Ge Rongjin, *Zhongguo zhexue fanchou tonglun* (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 2001), 155–78. The placeholder function of *dao* will be briefly discussed in chapter two. See also Mark Csikszentmihalyi, “Thematic Analyses of the *Laozi*,” in *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, ed. Xiaogan Liu (Springer, 2015), 48–51.

⁵² James Joll, “Politicians and the Freedom to Choose: The Case of July 1914,” in *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin*, ed. Alan Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 99–114. See also Duncan Kelly, “Intellectual History and the History of Political Thought,” in *A Companion to Intellectual History*, eds. Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (Wiley-Blackwell: 2016), 143–5.

Collingwood then depicts the main task of the historian as to discern the thought of the agent behind every action in the event.⁵³ Nevertheless, a question immediately arises: How is the historian able to assume that the event or action bears the same meaning for them as it did for the agent, without reading posterior interpretations back into history which might be in stark contrast to what the agent had actually experienced? The complexity of historical events further precludes clear-cut interpretations in a definitive narrative. Political thought in history is therefore not subject to straightforwardly rational explanations based on current understandings of politics. The degree to which the political thought over a given period can be abstracted and systematized for logically coherent investigations also remains an issue of ongoing methodological debates.⁵⁴ One possible way to achieve the “right horizon of inquiry,” as argued by Gadamer, would be to follow a hermeneutic approach and situate ourselves into the historical consciousness of the time for a well-rounded understanding of the *Zeitgeist* less marred by contemporary criteria.⁵⁵ This dissertation draws insight from this approach and argues that this *Zeitgeist*, at least in the context of nineteenth century China, cannot be properly investigated without an analysis of evolving cosmology and its impact on contemporaneous political thinking. It thus necessitates an investigation of the intrinsic properties of evolving ideas and how their theoretical potentials came to be harnessed over time, apart from the contingent historical conditions that had an unmistakable impact on intellectual transformation.⁵⁶ On the other hand, intellectual trends in history should be seen as products by people who perceived and appropriated previous

⁵³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed., with lectures 1926–1928 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 213–7.

⁵⁴ J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3–17; Jon Elster, *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd, rev. ed. translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum Impacts (London: Continuum, 2004), 301–2.

⁵⁶ For the distinction between intrinsic property and genetic process in the study of ideas, see Lao Sze-kwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhhexueshi*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 2012), 1–14, 310–2.

intellectual transformation in their own ingenious ways, rather than as linear evolutions of ideas manifesting themselves at different historical stages. By tracing the evolution of ideas in history with a focus on the inner logic of intellectual trends while keeping an eye on historical contingencies that propelled people to reinvent the intellectual heritage bequeathed upon them, we are able to balance between over-generalization and fractured discussions in the study of intellectual history.

This dissertation therefore attempts to analyze the formation and transformation of Chinese statism by looking at the evolving dynamics in the cosmic visions of late imperial China and the ways such visions interacted with Qing literati's perceptions of contemporary sociopolitical situations. As discussed above, though the political culture of late imperial China has been studied in reference to its cosmological framework, cosmology tends to be regarded as an unchanging undertone and the ability of Chinese literati to reinvent cosmic visions in response to historical contingencies is downplayed. It thus calls for a specific investigation of how the interaction between cosmological assumptions and political thinking unfolded to better attend the intellectual autonomy of the literati. By intellectual autonomy, I mean the possibility of individual thinkers to not only reinvent established notions and past ideals, but to retain a degree of independence from the dictation of authority in their intellectual endeavors. In the context of nineteenth century China, it means an examination of the cosmological foundations underlying conceptions of political institutions, worldly order and individual relations to the state among the literati. Such an examination requires special attention to the literati's symbiotic role as servants to the state and guardians of *dao*, which is crucial to understanding their statist thinking that foresaw the crystallization of statism at the turn of the twentieth century. The clashes of competing transcendental visions (i.e., the meaning of *dao* and how to align human affairs with

dao's dictation) as well as attempts to reorganize the mundane sociopolitical order according to such visions are precisely what gave rise to transformations in the literati's political thinking and self-image, which enabled the perseverance of statist thinking as the state forms an integral part in the construction of literati identity.⁵⁷ Connections between literati identity and their intellectual endeavors have been preliminarily explored either in a traditional Confucian canon,⁵⁸ or with the aid of sociological theories on networking and identity formation during the High Qing.⁵⁹ By investigating how cosmic visions interacted with statist thinking across the nineteenth century, this dissertation hopes to reveal the "unspoken assumptions" in literati identity formation and their political aspirations that contributed to the tenacity of statism in modern China. To alleviate the potential risk of producing a historical account too idealized to capture the multiplicity and diversified implications of historical events, I intend to balance my research between the lives and intellectual endeavors of individual thinkers, and the emergence of a general discourse on the state. As one's life journey is invariably shaped by larger social, political and economic circumstances, a focus on personal experience can provide a glimpse into the vicissitudes of contingent historical circumstances. And since the literati's political thinking is closely tied to their self-identity in relation to changing historical conditions, such a discussion will not lose sight of the inner logic of intellectual developments. By identifying interconnections and common themes among the respective agendas of individual thinkers, the tenacity of certain modes of thought could also be elucidated despite the ebbs and flows of history. In this way, I

⁵⁷ For conflicts of transcendental visions vis-à-vis intellectual elites, see Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 208–13.

⁵⁸ Chin-Shing Huang, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century China: Li Fu and the Lu-Wang School Under the Ch'ing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47–62.

⁵⁹ Sela, *China's Philological Turn*.

believe my approach in the dissertation can suffice to ensure a well-rounded historical investigation.

Scope and Sources

The time frame in this dissertation spans across the nineteenth century from the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition to the eve of the Sino-Japanese war. If the above definition of statism holds valid, it speaks to the tenacity of certain transcendental visions in shaping Chinese political thinking that extends further back in time. Yet my focus is on the roots of statism in modern China, which grew out of intellectual trends evolving over the nineteenth century and were characteristic of a specific *Zeitgeist*. Hence, though not denying the intellectual precursors of statism that I examine share basic orientations and structures with preceding strands of thought, this dissertation will zoom in on intellectual transformations in nineteenth century China and pay attention to the continuous reinventions of certain ideas during the period.

Some explanations on the selection of materials are due as well. Since this dissertation looks at the gestation period of the nineteenth century that set the stage for statism to emerge in twentieth century China, it will cover the historical evolution of statist thinking between the flourishing of statecraft reformism during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition and the emergence of radicalized political ideas toward the end of the nineteenth century. Due to the fact that Chinese political thinking is intertwined with cosmic visions, I begin my inquiry with a focus on leading proponents of New Text learning and statecraft reformism. But I do not intend to exaggerate the gravity of New Text scholarship either, as the rise of New Text classicism was the culmination of previous intellectual developments and had a number of ramifications afterwards.⁶⁰ By

⁶⁰ Tai Ching-hsien, *Ming Qing xueshu sixiang shi lunji*, Part II (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2012), 257–73.

discussing the ingenuities of individual thinkers, I also attempt to highlight the statist undertone in the emergence of a general discourse on the state. Ideas from high officials, diplomatic ministers, treaty port intellectuals and merchant reformers will thus be the focus. Their essays, letters, memorials and newspaper opinion pieces will accordingly form the basis of my investigation. To confine the scope of analysis, I have selected writings in which the evolution of statist thinking is manifest for discussion. That is, the sources directly address the political implications of a materialist understanding of *dao*, the active demonstration of state power in response to changing circumstances and the role of the literati as propagators of *dao* in state politics. Though individual pieces might deal with different aspects of these issues, together they help elucidate an emerging discourse on the state shaped by the transcendental vision of political order in late imperial China. Their authors are mostly well-studied figures along the modernist or essentialist narrative. By reexamining their rationales and assumptions in light of statist thinking, I aim to unveil the transcendental dimension of changing conceptions of the state in late Qing China, which has not been adequately studied in either narrative. Works by less known literati are also included to demonstrate the spread of statist thinking across a broader landscape. My investigation will therefore interpret late Qing political thought on its own terms by focusing on how intellectual transformation unfolded in the two realms of the transcendental and the mundane. Hopefully, the nature of intellectual continuity and political modernization in China can be better understood in this way.

Yet this selection also poses the risk of coming up with a caricature of actual history. Without denying the possibility, I have one defense that if similar modes of thought can be detected in more than a few writings across space and time, it points to the emergence of a common discourse in the intellectual sphere and therefore intellectual transformation on a larger scale. A

cursory look at the compilations of collected essays by High Qing literati, early nineteenth century activists, treaty port intellectuals and merchant reformers already reveals similar structures of their arguments, namely that they all began with the exegesis of *dao* and proceeded to practical matters from there. Hence, it offers crucial insights of the intellectual dynamics back then by delving into such similarities. Since it is not remotely my intention to produce a master narrative on the historical evolution of late Qing political thought, the sources merely provide a glimpse into the bigger picture of Qing intellectual landscape, which invites further research on the multiplicity of China's modern transformation. Nevertheless, my selection will be inevitably marred by biases in the selecting process and the sources themselves, which I have to acknowledge. It is my sincere hope that future studies can overcome such biases by substantiating my preliminary exploration with investigations based on a broader range of materials.

Main findings and Chapterization

Bearing the above discussions in mind, this dissertation examines the roots of modern Chinese statism across the gestation period of the nineteenth century with an emphasis on the cosmological assumptions underlying Chinese political thought, as the “centrality of Confucian classical studies for political discourse in late imperial China”⁶¹ is for me precisely due to the centrality of cosmic visions inherent in these classics. The reason behind the endorsement of such a cosmology (despite competing versions of its specific forms) is closely related to the literati's self-identity and the missionary role they assumed in ordering the world. The Ming-Qing transition and intellectual transformation during the High Qing further led to the

⁶¹ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, xxxii.

popularization of a materialist conception of the cosmos which asserted that *dao* has to be sought in the realm of actual things and affairs (*qi* 器) rather than through metaphysical speculation. Combined with active state patronage of Confucian learning during the High Qing, scholars were emboldened to recover *dao* encoded in Confucian classics using Evidential techniques, an endeavor believed to be able to re-enliven the Golden Age of antiquity in the emerging sagely rule of their day. Such intellectual transformations in time gave rise to a presentist interpretation of classics that by historicizing the formation of Confucian classics denied the validity of philological studies on dated texts to illuminate *dao*. Instead, only through practical statecraft catering to the contemporary needs of the state could scholarly pursuits be aligned with the grand enterprise of transmitting *dao*. By formulating a symbiotic relationship between the state and the literati, scholars began to regard the state buttressed by cosmic authority as indispensable to fulfilling their mission of ordering the world. Hence, beginning in the early nineteenth century when domestic crisis started to plague the empire, literati activism started to reemerge from long-standing suppression by political power.⁶² To legitimize their political aspirations in an intellectual milieu that increasingly stressed the statecraft output of academic endeavors, these activists came to regard the construction of a strong state as *the* point of reference for their scholarship and political agendas. The consequent emergence of statist thinking in the early nineteenth century, which idealized the Qing state as embodying *dao* and thus self-legitimizing, became a convenient tool in justification of literati re-ascendance against corrupt powerholders in the dysfunctional bureaucracy. Initial perceptions of the Western threat that culminated in the Opium War were also steered toward preexisting political agendas aimed at revitalizing the state

⁶² Seunghyun Han, “Changing Roles of Local Elites from the 1730s to the 1820s,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part Two: The Ch’ing Dynasty to 1800*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 606–48.

by early advocates of statist thinking. After the mid-century transition that witnessed political turmoil at court, escalating Western aggression and destructive internal rebellions, statist thinking was popularized during the Tongzhi-Guangxu Restoration as a new generation of literati activists found it an urgent need to rebuild domestic governance and preserve Chinese might in foreign relations against Western intrusion. Alongside the influx of Western learning and growing Sino-foreign communication through treaty ports, personal sojourns and diplomatic missions, statist thinking became consolidated as the undertone of competing political agendas during the self-strengthening movement. The search for wealth and power was thus more than an expedient in response to Western impact and deeply entangled with the statist aspiration of realizing *dao* through *qi* (器). Up until the eve of 1895, statist thinking that sought legitimacy for literati empowerment by upholding state power saw nascent forms of modern Chinese statism gradually taking shape and foreshadowed the emergence of radicalized political ideas at the turn of the twentieth century.

Chapters in the dissertation will be organized in a chronological order. The design is to trace the historical evolution of intellectual precursors of statism from the early to the late nineteenth century by balancing between the inner logic of ideas on the state and broader sociopolitical circumstances that set the stage for the literati's reinvention of past traditions as well as foreign impact.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the evolution of the Chinese intellectual world from the Ming-Qing transition to the early nineteenth century. By briefly tracing how conceptions of the political vis-à-vis cosmological order had transformed till the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition, this chapter intends to reconstruct the historical dynamics from which incipient statist thinking emerged. It argues that the anti-metaphysical movement against the moralist teachings of Neo-

Confucianism and the epistemological revolution that gave rise to Evidential Scholarship (*kaozheng xue* 考證學), when combined with the peculiarities of High Qing politics, prompted a presentist agenda in Confucian classical studies that anticipated the marriage of classicism with statecraft reformism. When domestic crisis deepened at the turn of the nineteenth century, this presentism eventually saw a statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship, which stressed the statecraft output of academic pursuits. As resurging literati activism deemed a powerful state as indispensable for a turbulent age, statism began to surface among Confucian scholars.

Chapter 2 examines the changing political atmosphere and intellectual landscape in the first decades of the nineteenth century that engendered nascent statism. It discusses how the effort to revitalize literati morale by the imperial court in tackling dynastic decline was utilized by activists among the lettered class to call for their re-empowerment against long-standing political suppression of the High Qing. Continuing the presentist line of argument that led to the notion of epochal change in New Text cosmology, literati activists necessitated the agenda for institutional reform in which they would play a bigger role in imperial politics. To justify literati re-ascendance in the shadow of factionalism, New Text scholars such as Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794-1857) united Confucian scholarship, statecraft reformism and the idealization of a strong state under the banner of cosmic authority, which grounded their political activism in resuscitating Qing imperial power that harbored *dao*. Statist thinking accordingly crystallized as concerned literati strove to assume more responsibilities for the troubled empire.

Chapter 3 aims to show how statist thinking gained currency among literati activists around the Opium War by discussing the ways early advocates of statist thinking weaved their aspirations into domestic reform and initial perceptions of the Western threat. Focusing on the works of Wei Yuan as a clue, it argues that literati activists harnessed the anti-bureaucratic sentiment among

those outside high office to push for institutional reform, which consolidated the statist undertone in their aspiration for literati political empowerment. In the name of strengthening the state, statist thinkers like Wei saw their elevated role in politics against morally corrupt officeholders as indispensable for the betterment of state finance and people's livelihood, as well as the preservation of Chinese civilization in the face of rising Western dominance on a global scale. Statist thinking thus became an intellectual cornerstone of literati activists.

Chapters 4 looks at the transitional period centering around the Taiping Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century. It discusses how changes in the political, social and intellectual milieus brought about by both internal upheavals and foreign intrusions had engendered the popularization of statist thinking. By examining the rising prominence of Han ministers in the Qing officialdom, the impact of Western learning and the spread of the statecraft orientation within Confucian scholarship, this chapter aims to show how statist thinking attracted a growing number of the literati during the mid-century transition. It further discusses how such an intellectual transformation set the stage for the dissemination of statist thinking in the age of the Tongzhi-Guangxu Restoration and the self-strengthening movement.

Chapter 5 examines the spread of statist thinking among high officials in their visions for dynastic restoration and self-strengthening agendas. By looking at controversies over the question of talent (*rencai* 人才) and debates on the strategic design of Qing border defense, it discusses how the rationales behind the self-strengthening movement and its opponents continued the line of argument by early statist thinkers that grounded the validity of their political agendas in the construction of a strong state. In doing so, renewed calls for state activism in patronizing literati ascendance and in centralizing governance across the Qing borderlands utilized the growing Western impact as an opportunity to propagate preexisting

statist agendas, which enhanced the statist undertone in the political discourse on self-strengthening.

Chapter 6 continues the investigation of statist thinking vis-à-vis the self-strengthening movement by examining conceptions of the state among the emerging new types of sub-groups within the literati class such as treaty port intellectuals and diplomatic ministers. With the introduction of the modern press and Western concepts such as sovereignty and international law, growing aspirations for an activist state in defending China from foreign aggression and showcasing Chinese power on the world stage emboldened those eager to assume a bigger role in politics to appropriate the logic of statist thinking in advocating reform in emulation of Western models. Similar to how the presentist understanding of the classics had led to the statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship, competing visions for a powerful state were predicated on presentist interpretations of state institutions, foreign relations and broadened political participation informed by Western learning. The same statist line of thinking was also inextricably tied with the issue of literati political empowerment and the cosmic vision of *dao*'s great unity (*datong* 大同) in a rapidly changing world.

Chapter 7 discusses how statist thinking had shaped the logic of reform toward the last decade of the nineteenth century, when the search for wealth as the foundation of state power became an overriding concern among self-strengthening advocates. It examines the burgeoning call for empowering the merchant class in strengthening the state and using commerce as self-defense against foreign economic encroachment, which culminated in the notion of commercial warfare (*shangzhan* 商戰) hailed by merchant-reformer Zheng Guanying (鄭觀應, 1842-1921). Through a presentist reinvention of commerce, merchants were deemed as an integral part of the self-strengthening enterprise and thus deserved a voice in politics. The state should accordingly

patronize a wider range of economic activities in competition with foreign powers. The rationale behind merchant empowerment was thus predicated on the same statist logic for literati empowerment in imperial politics. Reform agendas toward the end of the nineteenth century accordingly saw further popularization of statist thinking in the political discourse, which morphed into an intellectual cornerstone for radicalized ideas to emerge in the post-1895 era.

In **Conclusion** I briefly discuss the lasting impact of statist thinking after 1895 by pointing out the logical connections between statist thinking and the thought of radical reformers at the turn of the twentieth century. Then I summarize my findings in the dissertation and discuss how the search for roots of Chinese statism could enrich our understanding of the modern Chinese state. I further analyze the broader implications of my findings in relation to current scholarship on Qing intellectual history and offer suggestions for future studies.

Chapter One: Qing Intellectual Transformation to the Early Nineteenth Century

Introduction

In order to understand the sociopolitical and intellectual landscapes out of which statism arose, it is necessary to take a brief look at previous historical evolutions of the Chinese intellectual world. The present chapter aims to fulfill such a goal by examining intellectual transformations that set the stage for the emergence of statist thinking. The intellectual trend most characteristic of the period, Evidential Scholarship, is well studied by Chinese and Western scholars alike. Elman sees such an intellectual movement as an epistemological revolution that fostered an empiricist turn in Confucian scholarship.¹ Ge Zhaoguang explains it through the concept of public discourse shaped by both external political forces and internal dynamics of Confucianism.² Seeking to elucidate such dynamics, scholars have emphasized the advent of ritualism that upheld Confucian ritual as institutionalized regulation of society as the driving force behind Evidential Scholarship, which forms another aspect of the intellectual transformation back then.³ Yu Ying-shih further situates the underlying assumption of Evidential Scholarship within the rise of Confucian intellectualism that prioritized objective knowledge over moral intuition and moralist teachings expressed through “empty talk” (*kongtan* 空談) detached from practical matters.⁴ In each case, connections between specific strands of thought

¹ Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2nd, rev. ed., UCLA Pacific Monograph Series (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

² Ge Zhaoguang, *Zhongguo sixiang shi*, vol 2 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2001), 499–573.

³ Kai-wing Chow, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Zhang Shou-an, *Shiba shiji lixue kaozheng de sixiang huoli— Lijiao zheng lun yu lizhi chongxing* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2005).

⁴ Yu Ying-shih, “Some Preliminary Observations on the Rise of Qing Confucian Intellectualism,” in *Chinese History and Culture: Seventeenth Century Through Twentieth Century*, ed. Yu Ying-shih, Josephine Chiu-Duke and Michael S. Duke (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1–39; Yu Ying-shih, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng: Qingdai zhongqi xueshu sixiang shi yanjiu* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2000), 18–34.

and the broader intellectual, social and political milieus remain to be delineated. To this end, Elman has attempted to examine how the changing political climate led to the resurgence of New Text classicism, which in turn paved the way for statecraft reformism in the mid-Qing.⁵ Ori Sela seeks to link scholarly agendas with the common identity of Confucian academic communities and demonstrate how philological studies were shaped by conceptions of the good world order.⁶ Their insights are yet to be woven into the interpretation of Qing intellectual transformation vis-à-vis imperial politics over the *longue durée*.

Studies that look more generally at intellectual development over a longer period, such as On-cho Ng who offers an overview of themes in Qing intellectual transformation till the eighteenth century, tend to gloss over the political implications of changes in the intellectual world.⁷ Wang Hui's work arguably pays the most consistent attention to the co-evolution between Confucian learning and political thought in late imperial China. For Wang, the quest for a universal imperial order under Heaven has prompted Qing scholars to propagate a culturalist conception of political legitimacy, which transcended racial and ethnic divisions and opened up space for the domestication of Western learning. Yet Wang's teleology, as discussed before, renders his investigation poised for a reconstruction of historical dynamics marred by the hindsight of Kang Youwei's radical reinvention of Confucian classicism.⁸ Tai Ching-hsien's panoptic investigations of late imperial Confucianism are helpful to reveal the multifarious implications of certain ideas. When it comes to the intersection of Confucian scholarship and political thinking, however, further studies are needed to demonstrate the inner logic of political ideas vis-à-vis the

⁵ Benjamin A. Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-Chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁶ Sela, *China's Philological Turn*.

⁷ On-cho Ng, "Qing Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/qing-philosophy>.

⁸ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, vols 1, 2, 260–830.

broader intellectual landscape.⁹ Others tend to follow a conventional school-based or biographical format of inquiry which cannot capture the evolution of interrelated themes,¹⁰ or focus on the impact of historical events on the academia which inadequately addresses intellectual dynamics on their own terms.¹¹

Throughout the above review, the issue of cosmology is missing. Qing cosmology has been understood by Henderson as representing a decline in cosmological thinking of imperial China, as scholars armed with scientific knowledge brought by the Jesuits started to reject previous cosmological systems and geographical cosmography. Instead, they stressed asymmetries and irregularities in the cosmos which fostered an “anticosmological” view that denied the guiding role of cosmic forces in human affairs.¹² It is unclear to what extent Henderson’s investigation has influenced the field, but discussions on specific connections between cosmic visions and political thinking among Qing literati are virtually eclipsed in modern scholarship. Most scholars either look at how the literati’s self-identity vis-à-vis *dao* had been manipulated by political authority in service of Qing rule,¹³ or briefly mention conceptions of cosmic reality as an anecdote to Qing literati’s scholarly pursuits.¹⁴ Others see the rhetoric of good cosmic forces as a consecrated tradition in Neo-Confucian moral cultivation readily upheld by the literati in late imperial China.¹⁵ Nevertheless, no systematic cosmology does not mean no cosmology at all. As my discussion will show, the move away from established cosmological models was facilitated

⁹ Tai, *Xueshu sixiang shi*, Part I, II.

¹⁰ E.g., Wang Xuequn, *Zhongguo ruxue shi: Qingdai juan* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2011); Zhang Shunhui, *Qingru xueji* (Wuhan: Huazhong Normal University Press, 2005).

¹¹ R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor’s Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch’ien-Lung Era*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 129 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹² Henderson, *Development and Decline*, 137–258.

¹³ Huang, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics*, chs. 3, 7.

¹⁴ Sela, *China’s Philological Turn*, 176–7.

¹⁵ Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*.

by a materialist understanding of the cosmic order, which in effect allowed greater leeway for the literati to assert their prestige as true disciples of Confucian teachings. Moreover, an investigation of the cosmological assumptions in Qing political thought will reveal the underlying logic of certain issues (e.g., literati identity vis-à-vis cosmic and political authority) persistently addressed in the Qing intellectual transformation. Such a revelation will provide a deeper understanding of Qing intellectual history, as opposed to the conventional depiction of this history as a successive turn of events where older trends were naturally replaced by newer ones in response to changing circumstances.¹⁶ By highlighting the intellectual autonomy of Qing literati in the sense of how they appropriated changing sociopolitical realities through transcendental visions in service of their agendas in the mundane realm, I further intend to transcend the conception of Qing intellectual transformation as being shaped by the inner logic of ideas,¹⁷ or by socio-historical situations.¹⁸ Rather, historical figures are far from being passively influenced by either internal or external factors. The emphasis should be placed on the ingenious ways they utilized the theoretical potential of past ideas in response to novel situations in their lifeworld.

This chapter thus traces the evolution of conceptions of cosmic reality, political order and scholarly agendas that prepared the ground for statist thinking by looking at how the underlying concern of literati identity vis-à-vis political authority and social transformation was persistently addressed by Confucian scholars. It argues that revolting against the extremes of pan-moralism brought about by Wang Yangming's (王陽明, 1472-1529) "Learning of the heart-mind" (*xinxue* 心學), a number of literati reinserted the gravity of Confucian classical studies (*jingxue* 經學) as

¹⁶ Wang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*; Tai, *Xueshu sixiang shi*, Part II.

¹⁷ Yu, "Some Preliminary Observations;" Lao, *Zhexue shi*.

¹⁸ Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 499–535; Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*.

the prerequisite for transmitting sagely teachings and restoring social order during the Ming-Qing transition. Deviating from the cosmology of the officially sanctioned “Learning of *dao*” (*Daoxue* 道學, a synonym with the Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism or *lixue* 理學) where the cosmos is governed by the intangible principle (*li* 理) and the human mind subjugated to it, they emphasized the priority of concrete vital force (*qi* 氣) in the cosmic process of generation. Accordingly, Confucian learning should not be fixated on self-indulgent cogitation over metaphysical issues beyond the experiential world, but cater to practical matters in human society. Unlike metaphysics which concerns grasping the ultimate truth of the universe, the changing views of cosmology point to the reformulation of sociopolitical order in reverence to cosmic authority. Moreover, such an endeavor can only be actualized through intellectual knowledge sanctioned by the Confucian classics. This rise of Confucian intellectualism translated itself into the political ideal of serving the activist state under Qing rule on one hand, and into the goal of reviving authentic texts through Evidential Scholarship to recover *dao* in Confucian classics on the other. The imperial recognition of Evidential Scholarship in the Lower Yangtze region (Jiangnan 江南) during the Qianlong reign further sparked the quest of illuminating “meanings and principles” (*yili* 義理) using Evidential techniques. The desirability of realizing ancient ideals in the contemporary scene eventually gave rise to a presentist interpretation of classical studies which emphasized the practical output of academic endeavors to address urgent needs of the day. When domestic crises began to plague the declining empire at the turn of the nineteenth century, concerned literati appropriated such a presentism to call for institutional reform, which saw a statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship manifested for instance in the thought of Zhang Xuecheng (章學誠, 1738-1801). Resurging literati activism accordingly regarded a strong state as the ultimate point of reference, since literati identity and

statecraft agendas became increasingly associated with the mission of transmitting *dao* under the aegis of state authority.

Literati identity and Confucian intellectualism

This section discusses how changing conceptions of cosmic reality and literati identity unfolded by looking at the popularization of *qi* (氣) cosmology and its implications in the writings of leading scholars during the Ming-Qing transition. Chinese society underwent profound changes in the late Ming which effectively dismantled Confucian ideals of social order. The influx and monetization of silver resulting from China's integration into the world economy brought about wealth and prosperity that boosted unprecedented levels of commercialization and urbanization.¹⁹ The increasing social mobility enabled gentry elites to form regional networks and extra-bureaucratic organizations potentially at odds with the will of the state. Alongside the booming economy were the gentry's abuse of power by dint of their privileges and the polarization of society, which gradually eroded Confucian ethics and the literati image as leading examples of the people when the breakdown of preexisting social classes saw the heterogenization of literati in terms of ideological unity.²⁰ The situation was exacerbated by the pan-moralist implications of Wang Yangming's *xinxue*, as it granted the possibility of even commoners to achieve moral transcendence by solely enlightening one's immanent nature. In this way, moral, intellectual and ultimately political authority could no longer be confirmed via

¹⁹ Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 296–312; idem, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 140–52;

²⁰ For the multivalent impacts of economic prosperity, see Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For the transformation of the literati class, see Chow, *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 15–21; Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 95–210; Zhang Xianqing ed., *Mingdai houqi shehui zhuanxing yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008).

established human institutions or social norms. The populist and syncretic trends in Confucianism flourishing thereof further diluted the sense of Confucian orthodoxy and inflicted confusions in literati identity.²¹

Hence, when Gu Yanwu (顧炎武, 1613-1682) claimed in a letter to his poet friend Shi Runzhang (施閏章, 1618-1683) that “what is called *lixue* in ancient times is in fact *jingxue*,”²² he was revealing a deep sense of identity crisis and an urge for resolution. As intellectual elites boasting the transcendental vision of Confucianism in ordering the world, Chinese literati relied on a set of autonomous and distinctive criteria in the construction of group identity apart from the vicissitudes of sociopolitical realities. In competitions with other types of elites and within the literati class itself, such criteria become subject to growing reflexivity on their core elements and on the legitimization of identity formation for intellectuals.²³ By adhering to the orthodox teachings in Confucian classics, Gu exhibited such a reflexivity in securing a foundation for literati identity against the shock waves from social disintegration and the subversive effect of Wang Yangming’s thought. It is no wonder that for Gu the laborious endeavor to master the classics would take decades to accomplish, and the contemporary proclivity of scholars to value personal commentaries (*yulu* 語錄) over the classics had in fact cankered *lixue* and turned it to Chan Buddhism. But interestingly enough, Gu did not simply adopt a dogmatic stance toward Confucian classics as unchanging truth, as he also stated that “the *Analects* is *yulu* by sages.” It is the scholars’ reliance on commentaries by later generations rather than by those of the sages that

²¹ For a philosophical analysis of Wang Yangming’s thought and his influence, see Lao Sze-kwang, *Xinbian Zhongguo zhexue shi*, vol. 3 (Taipei: Sanmin chubanshe, 2012), 302–95. For a brief survey of late Ming syncretism, see Chow, *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 21–31.

²² Gu Yanwu, “Yu Shi Yushan shu,” in *Gu Tinglin shiwen ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 62.

²³ Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 201–2, 208–9, 211–3.

had made them “ignorant of the fundamental.”²⁴ Contemptuous of deviations from Confucian classical teachings, Gu was equally disdained by the doctrinaire tendency in moral cultivation upheld by *lixue* that could be traced back to Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200). In a cosmos governed by the intangible principle, people could do little but follow the dictation of principle, as understood by Zhu. Through his study of history, however, Gu insinuated an emphasis on the contingency of historical events and therefore the intellectual autonomy of individuals. He would thus promote a less idealized interpretation of history as the manifestation of principle compared to Zhu, as well as a historicist understanding of classics through piecemeal learning and the method of *kaozheng*.²⁵ In doing so, Gu discredited the centrality of principle in human society and resorted to the study of practical matters in the hope of reviving true meanings of Confucianism.²⁶ Therefore, Gu Yanwu used classical studies to simultaneously fend off the undesirable impacts of Wang’s pan-moralism and to substantiate the anti-metaphysical backlash against the cosmology of *lixue*. And Gu was not alone in the endeavor to rectify genuine Confucian learning in face of deepening social and intellectual crises. As early as in the heyday of Donglin (東林) activism, leading Donglin scholars had relentlessly attacked the populist and syncretic tendencies which were regarded as subversive to Confucian values and held accountable for moral decay. By denouncing Buddhist teachings and spontaneity in moral cultivation as heterodox elements insidiously corrupting the Confucian spirit, they stressed the primacy of external discipline (i.e., Confucian classical teachings) and conformity to objective norms in moral cultivation, instead of uncovering one’s innate good through moral intuition.²⁷

²⁴ Gu, “Yu Shi Yushan shu,” 62.

²⁵ Willard J. Peterson, “Advancement of Learning in Early Ch’ing: Three Cases,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part Two: The Ch’ing Dynasty to 1800*, 534–58.

²⁶ Wang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 218–38; Zhang, *Qingru*, 14–9.

²⁷ Chow, *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 32–9.

Yet such criticisms of pan-moralism are not enough. Due to the strong this-worldly orientation in the transcendental vision of Confucianism, resolution to the tension between mundane and trans-mundane orders is defined in secular terms and lies predominantly in existing social relations and political systems.²⁸ This intricate correlation between transcendental visions and conceptions of the mundane order, I would argue, further functions as a two-way street since changing notions of moral agency can in theory initiate reappraisals of cosmic reality as well. In actual history, it can be observed that kingpins in the Donglin Academy like Gao Panlong (高攀龍, 1562-1626) resorted to the *qi* (氣) ontology of Zhang Zai (張載, 1020-1077) to emphasize the observation of correct rites as the basis for moral cultivation.²⁹ Though largely following Zhu Xi's dualist conception of *li* and *qi* (氣), Gao nevertheless elevated the status of *qi* (氣) by recognizing its concreteness apart from the intangible *li*. This stance represents a shift away from empty talk toward practical learning (*shixue* 實學) in the turmoil of late Ming.³⁰ Concerns for practical statecraft among the literati also led scholars to reformulate the cosmology of *Daoxue* during the Ming-Qing transition. Liu Zongzhou (劉宗周, 1578-1645), an avowed follower of Wang Yangming and diehard Ming loyalist, eventually overthrew Zhu's dualism by affirming that *qi* (氣) was what permeates Heaven and Earth and *li* had no separate ontological standing. Liu's monist view on cosmic reality in turn leads him to advocate the unity of diverse ideas in practice under the unequivocal guidance of one's heart-mind.³¹ Moral cultivation must thus be complemented by achievements in the actual sociopolitical realm and conversely the resolution

²⁸ Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 473–81; Fingarette, “Human Community as Holy Rite.”

²⁹ Chow, *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 39.

³⁰ Bu Jinzhi, “Lun Gao Panlong de *lixue* sixiang he wushi zhiyong xueshuo,” *Xueshu yuekan*, no. 09 (1986): 33–37+69; Lao, *Zhexue shi*, 413–28.

³¹ Ge Jinrong, *Zhongguo shixue sixiang shi*, vol. B (Beijing: Capital Normal University Press, 1994), 64–6; Lao, *Zhexue shi*, 459–72.

of practical issues ought to be dependent upon those capable of enlightening the innate good. In line of Liu's teachings, Huang Zongxi (黃宗羲, 1610-1695) expounded on the monism of *qi* (氣) as constituting the ultimate reality of the cosmos. Consequently, the relations of *li*, human nature (*xing* 性), sentiment (*qing* 情), and even the commanding heart-mind are unified as manifestations of *qi*'s (氣) self-generation.³² This stress of unity further prompted Huang's disapproval of Confucian learning since the Song dynasty, which was conceptualized by him as the parochial focus on meanings and principles devoid of practical statecraft and consequently compromising the teachings in Confucian classics. For Huang, true Confucian scholars should actively participate in the ordering of Heaven and Earth rather than dwelling on moral speculation, and genuine Confucian learning should not neglect the investigation of *dao* contained in the *Six Classics* (*liujing* 六經).³³ Huang's view of classical studies is thus close to Gu Yanwu's in regards to their shared orientation of seeking what it means to be a true Confucian disciple by returning to the classics. Such a search for identity also formed an integral part of the intellectual transformation in this period.

The outcome of this transformation is twofold. Firstly, with the decline of the dualist understanding of cosmic reality, the concept of *qi* (氣) sparked increasing criticisms of the official cosmology praising *li*'s dominance. With the spread of Western learning brought by Jesuit missionaries, Chinese scholars also became less confined to the moral metaphysics of *Daoxue* and reassessed previous cosmological models on more empirical grounds.³⁴ A corollary to such an anti-metaphysical view of the cosmos was a growing consciousness of the practical

³² Wang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 74–81; Ge, *Zhongguo shixue*, 66–76.

³³ Lao, *Zhexue shi*, 492–8.

³⁴ Henderson, *Development and Decline*, 150–5, 175–95; Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 449–98.

output of moral cultivation. Since the intangible *li* is inseparable from the concrete *qi* (氣) and must manifest itself through *qi*'s (氣) actual movement, enlightening one's innate good is also inextricably linked to external accomplishments in ordering the world. This statecraft undertone arguably prompted the scholarly effort to compile compendiums of statecraft writings, the revival of historical and classical studies, and the domestication of Western astronomical and mathematical knowledge in this period.³⁵ Secondly and more importantly, the affirmation of individual autonomy based on *qi* (氣) morphed into a lasting source to consolidate literati identity. As *qi*'s (氣) self-generation is indeterminate, the human mind freed from the overmastering cosmic authority needed objective means to stay on the course toward moral perfection. It is thus only the literati with the correct tool of Confucian teachings who could fulfil the mission to guide society against degeneration. Hence, Huang Zongxi would regard the attained men's (*junzi* 君子) moral intention (*yi* 意) as transcending the potentially corruptible *xing* and even the heart-mind, both composed of *qi* (氣). Arguing against autocratic rulership, he also reinserted the importance of the literati in politics through the institutionalization of schools for public debates in policy making as a means to check the monarch's arbitrary power.³⁶ Another example is Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619-1692) who took Zhang Zai's conception of *qi* (氣) one step further by reformulating the entire Confucian cosmology based on *qi* (氣) monism in cosmic creation.³⁷ Denying the duality of *li* and human desire (*renyu* 人欲), Wang also cautioned against excessive desire and regarded moral cultivation as what differentiated the literati from commoners in the sense that only the morally righteous literati could regulate desire

³⁵ Ge, *Zhongguo shixue*, 117–55, 241–97, 489–511.

³⁶ Willard J. Peterson, "Arguments over Learning Based on Intuitive Knowing in Early Ch'ing," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part Two: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 478–90.

³⁷ Wang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 171–87; Lao, *Zhexue shi*, 512–47.

in reverence to *li*.³⁸ To avoid the pitfalls of metaphysical speculation leading to pan-moralism, the return to Confucian classics eventually became the consensus among the literati as the central criterion of their identity formation.³⁹ Therefore, the internal oscillations between the poles of morality and knowledge may well have contributed to the rise of Confucian intellectualism in the early Qing,⁴⁰ but the incentives of such dynamics cannot be sufficiently explained in the polarity per se. As we have seen, changing views on cosmic reality and identity formation of the literati shaped by specific intellectual and social forces also influenced intellectual transformations of the time to a significant degree. The evidential approach to classical studies crystallizing therein could also be seen as resulting from these factors,⁴¹ as the search for verifiable knowledge on objective grounds sanctioned by the classics in effect confined intellectual autonomy within the orientations of Confucianism.⁴² The tide had irreversibly turned.

The above analysis in no way depicts the whole picture of changing intellectual landscape during the Ming-Qing transition. As Tai Ching-hsien notes, the scholarly reaction to Wang Yangming's thought during the Ming-Qing transition sparked multiple directions in the development of Confucian learning. The interconnection and interaction between moral cultivation, metaphysical debates and statecraft aspirations were harnessed by scholars of various intellectual orientations in response to profound changes of their lifeworld.⁴³ The rise of practical learning and philology is arguably informed by the intellectual endeavors of late Ming scholars

³⁸ Wang Fan-sen, *Wan Ming Qing chu sixiang shilun* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2004), 99–102.

³⁹ Small wonder that Wang Fuzhi's works on classical studies were hailed in later-day scholarship. See Zhang, *Qingru*, 201–3.

⁴⁰ Yu, "Some Preliminary Observations."

⁴¹ Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*, 73–92.

⁴² Kai-wing Chow notes that *kaozheng* as a hermeneutical method served to check the excesses of textual skepticism in the early Qing, see his *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 163–70.

⁴³ See Tai's systematic categorization and discussion of these directions in his *Xueshu sixiang shi*, Part II, 327–44.

as well, which points to continuity rather than rupture in the evolution of Neo-Confucianism.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the specific line of reasoning arising from the materialist understanding of the cosmos, which simultaneously promoted the intellectual autonomy of the literati and the search for external disciplines in the institutionalized control of human agency, would be time and again appropriated by Qing scholars in the quest for proper sociopolitical order. The growing interest in Evidential Scholarship is also reflective of this shift in the intellectual world prompted by political realities under Qing rule.⁴⁵ Such realities would further shape the assumptions underlying classical studies, as well as conceptions of imperial politics among scholars during the High Qing, which will be examined in the next section.

Qing politics and classical studies

Upon the swift occupation of Ming China, the Qing struggled for nearly four decades to consolidate its rule as alien conquerors. Using both carrots and sticks, the Qing court managed to secure an alliance with gentry elites in local governance and accommodated the literati's social status in the new system.⁴⁶ The Shunzhi Emperor's short reign was followed by an age of stability under the Kangxi Emperor, who as an outstanding military and political leader successfully pacified the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories, enhanced border control along the Qing frontiers and initiated reforms in centralizing monarchical power and provincial administration.⁴⁷ Shifting from the regionalist allegiance with Liaodong Chinese in the early years of conquest, Kangxi also moved toward a more inclusive stance to win over literati loyalty

⁴⁴ Yu Ying-shih, "Qing Confucianism," in *Chinese History and Culture*, 113–7; idem, "Some Preliminary Observations."

⁴⁵ Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 499–524.

⁴⁶ William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing*, History of Imperial China (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 24–30.

⁴⁷ Jonathan D. Spence, "The K'ang-hsi Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part One: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, ed. Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 120–82.

especially in Jiangnan.⁴⁸ One profound measure was to patronize scholarly enterprises by officially sponsoring Confucian learning through erecting the orthodoxy of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, directing massive projects such as the compilation of Ming History and standardizing interpretations of classics. As a result, many offspring of Ming loyalists and leading Jiangnan scholars were drawn to the court and became servants of the new dynasty.⁴⁹ This section looks at how such sociopolitical realities were perceived by Qing literati and how their perceptions shaped their scholarly agendas by unveiling an ambitious undertone among officials and scholars to uncover *dao* in the classics for the emerging sagely rule apart from the technical aspects of philological studies.

Bearing the above historical transformation in mind, we would not be surprised that when assuming the role of sub-chancellor in the Grand Secretariat, Li Guangdi (李光地, 1642-1718), a prominent scholar-official under Kangxi's patronage, acclaimed the emperor's rule with utmost ardor:

I again observe that the origins of *dao* and governance (*zhi* 治) were one in ancient times but became separated later. Mencius recorded the five-hundred-year history of continuous traditions from Yao and Shun to King Wen. This is the example that *dao* and governance originate from one... Confucius relocated eastward in his lifetime, and Master Zhu southward. It is because Heaven endowed them with *dao* yet the time was not right, exemplifying the separateness of *dao* and governance. It has been another five hundred years since the time of Mater Zhu. With our

⁴⁸ Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 108–28.

⁴⁹ Willard J. Peterson, “Dominating Learning from above in the K’ang-hsi Period,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part Two: The Ch’ing Dynasty to 1800*, 571–605.

emperor meeting the expectations of sage-king and practicing sagely learning, Heaven would revive the fate (*yun* 運) of Yao and Shun, unifying the traditions of *dao* and governance!⁵⁰

Having emerged as a Qing loyalist during the Three Feudatories rebellion, Li was personally praised by Kangxi and stormed up the ladder in the bureaucracy accordingly. When presenting the above accolade to the emperor after returning to the capital from the rebellion which disrupted his early success in the officialdom,⁵¹ Li might very well have been driven by a careerist motive given his humble Fujianese background. Yet Li's speech reveals a good portion of political realities deftly anchored by Kangxi, as the emperor actively sought to surpass his predecessors through reuniting the traditions of *dao* and governance. Kangxi would thus tirelessly study Song Neo-Confucianism and proclaim the two inseparable traditions as having been endowed by Heaven's Mandate to the Qing dominion. In addition, the emperor also presented himself as the sage-king monopolizing Heaven's mainstay (*qiangang* 乾綱) and connecting the realms of Heaven and man.⁵² Under such circumstances, the intellectual autonomy promoted by literati of an earlier generation gradually succumbed to political authority, and consequently the critical strain in literati identity as bearers of *dao* independent of political institutions faded.⁵³ But on the other hand, the official patronage of Confucian learning also emboldened ambitious literati to materialize their visions of transmitting *dao* through serving the imperial state. Hence, Li Guangdi reintroduced the notion of fate resonating with the cosmic model of the Five-Element cycle, which had been waning from the discourse of

⁵⁰ Peng Shaosheng, "Gu guanglu dafu Wenyuange daxueshi Li Wenzhen gong shizhuang," in *Beizhuan ji*, vol. 1, ed. Qian Yiji and Jin Si (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 334–5.

⁵¹ On-cho Ng, *Cheng-Zhu Confucianism in the Early Qing: Li Guangdi (1642-1718) and Qing Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 53–7.

⁵² Ho Koon-piu, "Qiangang duyu, qiangang duduan—Kangxi, Yongzheng erdi junquan sixiang de yige cemiao," *Hanxue yanjiu* 20, no. 2 (2002): 277–91; Wang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 33–7.

⁵³ Huang, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics*, 148–68; Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 409–10.

orthodoxy since the Song,⁵⁴ to hail the emergence of sagely rule in his day. He further pointed out that the monarch's learning is not different from the literati's and Kangxi's learning was essentially that of the Three Dynasties.⁵⁵ In this way, Li insinuated a task for Confucian learning to restore the Golden Age in the contemporary scene under the patronage of political authority.⁵⁶ He would thus reformulate Zhu Xi's metaphysics to forward a meta-practical agenda of verifying metaphysical concepts in actual accomplishments of self-cultivation and statecraft.⁵⁷ Carefully chartering the ground of literati autonomy now regulated by the state, scholars like Li Guangdi came to regard the existing political framework as indispensable to actualize Confucian ideals.

Such conceptual transformations, accompanied by unprecedented social change in the High Qing like population boom, imperial expansion, massive migration and growth of extra-bureaucratic organizations,⁵⁸ aroused among concerned literati an urge to both cope with the rapidly changing circumstances and to order the world under the aegis of state authority. Upon succession to Kangxi's throne, the Yongzheng Emperor's relentless project of imposing the will of the state on running the bureaucracy and regulating public affairs also effectively disciplined the literati class in service of the empire.⁵⁹ Therefore, fervent officials would repeatedly encourage state activism in managing local affairs and propagate state ideology through education campaigns and orthodox ritual performance.⁶⁰ Scholarly agendas were ineluctably shaped by these intellectual and political forces. The kingpin of Evidential Scholarship in the

⁵⁴ Liu Pujiang, "'Wude zhongshi' shuo de zhongjie—Songdai yijiang chuantong zhengzhi wenhua de shanbian," in *Zhongguo gudai zhengzhi wenhua yanjiu*, ed. Chen Suzhen (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009), 377–404.

⁵⁵ Peng, "Gu guanglu dafu," 334.

⁵⁶ Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 346–8.

⁵⁷ Ng, *Cheng-Zhu Confucianism*, 69–129.

⁵⁸ William T. Rowe, "Social Stability and Social Change," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part One: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 473–562.

⁵⁹ Madeleine Zelin, "The Yung-cheng Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part One: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 183–229.

⁶⁰ E.g., the case of Chen Hongmou (陳宏謀, 1696–1771). See William T. Rowe, *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 326–62, 406–45.

Qianlong era, Dai Zhen (戴震, 1724-1777), would thus conceptualize classical studies as transcending mere philological concerns:

If (the study of) meanings and principles can be grounded in speculation instead of the classics, then everyone would grasp them out of emptiness. What would be the use of classical studies? It is when through speculation one fails to comprehend the meanings and principles of the worthies and sages that one turns to classics. And it is when the ancient classical texts create obstacles to understanding that one turns to philology. With the illumination of philology comes the illumination of the classics, and with that comes the illumination of the meanings and principles of the worthies and sages. Then what is also the case in my mind will be illuminated. The meanings and principles of the worthies and sages are preserved nowhere else than in the codes and institutions (*dianzhang zhidu* 典章制度).⁶¹

Dai wrote these words in commemoration of the senior philologist Hui Dong (惠棟, 1697-1758), whom Dai acquainted with briefly in 1757. After their meeting ended up in irreconcilable divides over methodological issues of studying Zhou rituals, Dai seemed to again insinuate a rebuttal of Hui's parochial focus on the technical aspects of ancient rituals and classics. For Dai, what is encoded in the classics contains not only guidelines for ritual performance but the actual working of the cosmos. It is thus evidential scholars' unshirkable duty to uncover the intricacies of *yili* through arduous philological inquiry which was believed to be able to recover true meanings of Confucian classics and ultimately the *dao* of antiquity. Such a self-ascribed task served to distinguish evidential scholars as disciples of authentic Confucian teachings from *lixue* adherents and against the challenge posed by Western scientific knowledge in the quest of genuine literati

⁶¹ Dai Zhen, "Ti Hui Dingyu xiansheng shoujing tu," in *Dai Zhen quanshu*, vol. 6, ed. Yang Yingqin and Chu Weiqi (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2010), 498.

identity during the Qianlong-Jiaqing era.⁶² Small wonder that Dai would strive to master Jesuit science and become a polymath of new technologies, while clinging to the classical vision of reviving traditions of antiquity.⁶³ Yet far from blindly following the classics, Dai viewed textual authority as immanent in “what is also the case in my mind” and thus cannot exist independently from scholars’ collective affirmation. The illumination of classical teachings should then be grounded not upon metaphysical principles but through identifying one’s mind with that of the sages. This assertion logically led to his attack on the contrast of principle and human desire:

All actions originate from desire. No desire means non-action (*wuwei* 無為). Desire proceeds action and actions guided by utterly unchanging propriety are called *li*... Sages strive to base desire and action on the course of *li*. Hence *junzi* value only no selfishness instead of no desire and derive desire out of good instead of evil. Then they do not necessarily abstain from the feelings of hunger, cold or grief, nor from appetite, sexual desires and human emotions...⁶⁴

In line with the anti-metaphysical scholars, Dai rejected *lixue*’s dualism and attributed the foundation of principle to ritual propriety which is devoid of selfish acts and acknowledged by socially acceptable codes of conduct. This “social perspective” sets Dai’s thought apart from the polemics between pedantic evidential scholars and advocates of *lixue*.⁶⁵ It further points to Dai’s aspiration of situating true *yili* in the codes and institutions erected by past sages through the philological reconstruction of antiquity. Dai’s scholarly agenda thus echoes with the institutionalist search for external means to sanction human agency by scholars during the Ming-Qing transition. Indirectly, the intellectual autonomy relinquished to political authority by the

⁶² Sela, *China’s Philological Turn*, 93–132, 150–62.

⁶³ Minghui Hu, *China’s Transition to Modernity: The New Classical Vision of Dai Zhen* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015), 124–212.

⁶⁴ Dai Zhen, “Mengzi ziyi shuzheng, vol. B,” in *Dai Zhen quanshu*, vol. 6, 214.

⁶⁵ Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 108–27.

likes of Li Guangdi was partially retaken by Dai, as the recovered truth of antiquity manifesting authentic *dao* could potentially serve as a justified source of criticism against contemporary politics. Such a potential would be gradually realized toward the end of the eighteenth century when prosperity gave way to crises and decline.

The state intrusion into the cultural sphere which intensified during the High Qing greatly reoriented Confucian learning as literati cautiously sought to establish an academic discourse expressed through Evidential Scholarship to preserve their identity in a passive way.⁶⁶ But Qing emperors' activist stance in state affairs also came to be regarded by many as a sign of emerging sagely rule and an opportunity to fulfil the transmission of *dao* aided by political authority. The Qianlong Emperor's personal endorsement of Evidential Scholarship after his first tour to Jiangnan in addition encouraged scholars to recover truth of the golden past under imperial patronage.⁶⁷ The likes of Dai Zhen thus sought to insinuate political implications into scholarly agendas as a response to the realities of state intrusion and *lixue* dominance at court, which frustrated their careers as minor figures in the officialdom.⁶⁸ Dissatisfied by the parochial concern on mere technical issues among pedantic philologists, Dai endeavored to illuminate the *yili* of past sages through classical studies, which were regarded as a pivot to realize *dao* in the contemporary scene. Personally, he would bear the cost of his conviction as he suffered from attacks by both evidential scholars and *lixue* advocates.⁶⁹ Still, the presentist implication of Dai's scholarly agenda would spark further intellectual transformations in the latter half of eighteenth century.

⁶⁶ Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 522–35.

⁶⁷ Chen Zuwu, *Qian-Jia xuepai yanjiu* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2005), 1–20; Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 249–50.

⁶⁸ Li Kai, *Dai Zhen pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1992), 1–8, 392–402.

⁶⁹ Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 103–43.

Re-enlivening past glory: Presentism and emerging statist thinking

This section investigates how the active patronage of Confucian scholarship by the state prompted a presentist understanding of classical studies and eventually a statist re-orientation of scholarly agendas, which fueled resurging literati activism and the emergence of statist thinking. The Qianlong Emperor's own visions of emperorship arguably played a decisive role in directing the political trajectory of the Qing empire since the mid-eighteenth century. He adamantly sought to patronize Confucian learning following his grandfather Kangxi by erecting Confucian orthodoxy and eradicating heterodox teachings through literary inquisitions and the compilation of the Four Treasuries Encyclopedia, which elicited mixed responses from intellectual elites despite the imperial ambition for cultural dominance.⁷⁰ Discrediting the ethnocentric discourse on orthodoxy since the Song dynasty, Qianlong also struggled to buttress state legitimacy through the rhetoric of unity (*yitong* 一統) in terms of spatial expansion and cultural diversity. Ethnic/racial distinctions were thus ideologically relativized in the name of civilization and the literati's historical memory on alien conquest was gradually reshaped by the emperor's monopolizing power.⁷¹ Hence, though the genealogical reconstruction of the history of Manchu, Mongol, Han and other ethnicities under Qing rule might have consolidated their once fluid sense of identity, their reconstructed images as pillars upholding the Celestial Empire effectively reinforced Qianlong's universalist claims to sovereignty.⁷²

⁷⁰ Wang Fan-sen, "Political Pressures on the Cultural Sphere in the Ch'ing Period," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part Two: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 606–48; Alexander Woodside, "The Ch'ien-lung Reign," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part One: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 282–93; Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries*.

⁷¹ Yang Nianqun, *Hechu shi Jiangnan: Qingchao zhengtong guan de queli yu shilin jingshen shijie de bianyi* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 261–303.

⁷² Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror*, 217–336.

Qianlong's pursuit of monarchical dominance in politics might have been frustrated by the very bureaucracy he relied on, which operated as a check to the emperor's absolute power.⁷³ Nevertheless, the persistent encroachment of political authority into the cultural sphere and the Qing's expansionist stance on empire building created a sociopolitical milieu conducive to the literati's aspiration of restoring the glorious age of antiquity in their own time. Particularly, it could have driven Zhang Xuecheng to boldly develop his unconventional ideas on classical studies after his short yet decisive communications with Dai Zhen. Taking Dai's discontent of philology to the next level, Zhang dethroned the *Six Classics* altogether by claiming their origins as inherent in the historical process of human evolution.⁷⁴ To demonstrate the significance of Zhang's assertion, we must first look at his cosmic vision of *dao* vis-à-vis the realm of man:⁷⁵

When Heaven and earth produced man, *dao* existed but had not yet taken shape. As soon as there were three people living together in one house, *dao* took shape but was not yet plainly manifested. When there came to be groups of five and ten and these grew to hundreds and thousands, one house could not possibly accommodate them all, and so they split into groups and separated into classes, and *dao* became manifest. The concepts of benevolence and righteousness, loyalty and filial piety, and the institutions of penal and administrative laws, ritual, and music were all things that could not but arise thereafter... *Dao* is thus not something the wisdom of a sage can manufacture; it is in every particular instance gradually given shape and manifested and inevitably develops from the nature of the state of things. Therefore, it is said to be "of Heaven."

⁷³ See Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁷⁴ Yu Ying-shih, "Zhang Xuecheng Versus Dai Zhen: A Study in Intellectual Challenge and Response in Eighteenth-Century China," in *Chinese History and Culture: Seventeenth Century Through Twentieth Century*, 85–112; Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 35–48.

⁷⁵ Zhang Xuecheng, "Yuan *dao* shang," in *Wenshi tongyi xinbian xinzhu*, ed. Cang Xiuliang (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 94–5. Translation adapted from Zhang Xuecheng and Philip J. Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History: Essays and Letters of Zhang Xuecheng* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 25–7.

Repudiating metaphysical dualism like his contemporaries, Zhang conceptualized *dao* as manifested in quotidian activities of man and human institutions. In a deterministic fashion, such manifestations are also devoid of personal attributes and merely reflective of the natural order of things. The two-way street of conceptions of mundane and trans-mundane orders now takes a fateful turn, as *dao* being inseparable from human society now entails the subjugation of man to the cosmic authority of *dao* as well. Hence, when sages establish codes and institutions, they do so out of necessity to accord the mundane with *dao*'s dictation.⁷⁶

Dao is what it is of itself (*ziran* 自然); sages do what they do of necessity (*bude buran* 不得不然). Are these the same? My reply is no. *Dao* does not act and is so of itself; sages see what they see and cannot but do as they do. Therefore, one may say that sages embody *dao*, but one may not say that sages and *dao* are one in form. Sages see what they see, and hence they cannot but do as they do. Commoners see nothing, and so do what they do without being aware of it. Which is closer to *dao*? My reply is that to do as one does without being aware of it is *dao*. It is not that commoners see nothing, but rather that the thing cannot be seen. Doing as they do of necessity is how sages accord with *dao*, but it is not *dao* itself. Sages seek *dao*, but *dao* cannot be seen. And so commoners' doing without being aware of it is what sages rely upon to see *dao*. Doing as one does without being aware is the trace of the alternation of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽). Worthies learn from sages; the gentlemen learn from worthies, but sages learn from commoners. This does not mean that they study commoners themselves; rather, it means that *dao* must be sought in the traces of the alternation of *yin* and *yang*.

Quotidian activities of commoners are from which *dao* is inferred, but they are intermediate in nature so as to complete the sages' mission of transmitting *dao* to all under Heaven. When a

⁷⁶ Zhang, "Yuan *dao* shang," 95. Translation adapted from Zhang and Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History*, 28.

temporal dimension is added to such a perception of realities, past sages have managed to succeed in the establishment of codes and institutions (including the classics) under their specific historical circumstances. If there were true sages in the contemporary scene, they should in principle accomplish the great deed by addressing present day needs to re-enliven antiquity's glory, instead of holding fast to teachings from a different age.⁷⁷ Therefore, Zhang would deny the sacredness of the *Six Classics* simply due to their instrumental nature:⁷⁸

Dao can no more be abstracted from the material world than a shadow can be separated from the shape that casts it. Because those in later ages who accepted Confucius' teachings obtained them from the *Six Classics*, they came to regard the *Six Classics* as "books that embody *dao*." However, they failed to realize that the *Six Classics* all belong to the realm of actual things and affairs (*qi* 器) ... In the Three Dynasties and in earlier times, the *Book of Odes*, *Book of History*, and other classical disciplines were taught to everyone. It was not, as in later times, when we find the *Six Classics* placed on a pedestal, treated as the special subject matter of the Confucian school, and singled out as "books which embody *dao*."

Historicizing the formation of Confucian classics and Confucianism itself, Zhang belittled the attempt to illuminate *dao* from the venue of classical studies. Instead, since the classics were created out of necessity under specific historical circumstances, scholars should first and foremost delineate their contingent functions in specific historical periods. The differentiation and classification of writings are then part of a historical process in themselves which must be understood as inevitable and necessary for past sages to grasp the autarkical *dao*.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 11–4.

⁷⁸ Zhang Xuecheng, "Yuan *dao* zhong," in *Wenshi tongyi xinbian xinzhu*, ed. Cang Xiuliang (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 100–1. Translation adapted from Zhang and Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History*, 36–7.

⁷⁹ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 464–77.

Such an understanding of the classics for Zhang immediately transcends mere epistemological concerns and points to the practical endeavor of reshaping existing political establishments in accordance to *dao*, without recourse to dated classical teachings. He thus powerfully claimed the inefficacy of the *Six Classics* to help transmit *dao* in the present.⁸⁰

Dao is perfectly preserved within the *Six Classics*. While its profound meaning is hidden in what has gone before (them), philology is able to make this clear. However, the changing course of things and affairs emerges in what comes after, and the *Six Classics* cannot speak of this. Therefore, one must extract the essential guiding principle of the *Six Classics* and at all times use writing as a way to thoroughly investigate the great *dao*.

The classics might have well served the purpose of illuminating and transmitting *dao* in ancient times, but their very nature as historical products would nullify their validity to tackle contemporary issues. This “paradigm shift” in Confucian learning not only elevates the intellectual autonomy of contemporary worthies above that of past sages, but it does so in a deterministic manner with hostility toward individualistic claims to *dao*. As the codes and institutions of the Three Dynasties were established out of necessity rather than of personal preferences, the reformulation of political institutions must also be carried out in a depersonalized fashion in deference to *dao*, if the past glory of antiquity were to be restored. The worthies capable of grasping the real *dao* necessary for contemporary needs would then enjoy unquestionable authority endowed by Heaven. They would also be ineluctably involved in state politics to spread *dao*’s benevolence to all under Heaven. This idealization of the Three

⁸⁰ Zhang Xuecheng, “Yuan *dao* xia,” in *Wenshi tongyi xinbian xinzhu*, ed. Cang Xiuliang (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 104. Translation adapted from Zhang and Ivanhoe, *On Ethics and History*, 41.

Dynasties led Zhang to view scholarly agendas as inextricably tied with the welfare of the state:⁸¹

The *Book of Rites* says: “Ritual magnifies its time.” ... What it means is to uphold the institutions of contemporary kings (*shiwang* 時王). When scholars merely recite the words of past sages instead of getting a grip on the institutions of contemporary kings... they are not thinking of practicality. Thus, when *dao* is concealed and hard to discern, the literati’s knowledge and writings do not necessarily satisfy the needs of the state. When laws (*fa* 法) are disclosed, they are easy to follow. And the records (*zhanggu* 掌故) preserved by official scribes are in fact where (the history of) state institutions lie. They are also the records of governance since the time of Yao and Shun. If noble men were to learn, they must study the contemporary codes to cater to social relations and everyday utilities. They must also study the official records to master the techniques of classical studies (*jingshu* 經術). In this way, learning can be for practical issues and literature will not be empty words.

Abhorrent of scholars’ parochial agendas in his time, Zhang denounced any scholarly pursuits devoted to purely academic ends as displaying literati vanity. Genuine learning should then always be inseparable from statecraft ideals and accordingly be placed under the patronage of political authority. The presentist agenda of Zhang eventually steered toward a statist stance on scholarship, as he called for more state regulation on book collections and condemned history writing based on private intentions unsanctioned by official criteria.⁸² Dismantling textual authority central to classical studies, Zhang Xuecheng formulated an interpretation of history which may well have offered a historicist approach to Confucian self-cultivation or a nascent

⁸¹ Zhang Xuecheng, “Shi shi,” in *Wenshi tongyi xinbian xinzhuzhu*, ed. Cang Xiuliang (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2017), 271.

⁸² Yang, *Hechu shi Jiangnan*, 313–31.

form of ethical philosophy stressing the role of historical investigation in moral perfection.⁸³ Yet Zhang's cosmic vision of *dao* as immanent in the codes and institutions of the idealized antiquity constituted his central agenda manifesting presentist concerns in the sense that true sages should observe their particular position in time (*shihui* 時會) and create the right codes and institutions comparable to that of the golden past. If so, the contemporary political order could potentially become the classic model for later generations as well.⁸⁴ Zhang's presentist orientation in addition promoted his statist stance to value "the institutions of contemporary kings" and to regard state officials as teachers (*yili weishi* 以吏為師) since they are the established literati in a political system embodying *dao*.⁸⁵ The symbiotic relation between the literati and the state, like the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器), was for Zhang indispensable to the realization of sagely rule in his day.

Though Zhang Xuecheng remained a marginal figure in his time,⁸⁶ his scholarly agenda was echoed by contemporaries equally keen on establishing proper codes and institutions. When compiling an investigation of historical sources under the patronage of Bi Yuan (畢沅, 1730-1797), then Governor-general (*xunfu* 巡撫) of Henan, Zhang worked closely with the master-to-be in ritual studies Ling Tingkan (凌廷堪, 1757-1809). Despite their academic exchanges being insufficiently documented, Ling's investigation of ritual as the basis for sociopolitical establishments shared the same presentist assumption in searching for the right means to reshape existing political institutions. Dissatisfied with his master Dai Zhen's philological approach to

⁸³ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 484–6; Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Lessons from the Past: Zhang Xuecheng and the Ethical Dimensions of History," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 189–203.

⁸⁴ Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 60.

⁸⁵ Zhang, "Shi shi," 271; Yang, *Hechu shi Jiangnan*, 342–8.

⁸⁶ Yu, "Zhang Xuecheng Versus Dai Zhen," 85–6.

illuminating *yili*, Ling saw extra-academic disciplines manifested in the codes and institutions of antiquity as indispensable for recovering authentic teachings of past sages.⁸⁷ He thus attempted to subvert the entire Neo-Confucian tradition by grounding learning within the realm of ritual studies:⁸⁸

What man has been endowed by Heaven is his nature. What is inherent in human nature is innate goodness. What is used to recover man's goodness is learning. What is the guiding principle of learning is ritual. Thus, the *dao* of sages is nothing more than ritual... Apart from ritual, there is nothing that can be called learning... In the time of the glorious kings of the Three Dynasties, ritual was spread from the above as (authentic) teachings and studied by the lowly as (genuine) learning.

Criticizing the Neo-Confucian emphasis on principle as the Buddhist corruption of Confucian teachings, Ling joined the anti-metaphysical current in defining human nature solely in physical terms. He further followed the logic of *qi* (氣) cosmology in stressing external disciplines and rejected the possibility of individual moral cultivation without collective guidance.⁸⁹ Yet apart from the statist tone of regarding ritual as an institutionalized mechanism to regulate social relations, Ling's conceptualization of ritual as a common code guiding the ruler and the ruled alike can also be used to argue against the ruler's autocratic power. Hence, Ling in his study of kinship rituals would expand the notion of *jun* (君) to mean any superior charged with the responsibility to govern people in his post, instead of a hereditary title enjoyed by the monarch alone.⁹⁰ In this way, the monarch's legitimacy should in principle be based on the ability to

⁸⁷ Zhang Shou-an, *Yi li dai li—Ling Tingkan yu Qing zhongye Ruxue sixiang zhi zhuanbian*, Taiwan xueshu congshu (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 18–22.

⁸⁸ Ling Tingkan, "Fuli shang," in *Jiaoli tang wenji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 27–8.

⁸⁹ Chow, *Rise of Confucian Ritualism*, 192–4.

⁹⁰ Zhang, *Shiba shiji lixue kaozheng de sixiang huoli*, 115–8.

perform his duty demanded by ritual rather than his supreme position. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the civilizing rhetoric promoted by the Qing court to downplay ethnic distinctions came to be utilized by the literati to forward their own visions of the imperial state. Ling Tingkan's ritual studies represented this emerging trend to empower the literati in face of the state's growing assertion of absolute authority.

The appropriation of the Qing's culturalist approach to universal sovereignty was further elaborated by Liu Fenglu (劉逢祿, 1776-1829), the prominent scholar and scion of the Changzhou (常州) Liu lineage who by bringing a synthesis of New Text classicism and Evidential Scholarship helped to gain national recognition for the tradition of *Gongyang* (公羊) commentary. Having used his expertise in Confucian classics to solve practical ritual and legal disputes while serving in the Ministry of Rites,⁹¹ Liu was highly likely convinced of the desirability to materialize contemporary statecraft ideals with the aided of the profound *yili* encoded in classical teachings. The gravity of cultural issues expressed through ritual in *Gongyang* classicism therefore led him to interpret the encroachment to the Central Plain by barbarian states on the periphery in the Eastern Zhou period as cosmic revelations of the shifting of Heaven's endowment:⁹²

When sages think of the change in sovereignty (*zhu* 主) between the central and peripheral states, they base it on Heaven's fate and trace it to the meanings in ritual to judge who should be in service to whom. The *dao* of Heaven and Earth is nothing more than what is manifested in actual events. Hence, sages would grant sovereignty (in historical writing) to King Zhuang of Chu and Duke Mu of Qin due to their worthiness. Eventually, they come to think that without Duke Huan

⁹¹ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 215–9.

⁹² Liu Fenglu, "Qin Chu Wu jin chu Zhongguo biao xu," in *Liu Libu ji* (Yanhui chengqing tang, 1892), 4:45b2–6.

of Qi or Duke Wen of Jin, states across the Central Plain would have long been subjugated to their sovereignty without having to wait for the times of the Dukes of Ding and Ai of Lu to let Chu take Lu's capital. When Prince Guang of Wu defeated the states of Chen and Xu, sages almost bend China's will to Wu's might. I lamented (at these facts) and sought for the reasons, and concluded that China itself is also the new barbarians (*yidi* 夷狄).

The relativized definition of China in cultural terms seems for Liu to be representative of *dao* and would in turn secure Heaven's Mandate for the qualified state to rule over lesser states. Ritual is the key to such a qualification and as institutionalized codes should be used to regulate worldly affairs for all under Heaven. The fluidity of such a Chinese identity corresponds to Liu's conceptions of dynastic cycles and epochal change, in which sages (i.e. Confucius) fully aware of the historical mission to transmit *dao* and bring order to chaos were portrayed as lawgivers indispensable to the establishment of political institutions.⁹³ In line with the notion of Grand Unity (*da yitong* 大一統) in *Gongyang* classicism to construct a hierarchical order based on ritualistic modes of governance, Liu Fenglu accommodated Qing ideology's reinvention of China as a multiethnic empire to argue for the orthodoxy of New Text Learning.⁹⁴ In the meantime, the New Text vision of Confucius' image as the "uncrowned king" (*suwang* 素王) and his prophetic role of encoding great meanings in the *Annals of Spring and Autumn* were harnessed by Liu to propagate the voluntarist strain of the *Gongyang* tradition in preservation of literati prestige against overarching political power. He would thus emphasize how to "weigh circumstances" (*quan* 權) in the interpretation of classics to set the stage for statecraft agendas to

⁹³ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 232–43, 258–71.

⁹⁴ Chen Qitai, *Qingdai Gongyang xue* (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997), 9–14, 94–8; Zhao, "Reinventing China," 10–4.

rise and rival against Neo-Confucian conservatism.⁹⁵ The double-edged sword of the culturalist construction of state legitimacy began to be wielded by concerned literati determined to play a bigger role in imperial politics in Liu Fenglu's time.

Writing in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, Liu Fenglu and his contemporaries could not have been blind to growing domestic crises manifested in demographic pressure, ecological degradation, internal rebellions and institutional breakdown.⁹⁶ The decline of the central government's ability to intervene in local affairs also generated a new wave of elite activism defying direct state control in favor of local autonomy.⁹⁷ These changing circumstances might have played a role in Liu's endeavor to marry classical studies with practical statecraft, which reveals his overriding concern of how to reform contemporary politics to tackle imminent crises under the guidance of great meanings in the classics. In this sense, the rise of New Text classicism in the mid-Qing is closely linked with the discourse on state legitimacy toward the end of the High Qing. Yet Liu's appropriation of the culturalist conception of sovereignty also had the effect of decoupling legitimacy from the current regime, since *dao* can be embodied in any state upholding ritual propriety.⁹⁸ Combined with the tumultuous realities troubling the shaky empire, the image of a strong state capable of ending chaos in collaboration with righteous literati boasting genuine Confucian teachings naturally became the point of reference for the validity of statecraft ideals. Literati activism is thus inextricably tied with emerging statist thinking in early nineteenth century China. Liu Fenglu's student and the leading New Text

⁹⁵ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 271–5.

⁹⁶ Susan Mann Jones and Philip A. Kuhn, "Dynastic decline and the roots of rebellion," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge, Eng.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 107–62.

⁹⁷ Han, "Changing Roles of Local Elites from the 1730s to the 1820s."

⁹⁸ Cf. Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 573–9.

scholar, Gong Zizhen (龔自珍, 1792-1841), therefore expressed his lamentation of the status quo as follows:⁹⁹

In the age prior to Zhou, one dynasty's governance is itself (the object) of the dynasty's learning. One dynasty's learning is itself initiated by the dynasty's kings... Those among the people who know the intention of laws are called the literati. Those literati able to explicate the intention of the dynasty's (erection of) laws and discipline each other are called Master-Confucianists (*shiru* 師儒) ... Those Master-Confucianists in later times are not the same. When they prioritize the monarch, they know nothing of how monarchs should rule over the people; when they prioritize the people, they know nothing of how the people should serve the monarch... Therefore, *dao* and virtue (*de* 德) are not unified and teachings follow different styles. Kingly rule cannot reach the people and the people's concerns cannot be raised to the court. The state has the resources to hire the literati yet the literati have no way to serve the state. How perilous is that!

Similar to Zhang Xuecheng's disdain of the literati's selfish pursuits for scholarly prestige, Gong impugned contemporary scholars' preoccupation with parochial concerns other than serving the state. But in his writings, Gong also sought to secure a separate standing for "Master's learning" (*zixue* 子學) apart from classical studies, instead of modeling Confucian scholarship after officials and subjugating scholarly agendas to political patronage.¹⁰⁰ What remained unquestionable for Zhang Xuecheng that *dao* was embodied by the Qing state was now approached by Gong in a more nuanced fashion. Less than two decades after Zhang's passing, rapid social changes had apparently altered the literati's perceptions of their role vis-à-vis the state by directing the likes of Gong Zizhen to promote greater intellectual autonomy while

⁹⁹ Gong Zizhen, "Yibing zhiji zhuyi diliu," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, ed. Liu Qizi (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2014), 5–7.

¹⁰⁰ Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 257–60, 366–8.

regarding the state as the ultimate point of reference for the literati. Gong would thus devote much of his academic career to cartographic studies on Qing's frontier defense as part of his agenda to strengthen the imperial state in decline.¹⁰¹ The crystallization of statist thinking was at this moment visible on the horizon.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the late Ming turmoil and the dynasty's eventual downfall, Confucian moral cultivation based purely on metaphysical speculations was gradually turned down by the literati who scapegoated such pan-moralist trends as the very reason behind social degeneration. As Wang Fan-sen observes, the search for institutionalized control of human agency had emerged out of the urgent need to restore social order during the Ming-Qing transition. Accordingly, the stress on external disciplines sanctioned by Confucian classics was increasingly endorsed by scholars to reshape sociopolitical realities under the aegis of classical teachings. This "outward turn" in scholarship saw a gradual decline in metaphysical inquiry which grounded scholarly agendas in the investigation of transcendental principles beyond the experiential world. Instead, practical matters should be the focus of scholars in constructing a good world order.¹⁰² My analysis confirms this transformation but adds that it was accompanied by an emerging materialist understanding of the cosmos based on *qi* (氣) monism, which was harnessed to uphold literati prestige in their identity formation and fueled the popularization of classical studies. With growing state activism in the High Qing, this anti-metaphysical movement and the subsequent rise of Confucian intellectualism emboldened Qing literati to illuminate the profound

¹⁰¹ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 585–603. See also Matthew W. Mosca, "The Literati Rewriting of China in the Qianglong-Jiaqing Transition," *Late Imperial China* 32, no. 2 (December 1, 2011): 89–132.

¹⁰² Wang Fan-sen, *Quanli de maoxiguan zuoyong: Qingdai de sixiang, xueshu yu xintai*, rev. ed. (Taipei: Lianjing, 2014), 1–40.

yili encoded in ancient classics through Evidential Scholarship and restore the Golden Age of antiquity in the contemporary scene. Presentism, which arose as a logical necessity of such transformations, came to be utilized as a handy tool of criticism when concerned literati combined classical studies and statecraft reformism to tackle domestic crises burgeoning at the turn of the nineteenth century. Ge Zhaoguang notes how the textualist concern of philological techniques detached from *yili* came increasingly under attack by Evidential scholars during the latter half of the eighteenth century. Consequently, the search for proper sociopolitical order saw a growing interest in issues related to Confucian rituals and political legitimacy in Evidential Scholarship.¹⁰³ From our discussion, it can be seen that the underlying agenda of illuminating *dao* through classics had arguably sustained such a quest, which was buttressed by the undertone of *qi* (氣) cosmology. Convinced of the emerging sagely rule, Qing scholars in addition regarded the existing imperial state as indispensable to the establishment of codes and institutions capable of re-enlivening the glory of antiquity, in contrast to their Ming predecessors who endeavored to transmit *dao* by enlightening the people through extra-bureaucratic venues.¹⁰⁴ Such a statist re-orientation of scholarship, as I have argued, led scholars like Zhang Xuecheng to formulate a symbiotic relation between the literati and the state modeled after the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器), which encouraged them to insert bigger influence on state politics against the long-standing suppression by the emperors' autocratic power.¹⁰⁵ Such a formulation arguably anticipated what Kuhn has identified as the constitutional agenda of how broadened political participation would enhance rather than limit state power.¹⁰⁶ The idealization of a strong state resulting from timely

¹⁰³ Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 536–70.

¹⁰⁴ Yu Ying-shih, *Song Ming lixue yu zhengzhi wenhua*, Dangdai Zhongguo xueshu wenku (Changchun: Jilin chubanshan jituan youxian zeren gongsi, 2008), 158–211.

¹⁰⁵ Junda Lu, “Ideas Behind Literati Activism in the Qianlong-Jiaqing Transition: Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) And the Statist Re-Oriented of Confucian Scholarship,” *Ming Qing Studies* 2021: 127–50.

¹⁰⁶ Kuhn, *Origins*, ch. 1.

reform carried out by political authority in collaboration with righteous literati thus became a convenient point of reference to justify resurging literati activism in response to dynastic decline. It was at this point that statist thinking began to take shape.

By tracing how the materialist understanding of cosmic reality had shaped the underlying agenda of Evidential Scholarship to illuminate *dao* in the classics for sagely rule, and how such an ambition had led to a presentist understanding of classical studies which eventually saw a statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship, we can better see the ways *qi* (氣) cosmology and a persistent concern for reformulating literati identity vis-à-vis cosmic authority, social relations and political institutions were reinvented by Qing scholars. Such a common theme linking different stages of Qing intellectual transformation together reveals the inner logic of intellectual trends that foresaw the emergence of statist thinking, which enriches the simple reconstruction of Qing intellectual development in a chronological manner without making adequate connections between successive strands of thought. It also points to the necessity of acknowledging the intellectual autonomy of Qing literati in their endeavors to appropriate both internal and external factors behind intellectual transformation when addressing contemporary issues, which arguably acted as the driving force for the evolution of ideas. These forebearers of statist thinking would set the stage for new dynamics in the Chinese intellectual world across its distressing nineteenth century.

Chapter Two: Resurging Literati Activism and the Emergence of Statist thinking

This chapter follows up the discussion in chapter one and attempts to show how statist thinking crystallized in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Modern scholarship on the intellectual history of this period has generally focused on two themes. Firstly, scholars discuss the inertia of Evidential scholarship which failed to address dynastic decline or grasp the profound implications of Western learning. Inadvertently, it foreshadowed China's falling prey to Western dominance in the nineteenth century.¹ Secondly, the re-emergence of New Text classicism and how it paved the way for statecraft reformism have been well-studied. By emphasizing epochal change and the culturalist conception of political legitimacy, New Text scholars are thought to have pioneered the incorporation of Western knowledge into the Chinese intellectual world and institutional reform in the late nineteenth century.² In both cases, the teleological undertone tends to obscure the intellectual dynamics of the time and downplays how the literati had appropriated changing political realities for their own agendas.

Hence, this chapter examines the historical dynamics of the intellectual landscape during the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition that engendered statist thinking by first looking at how rising rebellions in the late Jiaqing reign sparked fresh concerns for restoring state capacity in governance by the court and literati activists alike, which challenged the pedantic philology in Confucian learning. Next, I discuss how the multifaceted responses to such concerns had led

¹ Zhu Weizheng, "Shiba shiji de Hanxue yu Xixue," in *Zouchu Zhongshiji*, expand. ed., ed. Zhu Weizheng (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2007), 136–62; Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 554–73.

² Huang Kaiguo, *Gongyang xue fazhan shi* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2013), 568–730; Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 489–608; Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, esp. chs. 8, 9; Chen, *Gongyang xue*; Judith Whitbeck, "From K'ao-cheng to Ching-shih: Kung Tzu-chen and the Redirection of Literati Commitment in Early Nineteenth Century China," in *Jinshi Zhongguo jingshi sixiang yantaohui lunwenji*, ed. The Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (Taipei, 1984), 323–55.

Gong Zizhen to aspire for literati empowerment through the idealization of a powerful state staffed with statecraft experts in achieving sagely rule. Then I analyze how Gong's aspiration was picked up by Wei Yuan amid resurging literati activism as he sought to justify their cause. I argue that the spread of New Text learning was part of a larger intellectual transformation following the statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship. Encouraged by the symbiotic notion of state-literati relationship and eager to legitimize their resurging activism, literati activists like Gong Zizhen naturally idealized the ruling dynasty of the Qing as the epitome of China when he claimed that "the Great Qing (Daqing guo 大清國) is what has been called China (Zhongguo) since the time of Yao (堯以來所謂中國)."³ Accordingly, the political empowerment of the literati would ultimately lead to the strengthening of state capacity in achieving sagely rule. In this way, not only could the literati vindicate themselves against accusations of factionalism but the state ought to shift its autocratic rulership toward a more inclusive mode of governance through broadened political participation by those outside office. The early formation of statist thinking was elaborated in the writings of Wei Yuan when he continued the materialist understanding of *dao* by uniting moral cultivation, scholarship and statecraft together under *dao*'s banner. The literati as propagators of *dao* should accordingly assume a rightful place in the state as the embodiment of *dao*. The state was also bound to realize sagely rule in collaboration with qualified literati, who regarded serving the state as their unshirkable duty.

State-literati relationship and Confucian learning

This section looks at the literati response to the worrisome bureaucratic breakdown exemplified by the 1813 Eight Trigrams uprising and then discusses its repercussions in the intellectual

³ Gong Zizhen, "Xiyu zhi xingsheng yi," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, 125.

sphere. It seeks to show how growing calls for resuscitating literati morale had led scholars like Gong Zizhen to harness the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation in advocating literati political empowerment. When Gong Zizhen lamented over the inability of concerned literati to serve the state, he was speaking to a larger historical reality troubling the literati class of his time. The endeavor of constructing an activist state by the Qing court, though having convinced many of the emerging sagely rule, also generated protracted tensions between political authority and the literati. Disdained by factional power struggles that plagued the last years of Kangxi's reign, the Yongzheng Emperor swore to discipline the entire officialdom upon his succession to the throne. He personally condemned the conduct of forming private networks among the literati as a sign of disloyalty and subversive to the grand undertaking of Qing imperial enterprise by issuing a denunciation of factionalism, which sought to permanently uproot factions (*pengdang* 朋黨) under Qing rule.⁴ Systematic reforms that ensued also saw the centralization of governance and the bureaucratization of public sectors like education to strengthen state power in ruling over the society.⁵ Yongzheng's distrust of the literati class was further manifested in his decision to appoint state officials in supervision of social customs (*fengsu* 風俗) in Zhejiang, after the inquisition of two local bureaucrats for being implicated in factionalism. Warning fellow officials of the inherent perils in such treacherous acts, Yongzheng re-invoked his accusation on factions that without the aegis of state authority, the literati would have no separate standing in society and their privilege would be mere illusion.⁶ Under Yongzheng's reign, literati identity thus became completely subordinate to imperial patronage in Qing ideology.

⁴ Zhongguo diyi lishi danganguan ed, *Yongzhengchao qiju zhuce* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 276–80.

⁵ Zelin, "The Yung-cheng Reign," 193–221; Pei Huang, *Autocracy at Work; a Study of the Yung-Cheng Period, 1723-1735* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 113–301.

⁶ Shi Song ed., *Qingshi biannian*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2000), 199–200, 223.

Keenly aware of his father's failure to win over the literati's genuine support, the Qianlong Emperor adroitly shifted from Yongzheng's coercive measures toward a more sophisticated approach. On the one hand, Qianlong strove to insert state regulation of private book collections through the routinization of book requisition through massive scholarly projects like the compilation of the Four Treasuries Encyclopedia. His repeated assurance of good will notwithstanding, such a move effectively acted as a mechanism to eliminate heterodox writings circulating across local societies and resulted in widespread self-censorship among the literati.⁷ On the other hand, novel dynamics in the Jiangnan academia were attended to with great care by Qianlong as an occasion to showcase the state's cultural dominance over local scholarly communities. Apart from Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, Qianlong increasingly sought to promote the flourishing Evidential Scholarship at the national level by issuing decrees that encouraged classical studies and by granting honorary titles to eminent Evidential scholars like Dai Zhen. Whether Qianlong's intention was to cajole Confucian scholars into propagating state orthodoxy off their own bat or to advance his personal academic preference in asserting Qing cultural supremacy,⁸ his policies toward Confucian learning domesticated many minds among the literati class into regarding the Qing state as the sine qua non for scholarly success, as manifested in the statism of Zhang Xuecheng. Small wonder that Hong Liangji (洪亮吉, 1746-1809), upon his return to the capital for further appointment in 1796, would write in commemoration of Zhang's close friend and renowned historian Shao Jinhan (邵晋涵, 1743-1796) about his promotion into the Hanlin Academy as a boost in morale for Evidential scholars:

⁷ Yang, *Hechu shi Jiangnan*, 349–88; Wang, “Political Pressures,” 615–48.

⁸ Chen, *Qian-Jia xuepai*, 15–49; Zhu, “Hanxue yu Xixue,” 144–51.

In the beginning of the Qianlong era, the realm had enjoyed peace for over a hundred years and witnessed a flourishing of prominent scholars... When it comes to the initiation of the Four Treasuries project, you and Mister Dai (Zhen) were again selected as editors of the Hanlin Academy in the first instance. Literati across the realm craving for (true) learning were thus drawn to the writings of Mister Hui (Dong) and teachings of yours and Mister Dai's... It is therefore well deserved to say that the prosperity of classical studies today is the result of the sagely king's illumination from above and efforts by you and Mister Dai from below.⁹

The imperial patronage of scholarship and the active intrusion into the cultural sphere by political power had undoubtedly transformed the mindset of scholars like Hong, who saw academic prosperity as the joint effort of imperial patronage and scholars' diligent pursuit. To achieve academic excellence, it is thus vital for the literati to align their career with official dictation, in line with the statist re-orientation of scholarly agendas. But Hong could not have been blind to how political pressure had fueled parochial pursuits within Evidential Scholarship as well. If Dai Zhen's assertion that *dao* exists in the codes and institutions of antiquity could in theory serve as a justified source of criticism and consequently act as a leverage to preserve literati identity against the dictation of political authority, such a potential was gradually realized at the turn of the nineteenth century. For many, the pedantic philological studies had become an intellectual game and a passive resistance to the total subjugation of the literati's intellectual autonomy to political authority. Under such circumstances, the flourishing fashion (*fengqi* 風氣) of Confucian learning toward the end of the High Qing was at the same time seriously detached from urgent needs of the day.¹⁰

⁹ Hong Liangji, "Shao xueshi jiazhuan," in *Hong Liangji ji*, vol. 1, ed. Liu Dequan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 192.

¹⁰ Scholars have been debating over the extent to which political forces had shaped the rise of Evidential Scholarship. Pressures from the state undoubtedly domesticated many to become propagators of official ideology,

The multifaceted outcome of intellectual transformations during the High Qing was further complicated in the wake of Qianlong's demise and the Jiaqing Emperor's subsequent persecution of Heshen. Modest reforms carried out in the post-Heshen era, though seeing a gradual relaxation of political control of the literati class, had apparently disappointed many solicitous minds eager to revitalize the sagging bureaucracy as well. Consequently, discussions of personnel selection and literati morale began to attract wider attentions, apart from the dramatic acts by some moralists to push for greater changes as seen in the case of Hong Liangji's remonstrance.¹¹ Yet under the influence of Jiaqing's tutor Zhu Gui (朱珪, 1731-1806), who had been recalled to the capital upon Heshen's removal, the state policy of promoting Evidential Scholarship remained in effect and the emperor personally encouraged the pursuit of practical learning (at the time equal to *kaozheng* as opposed to metaphysical speculation) in his early years of reign. The official stance on Confucian learning was thus reminiscent of the Qianlong era, as manifested in debates on curricular reforms of the civil examination system that increasingly favored the replacement of pre-Song commentaries with annotations to classical texts upheld by Evidential scholars.¹² Nevertheless, the rapidly changing domestic situations could no longer permit the luxury of scholastic studies on philology. Demographic pressures, ecological degradation and the gradual breakdown of centralized bureaucratic control along the borders eventually led to the

but some also insinuated their own agendas into scholarly agendas sanctioned by the state. See Zhang Xun, "Junzi xingli, buqiu biansu: Qingdai kaojuxue de shehui xingge," *The Qing History Journal*, no. 01 (2013): 24–32; Zhu, "Hanxue yu Xixue.," Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 91–143; Ge, *Sixiang shi*, 499–524; Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*.

¹¹ David S. Nivison, "Ho-shen and His Accusers: Ideology and Political Behavior in the Eighteenth Century," in *Confucianism in Action*, eds. David S. Nivison and Arthur Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 209–43. For the Jiaqing reforms, see Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic decline," 116–9; Daniel McMahon, "Dynastic Decline, Heshen, and the Ideology of the Xianyu Reforms," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 38, no. 2 (June 2008): 231–54.

¹² Zhang Ruilong, "Tianlijiao shijian yu Qing zhongye wenhua zhengce de zhuanbian—yi Jiaqing chao wei zhongxin de kaocha," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*, 71 (March 2011): 54–68. For mid-Qing civil examination reforms, see Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 524–73.

militarization of local societies that culminated in large scale rebellions, which in turn forced the state to revise its tactics from hardline suppression to civilizing the people through cultural means.¹³ After putting out the White Lotus rebellion in 1804, Jiaqing began to vest his trust in the practical output of Evidential Scholarship, hoping that the flourishing of classical studies would in the end translate into scholarly efforts of aiding the state in propagating official ideology to civilize subjects of the Qing empire. But Jiaqing was equally aware of the parochial pursuit for subtle and pompous rhetoric by Evidential scholars. When editing a collection of sample essays for the civil examination, he tried to curb such a mannerism by urging not to include those “quoting esoteric references to hide (the author’s) shallow opinions and playing with words to appease the vulgar minds” so that students could incrementally shift their attention to assisting the state in “restoring the grand civilizing mission (*zhenxing wenjiao* 振興文教).”¹⁴ On his fiftieth birthday in 1809, Jiaqing again sought to illuminate the practical implications of classical studies by hosting a grace examination (*enke* 恩科) while decreeing a reformation of the official school system in the same year so that students would focus on the practical outcomes of education instead of pedantic outgrowths of philological studies.¹⁵ At this stage, the emperor’s reliance on Evidential Scholarship to rectify the human mind largely remained unchanged.

The turning point came in the aftermath of the fateful 1813 Eight Trigrams uprising. Though the state was able to swiftly quell the rebellion, it was utterly frustrated by the very outbreak of the incident and slow to recover from shockwaves of the assault on the Forbidden Palace.¹⁶ In

¹³ On such rebellions, see Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic decline,” 132–44.

¹⁴ *Qing Renzong shilu*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 710, hereafter *QRZSL*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 986.

¹⁶ For a detailed study, see Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China, the Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). See also Lin Yanqing, *Qingshi jishi benmo*, vol. 6, ed. Nan Bingwen and Bai Xinliang (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2006), 1995–2005.

December of 1813, shortly after the final crackdown, Jiaqing issued a special decree in an attempt to rationalize the cause of the event. He openly accused the gradual ignorance of teaching (*jiao* 教) after an extended period of peace to be accountable for movements sparked by heretics like this:

The realm has been enjoying peace and prosperity for long. With the growth of population and inflation of prices, more will be loafing around without steady means of income. Such a situation is exacerbated by slack bureaucrats and troops who are shameless and irresponsible, making them incapable to either govern effectively or maintain military might. It is an utter misfortune that I encounter a time like this!... When they do not know the (correct) teachings themselves, how could they transform the people? This is precisely how heterodox teachings (*xiejiao* 邪教) arise.¹⁷

Though blaming the sluggish officialdom as the primary cause, Jiaqing was not blatant enough to completely shun his responsibility of being the moral exemplar, as he also paid lip service to admitting his dereliction of supervising the bureaucracy from above. Nevertheless, the urgent issue at the moment was for officials to rectify their moral behaviors so that they could properly govern the people. It was only when “we monarch and ministers sincerely strive for moral perfection” that there remained a slight chance “the corrupted social customs can be remedied and previous negligence redressed.”¹⁸ Yongzheng’s worry about local *fengsu* was again felt by Jiaqing on a national level. But since it was unrealistic to reinstate his grandfather’s radical measures, Jiaqing turned to the civilizing mechanism of Confucian learning hoping that by propagating orthodox learning (*zhengxue* 正學), the human mind could eventually be rectified and heterodox teachings eradicated accordingly. Hence, in a second decree issued on the same

¹⁷ *QRZSL*, vol. 4, 841.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 842.

day, Jiaqing urged implementing the “practical policy” (*shizheng* 實政) of correcting *fengsu* through “illuminating ritual and teaching” to “reinvigorate the morale of the upright and alter the long-existing fashion of dereliction.”¹⁹ The integrity of state officials (*lizhi* 吏治) consequently became the focus of the emperor. In the February of the following year, Jiaqing informed the Grand Secretariat of his concurrence with one memorial on promoting obedient officials (*xunli* 循吏) by stating that “a good official does not only run the logistics of the state apparatus but also prioritizes the education of the people.” The very scarcity of such officials today should attract adequate attention:

Officials are talents (*rencai*) trained by the state. They are selected from the people for appointments to domesticate the people... If junior literati know only how to earn degrees by studying the classics and nothing of how sages cultivated their time and people... they would never be moved by the state’s great enterprise to civilize its people... How then could petty people find the right example to follow?²⁰

The issue of Confucian learning vis-à-vis the urgent need of disciplining the officialdom and civilizing the people was here brought up again by Jiaqing. But this time, instead of expressing encouragement to the practical output of scholarly pursuits, Jiaqing grew increasingly intolerant of the parochial trend in Evidential Scholarship. He would thus explicitly order a ban on admission of those showcasing scholastic philological skills in the civil examination half a month later:

The *Six Classics* are all texts embodying *dao* and contain no rare words or usages... These days junior literati know nothing of how to follow orthodox learning and deliberately hunt for odd

¹⁹ Ibid, 843.

²⁰ Ibid, 896–7.

terms... When tested with practical political matters, they turn out to be ignorant of how to differentiate the orthodox from the heterodox or identify the roots of order and chaos. How then could we expect them to be cognizant of politics and practice the sagely teachings? ... From now on... if examiners value esoteric essays and admit their authors... they will be strictly punished.²¹

By denouncing pedantic philological pursuits, Jiaqing wished to steer current scholarship toward assisting the state in its civilizing mission of indoctrinating the rapidly increasing population with Confucian norms. He would thus deliberately juxtapose orthodox learning and heterodox teaching to highlight the gravity of taming *fengsu* aided by Confucian learning, in an essay on “transforming the people and perfecting customs” (*huamin chengsu* 化民成俗) issued in June:

When orthodox learning flourishes, heterodox teaching will decline. When officials are serious (about their duty), the people will follow (their guidance). Today, the biggest malpractice is that orthodox learning is on the wane and officials are often derelict in their duty. Heterodox teaching thus arises and intoxicates the foolish, eventually leading to stubborn customs incapable of being civilized... If we monarch and ministers each fulfill our duty, and literati and commoners each dedicate to their professions, hopefully we can transform such social customs to be pristine. It all depends upon the illumination of orthodox learning!²²

Astonished by the subpar performance of state officials in quelling the 1813 uprising, Jiaqing was at the same time convinced that the crux of the problem lay in the dilapidation of the state’s civilizing power resulting from long-standing neglect of the practical outputs of Confucian scholarship. This practicality was then conceived by the emperor as the ability for Confucian learning to rectify official conduct and domesticate aberrant *fengsu* in an age plagued by malfeasance and moral degradation. The official stance toward heterodox teachings thus

²¹ Ibid, 910.

²² Ibid, 992–3.

gradually shifted from the relentless crackdowns adopted during the High Qing, as seen in the Wang Lun rebellion of 1774, to emphasizing the rectification of the human mind through cultural means during the Jiaqing reign, especially after 1813.²³ Jiaqing would even in his last years revert to the promotion of Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism in illuminating orthodox learning, stating that Zhu Xi's teaching was sufficient to help acquire the techniques of classical studies.²⁴ In this way, the imperial patronage of Evidential Scholarship since Qianlong began to waver, as political authority could hardly maintain its overarching role in directing Confucian learning. By calling for the restoration of Confucian learning's civilizing function, the state was further forced to re-empower the literati class in transforming parochial academic fashions, thus leading to the revision of its policy of patronizing Evidential Scholarship in the early nineteenth century.²⁵

Jiaqing's dismay of the officialdom was earnestly felt by concerned literati following the watershed of 1813, which for them signaled the utter dysfunction of the entire system. Yao Ying (姚瑩, 1785-1853), grandnephew of the leading Tongcheng (桐城) school scholar Yao Nai (姚鼐, 1732-1815), submitted a letter to his examiner in the civil examination Zhao Shenzen (趙慎畛, 1761-1825) upon hearing the shocking news of the attack on the Forbidden Palace.²⁶ In a highly emotional tone, Yao viewed the incident as an unmistakable sign that the state was losing

²³ Zhang Ruilong, "Tianli jiao qiyi yu Qing zhongye chaoting genchu 'xiejiao' de nuli—yi Jiaqing chao wei zhongxin de kaocha," *Zongjiao yanjiu*, no. 00 (2013): 195–222.

²⁴ *QRZSL*, vol. 5, 420; Zhang, "Tianli jiao shijian," 77–81.

²⁵ Zhang, "Tianli jiao shijian." See also Meng Sen, *Ming Qing shi jiangyi*, vol. B (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 614.

²⁶ On Tongcheng school at the turn of the nineteenth century, see William T. Rowe, *Speaking of Profit: Bao Shichen and Reform in Nineteenth-Century China*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 109 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), 31–2.

its capacity of governing the realm. But for Yao, the real cause to the problem was the lack of real talents in the bureaucracy rather than the malfeasance of officials:

Today's situation is like putting fire under wood, yet those in office still take it lightly and hesitate to speak about urgent state affairs... Even though there remain several righteous literati with sober minds, they are struggling (with their livelihoods) among commoners and trapped in vulgarity... Nothing is more urgent nowadays than the issue of talent. To obtain real talents, it is best to utilize their abilities respectively instead of restraining them with established norms and disciplining their petty deeds... I have not seen any ministers today who can be called sincere in valuing talents. How then could talents be selected to save the world?²⁷

Implicitly, Yao differed from Jiaqing's assertion that officials represented the apex of talents cultivated and appointed by the state. Rather, the very qualification of state officials in fulfilling their regular duty and the larger mission of ordering the world was called into question. Yao would consequently see his time as one governed by mediocre officials incapable of tackling imminent crises, while talents eager to "save the time" were barred from the opportunity of serving the state. Such conceptions were shared among Tongcheng advocates equally concerned about how to recruit talents into the drooping bureaucracy to turn the tide. Yao Nai's student and the would-be propagator of Tongcheng ancient-style essay in the capital, Mei Zengliang (梅曾亮, 1786-1856), also responded to the incident by calling for the promotion of talents outside government to help subdue the rebellion, since those in office tended to "stand by with folded arms when a slightest portion of interest is involved" and thus rendered "the hands of extraordinary men tied and miscreants increasingly blatant."²⁸ Mei's fellow apprentice, Guan

²⁷ Yao Ying, "Fu zuoshi Zhao Fenxun shu," in *Dongming waiji* (Anfu, 1867), 2:15b4-16a7.

²⁸ Mei Zengliang, "Shang Fang Shangshu shu," in *Baijian shanfang shiwen ji*, vol. A, annot. Peng Guozhong and Hu Xiaoming (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2012), 20.

Tong (管同, 1780-1831), went even further to systematically reflect upon the deterioration of *fengsu* under Qing rule:

Our Qing arose in the aftermath of the Ming dynasty's downfall... Roughly speaking, Ming customs were characterized by the imperiousness of officials and the arrogance of the literati. The (Qing) state was well aware of this and did everything to rectify such customs... But in my view, despite Ming customs having such defects, the original intent was to foster literati morale (*shiqi* 士氣) and cultivate talent. When we learn from past dynasties... the pivot is always to investigate their original intent... I hear that the governance of all under Heaven is dependent upon *fengsu*, and the rectification of *fengsu* is predicated on the flourishing of education... Today's *fengsu*, with all its defects, can be summarized as being plagued by obsequiousness and greed... To direct people away from greed, it is best to forbid the chase for profit (*li* 利); to direct people away from obsequiousness, it is best to open up pathways of remonstrance... The urgency is thus to reform previous decrees and allow the literati both inside and outside of office to submit memorials discussing issues from the emperor's conduct to state affairs without reservation.²⁹

In line with Jiaqing, Guan acknowledged the necessity of transforming current *fengsu* in dealing with the grim realities of the time. Yet instead of regarding the vulgarization of Confucian learning as the primary cause to institutional breakdown, Guan insinuated criticisms of the very political framework that had contributed to the Qing's prosperity for over a century. Slowly but surely, such a system had become a burden for the state to function properly in collaboration with the literati class. The remedy for Guan was to reevaluate the alteration of *fengsu* by Qing political power to restore the original intent that had generated literati activism in late Ming as a boost to literati morale in his age, which for him would encourage concerned talents to assume a

²⁹ Guan Tong, "Niyan fengsu shu," in *Huangchao jingshiwen bian*, Wei Yuan quanji, vol. 13 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 318–20.

bigger role in politics. Thus, in contrast to Jiaqing's assertion that abiding by the laws of the ancestors (*jiafa* 家法) was the key to restoring Qing imperial might,³⁰ the likes of Tongcheng scholars questioned the validity of the existing political framework in tackling current crises. Through the reappraisal of literati conduct in late Ming especially Donglin-style activism, they harnessed the incident of 1813 as an opportunity to recast the subordination of literati identity to political authority during the High Qing.³¹ Such a politicized reinterpretation of history, if not dexterously crafted, would directly contradict the official stance toward the Donglin partisans and invoke accusations of factionalism. Therefore, alternative explanations of the Ming dynasty's downfall began to emerge, as manifested in the writing of the royal clan member Zhao Lian (昭樾, 1776-1830) aimed at absolving literati partisanship from blames for the fall of the dynasty:

The late Ming was plagued by the monarchs' fatuousness and the eunuchs' abuse of power. The condition (*shi* 勢) of the state has been repeatedly subject to total breakdown. It was due to the ministers' brilliance and courage of admonishing that such mistakes were corrected several times... When the likes of King Tang³² and King Gui³³ exiled into the sea, the condition was far beyond any possibility of salvation. Yet the ministers ceaselessly planned for restoration and faced death calmly. This is the ultimate proof of their loyalty to the monarch. Why would someone still make a fuss of it (to question the facts) today?³⁴

By resorting to the rhetoric of *shi* as historical necessity beyond man's control, Zhao Lian joined the growing effort of reviving literati activism either through the appropriation of classical texts

³⁰ *QRZSL*, vol. 4, 843.

³¹ Zhang Ruilong, "Cong jianjie dao qufa: Qing Jiadao jian dui Mingdai shixi fengsu de pinglun yu zai dingwei," *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiusuo xuebao*, 58 (January 2014): 207–13.

³² Zhu Yujian (朱聿鍵, 1602-1646), was briefly installed as the Longwu Emperor of the Southern Ming dynasty.

³³ Zhu Youlang (朱由榔, 1623-1662), was installed as the Yongli Emperor of the Southern Ming dynasty.

³⁴ Zhao Lian, "Ming fei wangyu dangren," in *Xiaoting zalu*, ed. He Yingfang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 327.

on factions or the exoneration of Donglin-style partisanship in explaining the downfall of the Ming.³⁵ Since the Ming was bound to face its ineluctable demise, Donglin activism had nothing to do with its destiny and thus should not be held accountable. The emphasis on historical conditions in assessing literati activism was in turn reflective of presentist concerns aimed at addressing current urgencies through the historicization of moral practice.³⁶ Praising the moral integrity of late Ming ministers, Zhao Lian in addition sought to erect a role model for contemporary literati troubled by similar problems of dynastic decline. Sparked by the distressing Eight Trigrams rebellion of 1813, the solicitous minds among the literati appropriated the rhetoric of *fengsu* to call for the promotion of real talents in revitalizing the bureaucracy, eventually coming to demand broader political participation in response to the worrisome circumstances.³⁷ The unsettling situations in the late Jiaqing reign thus became a felicitous occasion for reformist voices to gain wider influence, as more became convinced of the imminence of change.

The political orientation of Tongcheng scholars was shared among literati of various academic affiliations. As early as in 1799, the would-be specialist in pragmatic policy reform Bao Shichen (包世臣, 1775-1855) had sought to institutionalize literati participation in imperial politics to strengthen state capacity in dealing with accumulating crises.³⁸ Such an intellectual atmosphere evolving over a decade had certainly influenced the young Gong Zizhen.³⁹ After failing his Provincial examination in 1813, Gong left the capital for his hometown one month before the

³⁵ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 301–6.

³⁶ As manifested in the historicism of Zhang Xuecheng on moral cultivation, see Ivanhoe, “Lessons from the Past.”; Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 484–6.

³⁷ Zhang Ruilong, “Jiuzhou shengqi shi fenglei—Tianli jiao shijian xiaoxi de chuanbo yu shiren yizheng fengchao de xiqngqi,” *Hanxue yanjiu* 31, no. 2 (June 2013): 265–75.

³⁸ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 69–73.

³⁹ For Gong’s intellectual orientations, see Whitbeck, “From K’ao-cheng to Ching-shih.”

rebellion broke out. Upon hearing the news in Huizhou (徽州), Gong composed four essays discussing literati conduct in a time of emergencies like the current one.⁴⁰ Rambling through issues of sinking moral integrity, meager literati livelihood and inefficient mechanisms for the selection of officials, Gong insinuated both criticisms of the system and enthusiasms for initiating timely reform, which was indicative of his recent career setback. But in the final essay, Gong offered his own views on Confucian learning vis-à-vis politics in a distinctive way:

The Son of Heaven disciplines and directs officials to govern all under Heaven together with him. But he does so only by requiring the actual effect of governance (from officials) instead of questioning them about how to govern. Hence, all under Heaven were properly governed in the times of Yao, Shun and the Three Dynasties. No books are to be consulted on governing all under Heaven other than the *Six Classics*. What the *Six Classics* convey are all principles so as to illuminate the intentions (of the authors) and nothing technical about the petty details (of governance) is preserved. This can be detected on multiple occasions.⁴¹

Though not denying the guiding role of monarchs in commanding their ministers, Gong implicitly argued against the monarch's autocratic power since governance in the Golden Age of antiquity was achieved in collaboration with the officialdom. Moreover, the reason ministers back then were able to govern effectively in tandem with the monarch was due to their adroit application of principles encoded in the classics without fixating on the stereotyped understanding of such principles (i.e., leaving the officials with enough autonomy to decide themselves how to implement principles in practice). Therefore, the monarch should entrust

⁴⁰ Fan Kezheng, *Gong Zizhen nianpu kaolue* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2004), 72–4.

⁴¹ Gong Zizhen, “Mingliang lun si,” in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, ed. Liu Qizi (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2014), 93.

qualified ministers with adequate power to fulfil their duty of governing the realm and civilizing the people:

Heaven's mainstay (*qiangang*) values determination in action... Yet the sagely Son of Heaven would only oversee the gist (of governance). It is necessary that ministers inside and outside the office be properly empowered (for service). If ministers were insufficiently empowered, their morale cannot be boosted, leading to dereliction and eventually dysfunction. If ministers were insufficiently empowered, people would not be in awe of them, leading to disrespect and eventually rebellion... Emulating and implementing ancient methods is precisely to tackle today's drawback of fettering (minister's power).⁴²

Reevoking the rhetoric of *qiangang* and redefining it in favor of literati re-empowerment, Gong further diverted the ruler's autocratic power toward a reformulated state-literati relationship less hostile to the literati, which for him was better suited for the time.⁴³ Seeking to justify this reformulation, Gong saw the practical application of learning sanctioned by Confucian classics as the key to restore governance comparable to that of antiquity. Since only those capable of fully grasping the subtle principles in classical texts know how to apply them to specific circumstances of the day, these learned men should undoubtedly play a bigger role in aiding the state especially in times of hardship. In this way, Confucian learning served as a tool of legitimization for resurging literati activism in politics, which in turn sought justification in practical statecraft.

Such a statecraft orientation might very well have led Gong to criticize the scholastic differentiation between Han Learning and Song Learning after reading Jiang Fan's (江藩, 1761-

⁴² Ibid, 94.

⁴³ On the monopolization of *qiangang*, see Ho, "Qiangang duyu, qiangang duduan."

1831) magnum opus on Qing classical studies in 1817.⁴⁴ It might in addition have driven Gong to swiftly accept Liu Fenglu's New Text classicism upon their first acquaintance in 1819.⁴⁵ As mentioned before, Liu had used his knowledge of classical studies in resolving ritual disputes and gained his fame therefrom as an active propagator of New Text learning.⁴⁶ His claim that New Text Confucianism could "be used to thoroughly understand the classics by uncovering their original meanings; be used to judge history and clear up doubts; be used for self-cultivation and ordering the world to restore the *dao* of past kings" testified to the growing scholarly effort of searching for alternatives to Evidential Scholarship in applying Confucian classical teachings to statecraft agendas.⁴⁷ Seeking to promote the voluntarist strain of the *Gongyang* tradition, Liu elevated the prophetic image of Confucius in envisioning epochal change and foretelling ineluctable institutional reform, which stood in stark contrast to Zhang Xuecheng's conception of Confucius' role in history. For Zhang, Confucius "had virtue but lacked a position (*wei* 位). In other words, there was no one from whom he could acquire the power to create institutions."⁴⁸ Through Liu's reinvention, the subjugation of Confucius to political authority came to be altered by a new generation of scholars who attempted to obtain greater intellectual autonomy and broader literati political participation in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Gong Zizhen also joined the effort of elevating the literati's role in politics under the banner of classical studies. He would thus extrapolate the New Text notion of the Three Epochs (*sanshi* 三世) to necessitate reform in face of the looming chaotic age.⁵⁰ Diverging from Zhang Xuecheng's understanding of the

⁴⁴ Gong Zizhen, "Yu Jiang Ziping jian," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, 317

⁴⁵ Fan, *Nianpu*, 135–6.

⁴⁶ See ch. 1, n. 87.

⁴⁷ *Qingshi gao*, vol. 43 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 13266–7. See also Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 215–9.

⁴⁸ Zhang, "Yuan *dao* shang," 96.

⁴⁹ See Yang, *Hechu shi Jiangnan*, 331–4; Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 232–43.

⁵⁰ Chen, *Gongyang*, 160–4.

formation of classical texts as a necessary evil in ancient history that had dissolved the unity of scholars and state officials, Gong in addition strove to secure an independent foundation for the literati's intellectual autonomy by regarding the emergence of "Master's learning" as a natural process in historical evolution.⁵¹ Changing conceptions of state-literati relations therefore prompted the likes of Gong to harness Jiaqing's demand for the practical output of Confucian learning as the justification to assert themselves in politics against autocratic rulership, when dynastic decline fueled a growing sense of crisis among the lettered class. Yet despite being emboldened by the symbiotic notion of state-literati relationship, these activists still faced the question of how to justify literati empowerment in the shadow of factionalism, which will be discussed next.

Literati re-ascendance and the state

This section examines how nascent statist thinking was utilized by Gong Zizhen as he sought to justify literati empowerment by regarding it as an indispensable part of constructing a strong state. The transformation of the intellectual climate in the late Jiaqing reign was accompanied by the literati's growing inclination to exert bigger influence in politics through organized actions as well. In the following year of the Eight Trigrams rebellion, regular gatherings of literati associated with both personal networks of high officials and aesthetic fellowship started to take place in the southern region of the capital, which would later be known as the Xuannan Poetry Club (Xuannan *shishe* 宣南詩社). Functioning primarily as a nexus of bureaucratic patronage for career-seekers in the officialdom, the Club in addition provided an opportunity for like-minded literati to interact and share with each other political aspirations regarding current affairs,

⁵¹ Zhang Shou-an, "Liuqing jie shi? Qieting jingxuejia zenme shuo— Gong Zizhen, Zhang Xuecheng 'lun xueshu liubian' zhi yitong," in *Wenhua yu lishi de zhuisuo: Yu Ying-shih jiaoshou bazhi shouqing lunwen ji*, ed. Hoyt Tillman (Taipei: Lianjing, 2009), 273–310. See also Tai, *Ming Qing xueshu*, 257–60, 366–8.

forming a clique that gained wider political influence in the early Daoguang reign.⁵² Though the Club's relevance to contemporary politics might have been exaggerated in modern scholarship,⁵³ it is an unmistakable sign that calls for the practical output of scholarship began to be translated into collective actions amid relaxed political control. Nevertheless, such activities could not in theory be legitimized through the exoneration of late Ming partisanship alone, as the sheer reinterpretation of history was insufficient to justify resurging literati activism in contemporary politics. Further conceptual transformation was needed.

In the spring of 1820, Gong Zizhen tried and failed the Metropolitan examination once again after having passed the Provincial examination and spending years residing in the capital. But through contributions (*juanna* 捐納), he managed to secure a junior position in the Grand Secretariat, which allowed him to afford staying and finishing his proposal on the provincialization of Xinjiang (or the Western Territory, Xiyu 西域).⁵⁴ Often seen as a practical response to demographic pressures and frontier defense, the rationale behind this pivotal writing nevertheless deserves a closer examination against the background of the above-mentioned dynamics between political power and scholarship:

Across the Four Seas there are countless countries, none is mightier than our Great Qing. The Great Qing is what has been called China (Zhongguo) since the time of Yao... Emperor Qianlong was then born and able to use military measures in accordance with Heaven's fate. He thus harnessed the power of predecessors' armies as well as the manpower of the Southeast to open up

⁵² James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1991), 39–61.

⁵³ Recent studies suggest that the “big names” related to the Club could only have played a marginal role during the Club's active years from 1814 to 1824. Neither Gong Zizhen nor Wei Yuan were formal members despite their occasional attendance. Lin Zexu only briefly joined the Club during his stay in the capital in 1819. And instead of declining due to the political failures of its affiliates, the original club simply stopped gathering after its key members left for further appointments. See Wei Quan, *Shilin jiaoyou yu fengqi bianqian: Shijiu shiji Xuannan de wenren qunti yanjiu* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008), 71–107.

⁵⁴ Fan, *Nianpu*, 148–9, 157; Chen Ming, *Gong Zizhen pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1998), 32–3.

western frontiers as far as seventeen thousand *li* (里) away from the capital. Even our tributaries in the west could not have foreseen such deeds. Is this Heaven's intention for us to reach the Western Sea? It is impossible to tell.⁵⁵

Not only did Gong fully accept the Qing as China, but he justified its conquest of Central Eurasia as the will of Heaven in an agnostic tone. This echoed with the narrative in Qing ideology where the submission and incorporation of the Zunghars was the culmination of a historical process ordained by celestial power that had brought order and prosperity to the realm.⁵⁶ It was further reminiscent of Zhang Xuecheng's presentist attribution of Qing imperial might to historical necessity buttressed by cosmic authority. Moreover, Gong defended Chinese presence in the Western Territory as a means to distinguish himself from those with poor judgement:

Ignorant literati with shallow opinions and vile people of lowly background frequently doubt the wisdom of the emperor by arguing against wasting resources of the interior to support the frontier. They also doubt the emperor's humaneness due to the extirpation of the enemy, which resulted in the desolation of vast lands. This is utterly wrong. The way to rule all under Heaven is to conform (to the ineluctable trend). Even if we follow their argument, achievements cannot be undone, cost cannot be recovered and the extirpated cannot be revived. Then we might as well conform to the trend for further achievements. Besides, the truth is far from what they say! When we strive for greater achievements, what is already achieved and those depending on us will enjoy greater prosperity. Is this not what the will of Heaven and the Qianlong Emperor would eventually like to achieve?⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Gong, "Xiyu zhi xingsheng yi," 125–6.

⁵⁶ Perdue, *China Marches West*, 476–81.

⁵⁷ Gong, "Xiyu zhi xingsheng yi," 126.

Expressing more clearly Zhang's presentism in necessitating the Qing annexation of Xinjiang, Gong further linked the support for such an imperial enterprise to one's perspicacity in deciding what would be best for the state. He would thus see his proposal of mass migration into Xinjiang to exploit the uncultivated land and lessen demographic pressures in the interior (*neidi* 內地) as the sine qua non for consolidating the Qing's already glorious achievements in the region. Given his fledgling career in the officialdom, it is possible that Gong took an opportunist step in drafting such a proposal, hoping to gain recognition from his superiors. Yet by constructing an image of upright literati with keen observations who differ fundamentally from those unable to grasp the necessary trends leading to state power of the day, Gong was also seeking new ways to legitimize the literati's re-ascendance in politics. Real talents were an elite few who wholeheartedly cared about the state and also perspicacious enough to tackle urgent matters that would contribute to strengthening state power in achieving sagely rule. In turn, the state should promote such talents in place of the despicable careerists occupying high positions, if it wished to consolidate its rule over the realm. Hence, in his account of ruler-minister relations in antiquity, Gong highlighted the role of guests (*bin* 賓) in assisting their masters to achieve sagely rule. For Gong, the founding fathers of the state were no doubt endowed with sagely wisdom. But when they perished, it was pivotal that rulers turn to equally qualified ministers in managing state affairs. Nevertheless, these guests were not always trusted by the royal clan, resulting in the vicissitudes of power dynamics between guests and their masters. Since the sagely talent among these guests was Heaven's endowment, their employment in state institutions would reflect how well the state acted in reverence to Heaven's Mandate. Therefore, Gong proclaimed that "guests born in the reign of one dynasty should in principle serve the dynasty. Yet there remains the possibility that Heaven created such figures not for this dynasty alone. It is the reason that

masters dare not to be arrogant.”⁵⁸ Appropriating the Qing’s culturalist claim to legitimacy, Gong consolidated his reformulation of state-literati relationship by constructing an image of an idealized state endowed with cosmic power that would uphold qualified literati as indispensable allies in maintaining its rule. In this way, the image of upright and concerned literati capable of transforming genuine Confucian learning into practical statecraft also became a point of reference for the likes of Gong to seek bigger roles in state politics. What Bao Shichen had initiated was then taken up by Gong in a more sophisticated manner.

By constructing an idealized image of the state and binding literati identity with their statecraft endeavors, Gong in effect intertwined the voluntarist strain of Confucianism with the ability of the state to achieve effective governance in its domain. The enlarged role of qualified literati in politics would for Gong result in growing state capacity to resolve urgent issues threatening Qing rule. Therefore, the legitimization of literati activism led to growing calls for an activist state in tackling crises of the time. Combining the call for orthodox learning, Gong took a purist stance toward Confucian social ideals by conceptualizing agrarian society as the basis of the lineage system and ultimately the ritual order, when he was writing about the problems of agriculture in the same year. Through his evolutionary reconstruction of ancient history, Gong accused later generations of ignoring agriculture as the basis in the formation of political institutions. Order in local agrarian villages was the first step for the lineage system to emerge, then came the construction of rituals and political establishments on a national level. Yet the foundational role of agriculture must be maintained through political means sanctioned by the state, so that the even distribution of arable land could be carried out and commerce would not overtake

⁵⁸ Gong Zizhen, “Gushi gouchen lun si,” in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, 72–3. The decoupling of state legitimacy from current establishments here thus moves further away from Zhang Xuecheng’s belief in the legitimacy of the Qing state, see Qian Mu, *Zhongguo jin sanbai nian xueshu shi*, vol. B (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1997), 603–5.

agriculture as the root of wealth. Furthermore, state politics began with the regulation of agricultural productions by individual households, and in turn local society should be subject to official supervisions if necessary. Upon ending his arguments, Gong forcefully stated that there was no other way to good governance just like there could not be two roots of a single tree or two sources of a single river.⁵⁹ The central concern behind Gong's vision thus echoes with Bao Shichen's optimistic agenda of encouraging active state regulation in farming where agricultural production would meet the demand of a booming population under official supervision. Through careful planning by responsible officials, state patronage over agricultural production should eventually promote people's livelihoods. But eager to insert bigger influence in politics by erecting orthodox Confucian teachings, Gong was less tolerant to Bao's utilitarian view of commerce as an equal form of wealth to agricultural produce.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, in both cases the state was portrayed as an indispensable arbiter in society and its regulation of human activities ought to be carried out in collaboration with a qualified few whose moral righteousness and statecraft expertise would realize the Confucian ideal of sagely rule under the aegis of political authority.

Such a statist drive to ameliorate waning state power with the help of Confucian learning propelled Gong to reinvent the Qing as a monolithic state endowed with Heaven's Mandate due to its reverence to *dao*. In doing so, Gong naturally regarded disciplining the realm with Confucian ideals as inextricably tied to statecraft endeavors, as manifested in his radical proposal on provincializing Xinjiang. The rationale behind transforming the Qing's imperial vision of multiple sovereignties into a unitary Chinese state under centralized governance is thus more

⁵⁹ Gong Zizhen, "Nongzong," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, 107–11.

⁶⁰ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 74–106.

than responsive to growing pressure in border defense.⁶¹ Nor were Han Chinese literati merely “consumers” of Qing propaganda in reimagining China as essentially multiethnic,⁶² as the likes of Gong emboldened by such a reinvention also exploited such a notion in service of their political aspiration for literati empowerment. The literati re-ascendance in the early nineteenth century thus went in tandem with emerging statist thinking aimed at constructing a powerful state by promoting qualified literati in politics. The political empowerment of these literati would naturally be immune to factional struggles as well, since their moral righteousness ensured their wholehearted service to the state devoid of selfish pursuits. How such a line of thinking was further developed will be the focus of the next section.

Uniting statecraft and scholarship: The early formation of statism

The year 1820 saw another fateful event in the formation of statism, which was the succession of the Daoguang Emperor to the throne. Continuing the policy turn in the late Jiaqing reign, Daoguang actively promoted Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*) as a boost to literati morale upon taking over the shaky empire. He therefore granted the enshrinement of the renowned scholar and Ming loyalist Liu Zongzhou in the Temple of Confucius in 1822. When hosting his first Palace examination in the same year, Daoguang emphatically praised Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism by regarding its early advocates as moral exemplars for contemporary scholars. In order for students to “become upright literati when in school and good ministers when appointed (in office),” it was pivotal that they “fully understand the priority of morality over literary skills.”⁶³ The resurgence of Confucian voluntarism in the form of growing moralism against scholastic Evidential Scholarship thus continued to gain momentum. This section discusses how

⁶¹ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 585–603.

⁶² Cf. Mosca, “The Literati Rewriting of China,” 122.

⁶³ *Qing Xuanzong shilu*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 576, 579, hereafter *QXZSL*.

the moralist resurgence amid the shadow of factionalism prompted the crystallization of statist thinking in the thought of Wei Yuan, as he strove to unite political activism, scholarly pursuits and moral cultivation under *dao* which simultaneously justified the strengthening of state power and literati political empowerment.

Following Daoguang's emphasis on literati moral righteousness, the changing intellectual climate fostered bolder attacks on Evidential Scholarship (also frequently referred to as Han Learning), as seen in Fang Dongshu's (方東樹, 1772-1851) magnum opus on the inefficacy of the philological approach to classical studies in meeting the urgent demands of statecraft enterprises. Unreserved to express his antipathy toward pedantic philological inquiry, Fang systematically dismantled claims about Zhu Xi's one-sided stress on moral speculation at the cost of practical learning by Evidential scholars. Quoting extensively opinions on the practical output of classical studies from Song scholars, Fang argued it was Wang Yangming's pan-moralism that had misled late Ming scholars to the extreme of prioritizing inner cultivation over external disciplines. When the likes of Gu Yanwu pioneered the revival of classical studies, they were ignorant enough to discard Song scholars' insistence on the gravity of moral cultivation to illuminate meanings and principles (*yili*) altogether. Such an ignorance culminated in the arrogant belief of Evidential scholars that through sheer textual reconstruction of ancient classics, the encoded *dao* would be automatically recovered and help bring about sagely rule. Quite the contrary, Evidential Scholarship today had mutated into parochial debates "on paper over philological trivialities with people in antiquity." Once their learning is applied "either inwardly to self-cultivation or outwardly to statecraft agendas, it becomes utterly useless and

only makes people even more confused about what to do.”⁶⁴ Hence, it was necessary to restore moral speculations on *yili* as equally important in classical studies. Fang therefore outrightly denied Dai Zhen’s assertion that with the illumination of philology there would eventually come the illumination of what is also the case in one’s mind (*renxin suo tongran* 人心所同然):

Oftentimes, philology ends up distorting ancient classics due to misinterpretation of *yili*. If we do not prioritize the method of (moral) speculation on *yili*, how could we depend upon philology as unmistakable (in interpreting classics)!... In sum, advocates of *yili* never turn away from the philological approach but advocates of philology cannot always adhere to *yili*. How is it so? Because *yili* sometimes extends beyond written texts indeed.⁶⁵

For Fang, the philological reconstruction of classical texts no longer entails by itself the illumination of profound *yili*. Rather, the instrumental nature of philology must be guided by *yili* obtained through moral speculation. It naturally follows that only those capable of grasping true *yili* beyond the confines of written records could master the balance between philology and moral speculation, thus able to steer classical studies toward meeting practical demands of the day. Attempting to reclaim literati prestige both in politics and in scholarship, the call for greater intellectual autonomy has now become audacious enough to directly challenge the dominant trend in Confucian learning.

Though Fang loathed the pedantic trend within Evidential Scholarship, his defense of moral speculation reflected the syncretistic tendency in classical studies to transform Confucian scholarship into practical solutions to domestic crises, which in turn acted as a leverage to justify

⁶⁴ Fang Dongshu, “Hanxue shangdui,” in *Hanxue shicheng ji (Wai erzong)*, ed. Xu Hongxing (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1998), 276.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 321.

the re-ascendance of concerned literati in the tumultuous age.⁶⁶ The shifting climate certainly encouraged the younger generation of literati in the officialdom to form more politicized networks as venues to showcase moral righteousness and consequently their superiority in statecraft endeavors, as manifested in the emergence of the Spring Purification (*chunxi* 春禊) circle.⁶⁷ Upholding the self-image as paragons in moral cultivation, such a coalition of like-minded literati increasingly sought to exert bigger influence in politics against the degenerate officeholders by propagating *yili* as the core of orthodox Confucian teachings. Nevertheless, neither Fang Dongshu nor Spring Purification members could substantiate their intellectual enterprise in response to attacks from the Han Learning camp. If *yili* extends beyond the discipline of classical texts, how would one be able to differentiate true *yili* from mere personal opinions, as had already been pointed out by Dai Zhen? Even as the kingpins of the Spring Purification circle had adopted a utilitarian stance in arguing for resurging literati activism by alluding to the inevitability of historical change,⁶⁸ in theory it bears the risk that such endorsement of subjectivism in Confucian learning would devolve into devastating factional struggles as seen in the late Ming.

It was under these unsettling circumstances that Wei Yuan spent his early academic career in and around the capital. First arriving at the capital in 1814, Wei personally witnessed the intellectual and political transformations following the watershed of 1813. Immersed with the local Hunanese Neo-Confucian tradition that valued the practical outputs of scholarly pursuits, Wei seized the opportunity and studied under masters from the opposing camps of Han Learning,

⁶⁶ Wang Fan-sen, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang yu xueshu de puxi* (Changchun: Jilin chuban jituan youxian zeren gongsi, 2011), 3–22.

⁶⁷ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 63–99. See also Wei, *Shilin jiaoyou*, 109–19.

⁶⁸ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 87–99.

Song Learning and the fledgling New Text Learning. His eclectic interest in scholarship eventually directed him to favor the practical implications of elucidating great meanings in subtle words (*weiyán dàyì* 微言大義) in *Gongyang* classicism, thus helping him to forge a close relationship with Liu Fenglu.⁶⁹

The impact of New Text classicism on Wei can be observed through his preface to Liu's posthumously published collection of scholarly works, in which Wei seized the occasion to express his view on the contemporary task of classical studies:

The pivot of re-enlivening (the glory of) antiquity today lies in transmuting (*jin* 進) philology to the study of codes and institutions like that in the Eastern Han. This is how the study of *Qi Poetry* turns into that of *Lu Poetry*. It further lies in transmuting the study of codes and institutions to elucidating great meanings in subtle words to unite classical studies, politics and literature as one like that in the Western Han. This is how the study of *Lu Poetry* turns into *dao*.⁷⁰

Sharing the conviction of realizing past ideals in the present age with Evidential scholars, Wei nevertheless differed from them in regarding *Gongyang* classicism as the sine qua non to complete such a grand mission. The rectification of New Text as the orthodoxy in classical studies for Wei extended beyond trivial scholarly disputes and points to aligning Confucian learning with *dao*. It then begs the question of what *dao* entails in Wei's thought, which can be inferred from his exegesis on the text of *Laozi*. In his uncommon act of annotating a Daoist canon as a Confucian scholar, Wei conceptualized the constancy of *dao* as being a mere placeholder, since only namelessness (*wuming* 無名) could reveal *dao*'s uncultured nature (*pu*

⁶⁹ Wei Qi, "Shaoyang Wei fujun shilue," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 20 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 618–9; Wang Jiajian, *Wei Yuan nianpu* (Taipei: Jinghua shuju, 1967), 7–24; Chen Qitai and Liu Lanxiao, *Wei Yuan pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2004), 14–20. For the Hunanese tradition of Confucian learning, see Zhang, *Xueji*, 197–8; Yi Mengchun and Yi Lun, *Wei Yuan pingzhuan* (Changsha: Hunan University Press, 2007), 35–8.

⁷⁰ Wei Yuan, "Liu Libu yishu xu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 726.

樸). Yet *dao* is unmistakably the beginning of Heaven and Earth, from which myriad beings thrive. Hence, “only by adhering to the nameless can one institutionalize the named (*youming* 有名). And to establish institutions is to carve out *pu* in contribution to the formation of rituals, politics and legal systems on their own.” Like water in rivers and seas that has a definite origin, *dao* holds fast to its nameless nature despite being transformed into myriad things. Therefore, monarchs must also align themselves to the uncultured nature of namelessness to master the skill of governance.⁷¹ Given the intellectual background of the 1820s, it is not hard to imagine that Wei had used such a conception to insinuate criticisms of autocratic rulership. He would thus see the self-cultivation of sages as a process of eliminating extravagance and transforming things in accordance with what they are of themselves.⁷² Yet far from espousing political non-activism, Wei confirmed man’s indispensable role to actively engage in regulating how myriad beings would behave:

That myriad beings transform on their own means they generate and dissolve on their own... If not overseen, the age of Great Antiquity will degenerate into the age of the Three Dynasties and further into later generations. Who is to stop them? And can they be overseen through (improper) activism? They should only be overseen by the uncultured nature of namelessness, which entails directing movement through motionlessness, barring (excessive) culture through the uncultured and transforming sophistication through simplicity. Hence, desires will have no way to arise and return to the natural status of non-desire.⁷³

⁷¹ Wei Yuan, “*Laozi benyi*,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 2, 684.

⁷² *Ibid*, 681. See also Luo Jianqiu, “Cong Wei Yuan *Laozi benyi* kan Qingdai xueshu de zhuanbian,” *Modern Chinese History Studies*, no. 01 (1995): 79.

⁷³ Wei, “*Laozi benyi*,” 689–90.

The inherent tendency to degenerate among myriad beings necessitates ceaseless efforts on the part of man to regulate their behavior in prevention of degradation. And man must do so without being lured by the very tendency to degenerate, since in history chaos and destruction are often caused by the pursuit of excessive desires.⁷⁴ To cultivate the human mind to be immune from these negative potentials, it is pivotal that Confucian teachings be indoctrinated to foster the mind's steadfastness regardless of external vicissitudes. According to Wei, "there is no better way to ease anger than through the *Book of Odes*, no better way to remove melancholy than through the *Book of Music*, no better way to abstain from (the excessive use of) music than through the *Book of Ritual*, no better way to abide by ritual than through reverence (*jing* 敬) and no better way to maintain reverence than through tranquility (*jing* 靜). Once one becomes reverent on the outside and tranquil on the inside, he can return to his nature and be utterly unwavering."⁷⁵ Instead of downplaying human agency in reverence to the autarkical *dao* as advocated in *Laozi*, Wei highlighted the gravity of the activist strain in Confucian learning to prepare the righteous minds for regulating myriad beings in the name of *dao*. He therefore conceptualized the *dao* of Heaven and Earth as comprised of *yin* and *yang*, with the *dao* of sages constantly nourishing *yang* while *Laozi*'s *dao* had originated from *yin*.⁷⁶ Acknowledging the duality of *dao* in generating Confucianism and the text of *Laozi*, Wei was able to buttress his own understanding of cosmic reality and sagehood by resorting to the authority of *dao*, while demonstrating his allegiance to literati identity sanctioned by Confucian classics. The degenerative nature of myriad beings requires man to constantly regulate their transformation to accord them with *dao*, an endeavor dependent upon the guiding role of classics so that only the

⁷⁴ Wu Ze, "Wei Yuan de bianyi sixiang he lishi jinhua guandian——Wei Yuan shixue yanjiu zhiyi," *Lishi Yanjiu*, no. 05 (1962): 41–4.

⁷⁵ Wei Yuan, "Mogu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 12.

⁷⁶ Wei, "*Laozi benyi*," 649.

upright and steadfast minds could take on the grand enterprise. Moral cultivation was thus justified by the cosmic authority of *dao*, which fused the Laozian idea of non-action with Confucian classical teachings, making the two merely differ in practice rather than in principle.⁷⁷

This notion was further exploited by Wei to reformulate ruler-minister relations in favor of literati empowerment. On one hand, real talents could accomplish no greater deed than to assist the monarch in attaining moral perfection, which even surpassed the gravity of establishing codes and institutions. Otherwise, their talent would be wasted.⁷⁸ On the other hand, sagely rule could only be materialized when monarchs were able to seek out and rule in collaboration with such qualified men. Since “all under Heaven is like one man’s body” with “the monarch being the head, ministers the limbs and remonstrating ministers (*zhengchen* 諍臣) the mouthpiece,” enlightened monarchs would rely on the collective wisdom of even commoners in achieving good governance, as commoners were “the breath of the nose” essential to the body’s survival. This was why in antiquity everyone acted as criticizers and sagely kings constantly feared being disconnected from commoners.⁷⁹ The calls to “open up pathways of remonstrance” by the likes of Guan Tong was here legitimized in Wei’s reconstructed cosmology, where monarchical power was checked by qualified ministers whose moral rectitude justified their active engagement in *dao*’s transformation for the sake of all under Heaven. Such a reconstruction of the cosmic order undoubtedly emboldened Wei to question the legitimate form and boundary of political participation against long-entrenched powerholders, while regarding strengthening the state as the ultimate outcome of his reform agenda.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Huang Chia Chun, “Wei Yuan *Laozi benyi* jiehe kaoju xue de yili gaizao,” *Tamkang Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 45 (2011): 35–41.

⁷⁸ Wei, “Mogu,” 55.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 67.

⁸⁰ Kuhn, *Origins*, 39–46.

An immediate question that follows was how the practical output of moral cultivation could be properly gauged, without falling back into the conundrum of pan-moralism. For Wei, this was precisely where the goal of scholarship to “unite classical studies, politics and literature as one” came to the fore. Convinced that “what remains unchanging is only *dao* while actual conditions (勢) change daily and irreversibly,”⁸¹ Wei emphasized the necessity for human activities to be one with *dao*, which underlies the endeavor to achieve moral perfection:

In terms of the attained man’s relation to *dao*, he must begin with unity, retreat with unity, accumulate (his efforts) with unity and entertain (himself in accordance) with unity. What is unity (with *dao*)? It is like in the middle of earth where there is sundial. So is there in the center of *dao*... Human affairs lie in four directions while *dao* lies in the center. When sages grasp the gist, all in four directions will be drawn in (*Shengren zhiyao, sifang laixiao* 聖人執要，四方來效).⁸²

The centrality of *dao* in directing human affairs requires the properly cultivated minds to always accord their deeds with *dao*’s dictation against the vicissitudes of conditions. By the same token, intellectual pursuits and political institutions must also be united under *dao*’s authority to bring about order and prosperity. Wei thus attributed the tendency of degeneration from antiquity to the alienation of human affairs from *dao*’s oneness:

Before the Three Dynasties, the *dao* of monarchs and that of masters were one. Ritual and music thus served as means to (good) governance. From the Three Dynasties afterward, *dao* became separated, rendering ritual and music merely empty words... (In antiquity) the attained men in office all had virtue. Therefore, *dao* and morality were one and (regional) customs were identical. With the emergence of Confucius and Mencius came the title of Confucianist (*Ru* 儒), yet the

⁸¹ Wei, “Mogu,” 48.

⁸² Ibid, 26.

attained men started to distance themselves from Confucianists. With the emergence of worthies (*xian* 賢) in the Song came the title of *Daoxue*, yet Confucianists started to distance themselves from *dao* as well... Those in office and those with virtue thus became two; Confucianists engaged with classical studies, with moral cultivation and with politics also became three.⁸³

Similar to Zhang Xuecheng's historical reconstruction of *dao*'s differentiation, Wei also regarded such a process as the root of social decay. However, both the powerholders' long-standing negligence of virtue and the literati's parochial scholarly pursuits were to be held accountable for these misfortunes. Therefore, instead of blindly subjugating their intellectual autonomy to political authority, righteous literati should seek to reunite human affairs to be one with *dao*. The validity of moral cultivation and scholarship would thus be confirmed by practical statecraft, which would ultimately be conducive to strengthening the state endowed with *dao*'s might. Small wonder that Wei saw the state apparatus as *dao*'s concrete manifestation in the human realm:

What constitute *dao*'s appliance (*qi* 器)? Ritual and music. What constitute *dao*'s resolve (*duan* 斷)? Military and punishment. What constitute *dao*'s resources (*zi* 資)? Provisions (*shi* 食) and commodities (*huo* 貨). With every affair being shaped by *dao*, it is called sagely rule. To put down these affairs as guidance for later generations to act in accordance with *dao* is called the classics.⁸⁴

Classical texts were records by past sages to demonstrate the guiding role of *dao* in human affairs. With moral cultivation, scholarship and politics united under *dao*'s authority, scholars with moral rectitude should follow suit and merge Confucian learning aimed at transmitting *dao*

⁸³ Ibid, 22–3.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 23.

with statecraft enterprises in the construction of a strong state. The materialization of such a vision would in turn signal the superiority of their moral and intellectual endeavors, granting unquestionable justification for the political empowerment of these upright literati. It is now only a matter of action to “convert techniques of classical studies (*jingshu*) into techniques of governance (*zhishu* 治術)” and actualize such a grand vision.⁸⁵ In this way, Gong Zizhen’s construction of an idealized state was further elaborated to generate nascent statism that legitimized literati empowerment by regarding the state as the ultimate point of reference for scholarship and statecraft. The conundrum that had haunted Fang Dongshu was also resolved by the cosmic authority of *dao*, which simultaneously fueled aspirations for a strong state and literati re-ascendance. It was through these political and intellectual dynamics that we can observe the initial crystallization of statism in the early nineteenth century.

Conclusion

In response to growing calls for literati empowerment in politics, Wei Yuan conceptualized *dao* as being essentially nameless yet transformative in a cosmos replete with degenerative beings that required constant intervention to check their negative inclinations. Harnessing the theoretical potential of such a notion and combining it with Confucian classical teachings, Wei united the gravity of moral cultivation in scholarly pursuits, the practicality of Confucian scholarship and the indispensable role of classical studies in directing statecraft under the banner of *dao*. Such a unity dissolved rising tensions from resurging literati activism in the shadow of factionalism by portraying literati empowerment and strengthening state power as integral parts of the same enterprise to achieve sagely rule. It would prove to be a powerful tool in resuscitating literati

⁸⁵ Ibid.

morale against corrupt officeholders, who were described by Metzger as “men perpetually on the verge of moral failure.” Yet in contrast to Metzger that this view is an inherent feature of China’s late imperial political culture,⁸⁶ the analysis in this chapter suggests it was the burgeoning sense of moral and political crises in the late Jiaqing reign that had prompted literati outside high office to target the sagging bureaucracy in justification of their ascendance in politics. It was further grounded in Wei’s formulation of cosmic reality that regarded human nature as naturally inclined toward degeneration, which necessitated institutionalized control reminiscent of the social implications of *qi* (氣) cosmology. Such concerns had arguably led ambitious literati to seek new ways of networking in the guise of aesthetic fellowship, as observed by Polachek. Eager to legitimize their cause, these activists used the emerging Xuannan Poetry Club as a venue to showcase their moral and academic superiority against the accusation of faction.⁸⁷ Elman in addition examines how this shifting political climate saw the popularization of the New Text rhetoric on epochal change that paved the way for statecraft reformism.⁸⁸ My investigation shows that the New Text revival, though born out of the specific political milieu, was equally predicated on the underlying agenda for sagely rule within Evidential scholarship, which reached its logical endpoint in the presentist interpretation of classics and the statist re-orientation of scholarship. Appropriating the presentist logic and the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation, scholars like Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan used New Text classicism to legitimize literati activism by grounding their political empowerment in the necessity of timely reform that would result in bringing about a strong state for sagely rule. The right to power and recognition was therefore not only based on moral rectitude and academic excellence, but on statecraft expertise to help

⁸⁶ Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*, 170–6.

⁸⁷ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 39–50.

⁸⁸ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 299–319.

strengthen state capacity in tackling surging crises. Small wonder that, as Kuhn has noted, in Wei Yuan's view political participation should only be granted to established national elites whose impartial mindset had surpassed that of parochial lower-ranking degree-holders in rural areas.⁸⁹ The reformulation of state-literati relationship is accordingly an integral part of statist thinking that emphasized the central authority of the state.

By reformulating state-literati relation in favor of literati empowerment, early advocates of statism also opened up new possibilities of conceptualizing the state. Pierre-Étienne Will argues there existed an unwritten constitution in late imperial China embodied in state institutions established by dynastic founders and sanctioned by Confucian classics, government regulations laid out in the *Institutes* (*huidian* 會典) and an accumulated body of law.⁹⁰ Rowe observes that as early as in 1801, Bao Shichen had attempted to rewrite this constitution by promoting greater flexibility in personnel selection and local governance against autocratic rulership.⁹¹ From my analysis, it is not hard to see when Gong Zizhen equated the Great Qing (Daqing guo) with China, he in effect united *dao* and governance (*zhi*) in the present scene following Li Guangdi's aspiration, which could theoretically nullify the blind reverence to ancestral institutions. If *dao* were to be sought in *qi* (器) suited to the time, the codes and institutions of the state must be recurrently reformed as well. Such reforms would result in strengthened capacity to govern the realm by state apparatus, deemed as the natural embodiment of *dao*. Yet since the transmission of *dao* was also the unshirkable duty of the literati, the state and the literati formed a symbiotic relationship that legitimized literati political activism. In turn, the literati should wholeheartedly

⁸⁹ Kuhn, *Origins*, 41–4.

⁹⁰ Pierre-Étienne Will, "Checking Abuses of Power under the Ming Dynasty," in *China, Democracy, and Law: A Historical and Contemporary Approach*, eds. Mireille Delmas-Marty and Pierre-Étienne Will (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 123–33.

⁹¹ Rowe, "Rewriting the Qing Constitution," 211–6.

devote themselves to serving the state if sagely rule under *dao* were to be realized. The materialist understanding of *dao* thus converged with the presentist logic for institutional reform in generating incipient statism that ingeniously combined the strengthening of state power with literati empowerment against autocracy. Hence, Bao Shichen would discredit the stateless “ordering the world” and prioritize the enterprise of “ordering the state” (*jingguo* 經國).⁹² Such a state, staffed with qualified literati, must time and again demonstrate its ability to achieve sagely rule as the basis of its legitimacy. In the early nineteenth century, it means strengthening state capacity in governance by consolidating its central power to tackle institutional breakdown. Since the basic framework of Qing imperial polity has not been fundamentally challenged at this point, literati activists endeavored to actualize such aspirations through domestic reform and quelling Western aggression, as will be seen in chapter three.

⁹² Ibid, 215. See also Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*.

Chapter Three: Looming Western Impact

Stressing the unity of scholarship and statecraft, Wei Yuan was naturally eager to transform his academic training into statecraft agendas when the time was right. This chapter examines how statist thinking was woven into the rationale behind Wei's reform proposals and his perceptions of the Western threat around the Opium War. Together these two parts of investigation serve as a clue to reveal the consolidation of statist thinking among literati activists.

In recent decades, scholars have diverged from the fatalist impression of the Daoguang era as marked by inertia and inability to cope with rising internal and foreign challenges that foreshadowed the devastating mid-century rebellions. Instead, active measures to tackle bureaucratic malfeasance taken by the emperor and reform-minded officials have been duly noted, and the outcome of domestic reform has been assessed in a more positive tone.¹ Unsurprisingly, from the perspective of intellectual history, this era is generally depicted as the flourishing of statecraft reformism in the intellectual sphere.² Hao Chang sees the statecraft resurgence in scholarship as concerning the mere technical aspect of Confucian statecraft tradition rather than the activist strain of political criticism.³ Polachek describes how statecraft agendas were intertwined with the moralist self-representation by literati activists to demonstrate their superiority in political participation, and how their political ambitions had shaped and been shaped by power struggles centered on domestic reform.⁴ Wang Hui further argues that the New Text conception of state legitimacy, initially deployed to facilitate statecraft reformism, was

¹ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 107–49; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 311–86; Duan Chao, *Tao Zhu yu Jia-Dao jingshi sixiang yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 124–211. For the fatalist narrative, see Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic decline,” 119–32.

² E.g., The Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica ed, *Jinshi Zhongguo jingshi sixiang yantaohui lunwenji* (Taipei, 1984).

³ Chang, *You'an Yishi*, 89–93.

⁴ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 50–9, 87–94.

appropriated by Wei Yuan to reconceptualize China in a West-dominated world.⁵ The statecraft undertone seems to be taken as a natural response to the dire situations of the time.

In light of these studies, this chapter argues that the statecraft rationale behind domestic reform is not self-evident and must be interpreted against the transcendental vision expressed through the emerging statist thinking in the early nineteenth century. Similar to the conviction that *dao* must be manifested through *qi* (器), literati empowerment has to be justified by practical statecraft capable of bringing about sagely rule. In the context of the Daoguang era, literati activists readily appropriated the gruesome reality of declining state capacity in governance to call for institutional reform. Portraying the state as the embodiment of *dao* and themselves a qualified few to transmit *dao*, these activists harnessed the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation to legitimize their reform proposals by regarding their self-interest as identical to the interest of the state, since both were part of the same grand undertaking. Therefore, they constantly lambasted corrupt officeholders as obstacles and sought to consolidate the central power of the state in cleansing such evildoers. This anti-bureaucratic undertone paradoxically enhanced statist thinking among literati activists as they simultaneously targeted bureaucratic malfeasance and autocratic rulership. The implication was that only men like them should be entrusted to run high office of the state. Such an aspiration became complicated alongside growing awareness of the Western threat after the Opium War, as the Qing's defeat endangered its image as the natural abode of *dao*. Eager to restore state power against foreign intrusion, Wei Yuan blended his knowledge of the West into his cosmic vision to necessitate the Qing's active engagement with foreign powers on the world stage, which entailed international alliance in strategic defense and centralized governance in frontier management. The idealization of

⁵ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 603–79.

Western politics was further used by Wei as an opportunity to legitimize literati empowerment, which became imminent should the Qing wish to retain its cultural supremacy in a rapidly changing world. The initial Western impact accordingly saw the consolidation of statist thinking among literati activists.

Local reforms and statist thinking

This section discusses how statist thinking was manifested in literati activists' proposals on local reforms aimed at alleviating the state's financial difficulties. After spending over a decade in and around the capital, Wei Yuan left in 1825 for an advisory position in He Changling's (賀長齡, 1785-1848) office. Also a Hunanese local, He was then serving as the Provincial Administration Commissioner (*buzhengshi* 布政使) of Jiangsu. Upon arriving in Jiangsu, the economic engine and intellectual seedbed of late imperial China, Wei was entrusted with the task of editing a collection of statecraft writings entitled the *Collected Essays on Statecraft under the Reigning Dynasty* (*Huangchao jingshiwén biān* 皇朝經世文編). Through this opportunity, Wei was able to familiarize himself with state documents, which gave him a deeper understanding of actual state politics.⁶ It was also an occasion for Wei to interpret sociopolitical realities based on his training in classical studies. In the preface to *Huangchao jingshiwén biān*, Wei listed four principles of statecraft, namely that while “affairs (*shi* 事) must be based on the human mind... those who talk about the mind also need to seek proof in (actual) affairs,” while “law must be based on man... those who talk about man also need to contribute to (the functioning) of law,” while “the present must be based on the past... those who talk about the past also need to make

⁶ Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 21–6; Wang, *Nianpu*, 24–5. See also Wei Yuan, “Yu Tong Shitang sima shu,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 746.

contribution to the present,” and while “(the investigation of) things (*wu* 物) must be based on (the cultivation of) the self... those who talk about the inner self must also be able to correspond to the outside world.”⁷ Though it might be a common technique of argumentation to juxtapose two opposing concepts in formulating his statecraft ideals,⁸ it was equally possible that the proper balance between each pair corresponded to Wei’s belief in the importance of unity under *dao* in ordering the world. The establishment of human institutions (e.g., law) was thus predicated on morally rectified men, the study of the past on present needs and moral cultivation on the practical output of governing the realm (e.g., utilizing things). The issue of practical statecraft as a means to affirm such unity in this way became one of Wei’s central concerns. Convinced that “nothing is more urgent than present affairs” and “the imperial court is where (good) governance originates,” Wei unhesitatingly regarded the consolidation of the state’s central power as legitimate, as *dao* was embodied therein.⁹

Formulated in the early Daoguang reign, Wei’s statecraft agendas were indicative of certain realities troubling the new emperor and concerned literati alike. Aiming to revitalize the bureaucracy following his enthronement, Daoguang in late 1820 took the advice from one minister of the Grand Council, Yinghe (英和, 1771-1840) and issued a decree on systematically investigating corrupt practices (*lougui* 陋規) across the empire, which referred to a vast array of “hidden” rules including surcharges in addition to regular taxation as well as blatant bribes and kickbacks that went against the official code of conduct. Worried that such deviant practice would increasingly dampen literati morale and put heavy burden on the people’s livelihood,

⁷ Wei Yuan, “*Huangchao jingshiwen bian xu*,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 13, 1.

⁸ Kwang-Ching Liu, “Wei Yuan zhi zhaxue yu jingshi sixiang,” in *Jinshi Zhongguo jingshi sixiang yantaohui lunwenji*, 364.

⁹ Wei Yuan, “*Huangchao jingshiwen bian wuli*,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 13, 1.

Daoguang suggested legalizing a reasonable portion of these acts so that officials could abide by state legislation. The problem was that in order to implement these measures, it was necessary for local magistrates to first ferret out existing *lougui* in their domain for the central government.¹⁰ Much to Daoguang's dismay, his plan was met with staunch resistance throughout the bureaucracy. In under three months' time, a number of court officials and provincial governors submitted memorials to the emperor stating that a sudden move to axing even a portion of these long-existing rules would greatly impair local administration since they had in fact become an integral source of revenue for the Qing government. It was also morally objectionable to formalize such unconstitutional acts, which could exacerbate the exploitation of the local population by unscrupulous officials.¹¹ Realizing that he could hardly bend the bureaucracy to his will, Daoguang eventually withdrew his decision by issuing another decree in December explaining that he was overwhelmed by his father's funeral and thus hasty in concurring with Yinghe's proposal. Praising the critics for being loyal and clearheaded, the emperor in addition made the gesture of encouraging officials to rectify their behavior and stem morally detestable practice. Yinghe was relieved from duty but retained access to the Grand Council.¹² Daoguang's setback reflected a deep conundrum haunting his empire. That is, the very bureaucracy the state relied on was becoming increasingly under-funded and dysfunctional. The centralization and redistribution of tax revenues by the state forged during the High Qing, though ensuring a relatively low tax rate in line with Confucian ideals, had at this point limited state

¹⁰ *QXZSL*, vol. 1, 124–5. On the umbrella term of *lougui*, see Wei Qingyuan, “Lun Qingdai guanchang de lougui,” in *Ming Qing shi xinxu*, ed. Wei Qingyuan (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995), 243–50; Zhou Jian, “Lougui yu Qing Jia-Dao zhiji de difang caizheng,” *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo jikan*, 75 (March 2012): 118–30.

¹¹ Wei, “Lun Qingdai guanchang de lougui,” 284; Wu Zhenqing, *Qingshi jishi benmo*, vol. 7, ed. Nan Bingwen and Bai Xinliang (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2006), 2123.

¹² *QXZSL*, vol. 1, 209–10; Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2123.

capacity financially in face of domestic urgencies.¹³ Once curbed by the activist state, the *lougui* of informal funding practices had already started to resurge in the late Qianlong reign and grew rampant in Daoguang's day.¹⁴ The abortive investigation of *lougui* can thus be seen as a failed attempt to consolidate central power over local governance in terms of fiscal regulation.¹⁵ For literati activists, it was therefore inevitable to address the issue of how to deal with the corrupt bureaucracy while strengthening state capacity in domestic governance.

Hence, proposals on reforming the grain tribute system, a key source of state revenue, would seek alternative plans of transportation to bypass the existing bureaucratic administration in the name of strengthening the state. As one of the three great superintendencies alongside the salt monopoly and the Yellow River Conservancy, the grain tribute administration was directly controlled by the central government and charged with the task of collecting rice tax and shipping tribute grain from Jiangnan via the Grand Canal to the capital. By the early nineteenth century, the system had been deeply corrupted by overstaffing and superfluous fees demanded by officials during transportation. The increasing shipping cost incurred therefrom thus became a growing concern for the court and elicited continuous debates between proponents of sea transport as a more cost-effective alternative and those with a vested interest in canal transport.¹⁶ In 1824, an accidental rupture of a dike blocked the canal, forcing Daoguang to take a stand in whether to adopt the sea route alternative. Following another round of contentions, Daoguang in

¹³ For more information on Qing finance, see ch.7, esp. n.1.

¹⁴ Wei, "Lun Qingdai guanchang de lougui," 281–3; Feng Erkang, "Lun Daoguang chao shehui wenti," in *Guzhen zhai wencong*, ed. Feng Erkang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), 695–6.

¹⁵ Zhou, "Lougui yu Qing Jia-Dao zhiji de difang caizheng," 154–7. On High Qing fiscal reforms, see Ramon H. Myers and Yeh-Chien Wang, "Economic Developments, 1644-1800," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9, Part One: The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, 604–9; Zelin, "The Yung-cheng Reign," 206–15; Madeleine Zelin, *The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth-Century Ch'ing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁶ Jones and Kuhn, "Dynastic decline," 120–4; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 312–5.

mid-1825 finally agreed with the proposal of sea transport as an expedient and ordered the newly-appointed Governor-general of Liangjiang (兩江總督) Kišan (琦善, 1786-1854) to draft a plan with the assistance of the Jiangsu Governor (*xunfu* 巡撫) Tao Zhu (陶澍, 1779-1839), a statecraft-oriented official and He Changling's direct superior.¹⁷ Before Kišan replaced Wei Yuanyu (魏元煜, ?-1825) as the Governor-general of Liangjiang, Wei Yuan had submitted a letter detailing the feasibility of sea transport in reply to Yuanyu's consultation. In Wei Yuan's eyes, sea transport would benefit (*li* 利) state finance (*guoji* 國計), the people's livelihood (*minsheng* 民生) and sea merchants simply due to its much lower cost, which could be achieved by directly hiring merchant fleets and bypassing canal checkpoints, instead of relying on the bloated grain tribute system. And this was precisely the reason treacherous tax collectors, regulatory clerks and hereditary boatmen feeding off the corrupt system would stand in opposition for their own gains by coming up with various excuses questioning the ingenious plan. After refuting these excuses and offering a preliminary calculation of the total shipping cost, Wei concluded that only "commoners abort good deeds because of dissident voice while sages accomplish great deeds out of dissent."¹⁸ The moralist undertone corresponded with Wei's conviction that only upright literati could align themselves with the interest of the state against corrupt officeholders nibbling from the middle. This was even more manifest in a separate essay on the necessity of reforming the tribute grain transportation. In an imagined dialogue with an opponent to sea transport, Wei dismissed reservations about sea transport by stating that wise men always consider what would be most beneficial according to changing circumstances. Now that the capital of the Qing state was closer to the sea than those of previous dynasties, it created

¹⁷ *QXZSL*, vol. 1, 327–9, 338–9; Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2141–2.

¹⁸ Wei Yuan, "Fu Wei Zhifu xun haiyun shu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 396–8.

the geographical condition (*dishi* 地勢) favorable for sea transport. Merchants traveling along the sea route were as trustworthy in sea transport as boatmen sailing the canal, which formed the condition of human affairs (*shishi* 事勢). And the current disruption of canal transport necessitated change in the methods of shipping, generating the timely condition (*shishi* 時勢) accordingly. Since those with sagely wisdom would appropriate such conditions for the greater good, switching to sea transport was the sine qua non to achieve the most beneficial end for all but the despicable middlemen.¹⁹

On the technical level, Wei Yuan's practical concern of cutting transportation expense by streamlining the bloated bureaucracy was by no means unique and anticipated by reform-minded literati like Bao Shichen. In his 1801 proposal, Bao had boldly suggested an eventual phasing out of the entire grain tribute system by setting up agricultural colonies on salt marshes along the coast of Zhili (直隸), while utilizing market forces to meet the remaining quota of tribute grains. Even in a more plausible proposal drafted in 1825, Bao still argued for cutting redundant middlemen out of the transportation process and working directly with merchant groups under careful state supervision.²⁰ What remained as the chief concern for both Bao and Wei was how statecraft reformism could benefit the state by revitalizing the sagging system.²¹ Yet on an idealistic level, Wei's agenda also had the potential of fundamentally transforming the political institutions due to the inefficacy of long-entrenched powerholders across the officialdom.

¹⁹ Wei Yuan, "Chou cao pian shang," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 377–82.

²⁰ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 110–25; Li Guoqi, "Bao Shichen yu Wei Yuan jingshi sixiang bijiao fenxi," *Bulletin of Historical Research*, no. 33 (June 2005), 145–6.

²¹ In his translation of 利, Rowe uses the term profit to explicate Bao's proto-liberal mentality of generating wealth for the state and the people, despite noting that *li* could also be the logical opposite of disadvantage (*bi* 弊) and thus closer to the meaning of benefit or advantage. Here I would only point out that in terms of grain tribute reform, Bao's intention, similar to that of Wei's, was more statist in the sense of devising a plan most beneficial to strengthening state power. See Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 177–80.

Buttressed by the cosmology of *Gongyang* classicism emphasizing epochal change, such an aspiration inserted an anti-bureaucratic sentiment in Wei's statecraft thinking, which called for ineluctable institutional reforms by harnessing extra-bureaucratic forces such as the political empowerment of like-minded literati outside high office, in the name of consolidating the central power of the state.²² Therefore, upon the completion of a successful attempt to transport tribute grain by sea in 1826, Wei fanatically praised proposals on switching to sea transport since the times of Kangxi and Jiaqing as adhering to teachings of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in carrying out timely reform, which were based on careful calculations in response to specific historical conditions. Since it was also due to the ever-changing nature of conditions that long-existing practice was bound to generate disadvantages, only the qualified few can initiate reform for the greater good with their sagely wisdom.²³ When editing a more comprehensive account of the sea transport experiment, Wei further claimed it was traitorous officials rather than unfavorable conditions that had impeded the adoption of such a beneficent plan by the state. Quoting Laozi that "the great *dao* is plain and straightforward yet people tend to prefer byways," Wei in addition idealized statecraft reformers as true bearers of *dao* and thus indispensable in rectifying the human mind and achieving good governance.²⁴ In line with his conviction of cosmic reality where constantly degenerating beings necessitated ceaseless domestication on the part of man,²⁵ Wei had vested in his statecraft reformism a more grandiose mission than fixing the nuts-and-bolts of state institutions.

²² For the influence of *Gongyang* cosmology on Wei, see Chen, *Gongyang xue*, 232–54; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 262–91. See also Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 240–3.

²³ Wei Yuan, "Daoguang bingshu haiyun ji," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 392–5.

²⁴ Wei Yuan, "Haiyun quan'an xu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 388–9. Rowe's reading of Wei's writing focuses on his paean to human progress against barriers of nature, which neglects Wei's political aspiration therein. See Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 126–7.

²⁵ See ch. 2.

Despite the success of the 1826 sea shipment, advocates of routinizing sea transport were frustrated by opponents throughout the existing administration. The recovery of waterways along the canal and allegations of factionalism further drained Daoguang's trust in these sea transport propagators, eventually leading the emperor to put down such proposals.²⁶ Yet Wei's self-assumed duty of strengthening the state persisted into his subsequent statecraft agendas, such as the Liang-Huai (兩淮) salt reform. Like the grain tribute system, government monopoly on salt business had created a similarly bloated administration imposing superfluous fees (*fufei* 浮費) during trade and transport, which simply priced official salt out of the market in the early nineteenth century. As a result, salt smuggling grew rampant and the loss of state revenues due to declining sales became too urgent an issue to neglect. In December of 1830, Daoguang decided to initiate salt reform by firstly transferring the salt administration in the Liang-Huai region to Tao Zhu, then Governor-general of Liangjiang. With the emperor's permission to focus on cutting *fufei* incurred from overregulation in addition to extirpating salt smuggling, Tao uncompromisingly abolished many of the redundant administrative agencies and opened up the local market to unlicensed merchants by issuing salt tickets (*piao* 票) to anyone eligible for a certificate of authorization (*huzhao* 護照), which replaced the hereditary licenses (*gang* 綱) monopolized by the enfranchised few. Furthermore, restrictions on transport routes were relaxed in order to bypass existing checkpoints that might demand surcharges, thus rendering transportation more cost-efficient.²⁷ Though the reform could have been directly influenced by Bao Shichen's comprehensive proposal designed specifically for Tao, Wei Yuan as Tao's newly employed advisor also actively participated in devising specific measures to reform the old

²⁶ *QXZSL*, vol. 2, 1021–2, 1090–1; Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2143; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 54–9.

²⁷ *QXZSL*, vol. 3, 871, vol. 4, 113–4; Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2155–7; Duan, *Tao*, 135–56. See also Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic decline,” 126.

system.²⁸ Writing in retrospection several years later, Wei pointed out that the gist of the salt problem lay in how to transform the profit of smuggled salt into that of official salt (*huasi weiguan* 化私為官) by streamlining the unprofitable administration over salt monopoly. Once the treacherous act of embezzling from the middle (*zhongbao* 中飽) was eliminated, the cost of official salt would naturally be reduced and the price would become competitive again. Under state supervision, private merchants could eventually contribute to state finance by generating more revenues from increased sales and salt smuggling would diminish accordingly.²⁹ Convinced that no established practice could last for a hundred years without generating disadvantages therefrom, Wei again stressed the role of “great figures” (*daren* 大人) in identifying and enacting the sine qua non of removing such evil for the state.³⁰ Wei’s statist stance toward salt reform thus corresponded with the rationale behind Bao’s proposal, where the opening up of the salt market was designed to reinstate government regulation instead of promoting laissez-faire in the Western sense of market liberalism.³¹ Hence, statecraft reformers like Wei and Bao exhibited shared statist thinking where the consolidated central power of the state would transform into its strengthened capacity in governance and became *the* point of reference to demonstrate the validity of statecraft agendas.

The anti-bureaucratic undertone in the likes of Wei was closely linked to the political aspiration of empowering upright literati against corrupt officeholders in the name of rectifying *lizhi* and thus strengthening state capacity to tackle accumulating crises, an issue repeatedly heeded by

²⁸ Wang, *Nianpu*, 53–9; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 27–9, 332–6. For Bao’s role in the reform, see Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 137–49; Duan, *Tao Zhu*, 178–84.

²⁹ Wei Yuan, “Chou cuo pian,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 408–13. See also idem, “Huaibei piaoyan zhi xu,” in *ibid*, 414–5; “Huaibei piaoyan ji,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 20, 297–301.

³⁰ Wei, “Chou cuo pian,” 408–9.

³¹ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 141–9.

Daoguang ever since the failure of investigating *lougui*. Aiming to foster literati morale, the emperor personally took charge of several cases involving official malfeasance in his early reign and repeatedly used the occasions to admonish ministers against disdainful conduct.

Nevertheless, it tended to reveal deeper corruption across the bureaucracy as manifested in the 1830 case of contribution certificates forgery (*jiazhao* 假照).³² This political milieu certainly prompted concerned literati to become increasingly assertive in calling for the promotion of righteous officials against long-entrenched powerholders.³³ They accordingly grew unreserved to uphold the central authority of the state while lambasting corrupt officeholders. By seeing themselves as a qualified few whose interest was identical to that of the state, these activists appropriated the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation to justify their cause, which would potentially transcend the practical concern of fiscal reform and point to more thorough reappraisal of existing political institutions in accordance with an idealized state. This potential was to be further complicated by mounting pressure from the West, which we now turn to.

Charting a new world: statism and the Opium War

This section investigates how perceptions of the West were linked to statist thinking among the likes of Wei Yuan and consolidated the statist undertone in their political aspirations. When Wei was appraising the Liang-Huai salt reform around 1838, he was less perspicacious in detecting the unravelling of a dramatic turn of events that would alter the subsequent course of Chinese history. Being paid only a meager nominal salary, Qing officials at the county level resorted to a number of *lougui* to cover the cost of local administration, the condoning of rampant opium smuggling since the early 1800s included. Yet gaining momentum both at court and among local

³² Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2123–33; *QXZSL*, vol. 2, 484–6, 593–4. For the case of *jiazhao*, see Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2266–72; Fang Yujin ed., “Daoguang shinian sizao jiazhao an,” *Lishi dang’an*, no. 04 (1993): 34–52.

³³ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 80–3. See also Kuhn, *Origins*, 43–6.

governors, the hardline party on suppressing the opium trade eventually managed to win over Daoguang's support in late 1838. The rest then became the all-too-familiar story of the First Opium War.³⁴ Then residing in Jiangnan, Wei had not been able to gain first-hand experience of initial conflicts until he attended the interrogation of a captured British officer P. Anstruther in mid-1840. Still, he was quick to get involved in the war through participation in consolidating coastal defense as an advisor of Yu-qian (1793-1841), then Governor-general of Liangjiang and an uncompromising warmonger. Though Wei's service under Yu-qian ended in early 1841 due to his nonconfidence in the defense plan, he was deeply aggravated upon learning Yu-qian's suicide in combat in August, which prompted him to compose a private account of Qing conquest history later to be known as *Record of Sacred Campaigns* (*Shengwu ji* 聖武記).³⁵

Finished only weeks before the Treaty of Nanjing, *Shengwu ji* was deemed by Wei as a means to restore Qing military might with the aid of lessons from the empire's glorious past. Wei explicitly stated this purpose in the preface:

Heaven and Earth battle *yin-yang* with the Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行). When sages could command the officialdom (*wuguan* 五官), the war is (already) won at court (*miaotang* 廟堂) ... Today revenues are in deficit yet the state cannot be called deficient; talents not being employed (in state institutions) is called deficient. Decrees are not being implemented overseas yet the state cannot be called weak; decrees not being implemented domestically is called weak. Therefore,

³⁴ Mao Haijian, *Tianchao de bengkui: Yapian zhanzheng zai yanjiu*, rev. ed. (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2014); Wang Jianlang and Huang Ko-wu, eds., *Liang'an xinbian Zhongguo jindai shi: Wan Qing juan*, vol. A (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2016), 61–114; Frederic Wakeman, "The Canton trade and the Opium War," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 163–212. For a classic study on Qing local governance and county magistrates, see John Watt, *The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972). For how domestic politics led to the intransigent opium suppression, see Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 101–35. See also Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2273–397.

³⁵ Wang, *Nianpu*, 71–8; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 29–30, 517.

past kings worried not about state revenues but about (the promotion of) talents. They fretted not over being unable to impose their will onto barbarians (Yi 夷) but over being unable to do so within the realm. When no official is talentless, talents of the state will be in abundance. When no decree is neglected within the realm, state power will be strengthened. If so, no evil will be left unchastened, state revenues will not be in deficit, no apparatus will be dilapidated and no literatus will be derelict. How then could defending (the Qing) against foreign humiliation ever be an issue!³⁶

Regarding military affairs as dependent upon domestic politics and ultimately upon the moral conduct of state officials, Wei believed that the Qing's defeat was ultimately due to the incorrigibly corrupt powerholders across the officialdom. Such a belief led him to reconstruct the dreadful two years of war into a tale of righteous literati's heroic resistance against foreign intrusion, which was sabotaged by the despicable capitulationism of treacherous ministers in high office. Had it not been for their spineless insistence on appeasing the peremptory and insatiable British, the Qing's military setback would have been far from being predetermined. Weaving the myth of the Sanyuanli (三元里) victory into a narrative of how paramilitary forces could have been utilized to deter the invaders, Wei recapitulated his conviction that if coordinated by correct tactics under the command of resolute officials, the Qing could still have thwarted British offensives.³⁷ The pivot, then, is for the sagely king to promote qualified literati in revitalizing the bureaucracy, which would then translate into the state's military might in

³⁶ Wei Yuan, "Shengwu ji xu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 3 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 1. On the translation of Yi, see Lawrence Wang-chi Wong, "Barbarians or Not Barbarians: Translating Yi in the Context of Sino-British Relations in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *Towards a History of Translating: In Commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the Research Centre for Translation, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, volume II: On Translation History*, ed. Lawrence Wang-Chi Wong (Hong Kong: Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013), 293–387.

³⁷ Wei Yuan, "Daoguang yangsou zhengfu ji," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 3, 460–70; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 394–402; Yi and Yi, *Pingzhuan*, 149–62; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 194–200. For the debunking of San-yuan-li, see Mao, *Tianchao de bengkui*, 291–314; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 163–9.

pacifying disobedient barbarians. Only in this way could the war be won.³⁸ Wei thus joined forces with those broadly associated with the Spring Purification circle in absolving leaders of the hardline party like Lin Zexu of the accountability for the war. In their minds, the Qing was betrayed by the very officials entrusted with the mission to defend its imperium, whereas the upright literati who could have quelled foreign aggression were framed and wrongly demoted.³⁹ This anti-bureaucratic moralism, reminiscent of the mentality behind domestic reforms discussed above, was appropriated by the likes of Wei to rationalize the Qing's defeat as a warning sign of institutional breakdown. Wei's reconstruction of Qing military history is therefore more predicated on the moralist impulse to align later generations with "our great and sagely ancestors" in hopes of revitalizing the state, rather than being prompted by a "proto-militarist ideology" to justify Qing imperial expansion.⁴⁰ Wei's immediate response to the Opium War was thus characterized by an inward-looking approach that had used the occasion for internal power struggles.

Such a moralist sentiment also drove Wei to compile his most renowned work *Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* (*Haiguo tuzhi* 海國圖志), a project born out of the request by Lin Zexu to edit a collection of Western intelligence when the two comrades met briefly prior to Lin's exile to Xinjiang.⁴¹ Acknowledging the strategic purpose of *Haiguo tuzhi* to prepare China for future intrusion by utilizing foreign vantages against their own, Wei in addition pointed out the book's instrumental nature by stating that his compilation was merely about the mechanics of military (*bingji* 兵機), not the fundamental of the military (*bingben* 兵本). To pacify perils coming from

³⁸ Wei, "Shengwu ji xu," 2.

³⁹ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 177–203. See also Mao, *Tianchao de bengkui*, 20–8.

⁴⁰ Wei, "Shengwu ji xu," 2; Cf. Perdue, *China Marches West*, 502–3.

⁴¹ Wang, *Nianpu*, 76.

the sea, it was necessary to first eradicate perils accumulating (*jihuan* 積患) in the human mind.⁴² This recurring theme ran through Wei's first two essays on strategic design of coastal defense, which dovetailed with his conviction that with proper training of courageous local militia and well-coordinated defensive tactics commanded by qualified personnel to exhaust the enemy advantage of "stout ships and fierce guns," Qing forces could still have repelled the British without resorting to new military technologies.⁴³ Nevertheless, Wei could not futilely lambast the conduct of war among senior officials without devising a practical plan for future intrusions. Enlightened by the hodgepodge of foreign intelligence gathered by Lin Zexu, he soon realized the inadequacy of contemporary scholarship to properly situate the Qing in a global context. Lamenting that before the war, any translation of foreign books or inquiry into foreign affairs would have been deemed meddling and banned by local officials, Wei saw such reluctance to acquire information on the world as the main hindrance for the Qing to utilize the tactic of "using foreigners against foreigners", which had contributed to the victory of its conquest of Taiwan and the Zunghars. To effectively handle the rebellious "barbarians," it was vital to update the Qing perception of foreign powers with an integrated perspective that integrated the previously fragmented information order into a unified outlook.⁴⁴ Recognizing Britain as a persistently hostile power, Wei consciously attempted to tackle the British threat on a global scale by establishing a geographical and historical database of its rise in Europe alongside its colonial expansion in Southeast Asia (Nanyang 南洋) for geopolitical considerations of Qing strategic

⁴² Wei Yuan, "Haiguo tuzhi yuanxu," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 4 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 1–2.

⁴³ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 1," 12–24; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 198–200.

⁴⁴ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 2," 27. For an analysis of Wei's global outlook, see Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 272–6.

defense.⁴⁵ The emphasis on the unity of scholarship and statecraft had now led Wei to adopt a global view in his geopolitical studies where the Qing state was juxtaposed with its rivals in a single theater.

Bearing this global consciousness in mind, Wei sought to identify the driving force of Western expansions across the world by (mistakenly) attributing the successive rise of European colonial powers to the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Mingling the history of Ancient Rome with that of the Holy Roman Empire, Wei claimed it was the fall of the Roman imperium and the subsequent loss of central authority that had led to immoral inter-state rivalries for centuries. To compete with others through sheer strength, Europeans utilized commercial expansion as the *sine qua non* to accumulate wealth and consolidate state power. Military conquest and overseas commerce thus reinforced each other in the Western penetration into local societies across the world, which only served to intensify their competition on a global scale. With the British now taking the lead in such struggles, Western powers had begun to fundamentally dismantle peace and stability in the Qing's vicinity.⁴⁶ Judging European colonial history from a moralist perspective, Wei nevertheless saw the disarray of European states as caused by the *realpolitik* of waning political authority in a once unified realm. Hence, to battle such chaos now spreading to Asia, it required the Qing state to alter its isolationist stance toward maritime affairs and adopt an outward-looking approach to reassert its imperial might in maintaining order and prosperity along the Qing's borderlands. Reevoking the early Ming model of overlordship in Nanyang, Wei argued for the active Qing involvement in regional affairs across maritime Asia. The presence of

⁴⁵ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 5," 342; "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 37," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 6 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 1078.

⁴⁶ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 37," 1077–8, 1094–100. See also a discussion in Jane Kate Leonard, *Wei Yuan and China's Rediscovery of the Maritime World*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 111 (Cambridge, Mass.; London, Eng.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 154–63.

tributary relationships with China had for Wei contributed to the reciprocal nature of trade among Asian states and thus ensured prolonged regional stability before Western intrusion. Citing the victories of Vietnam and Burma in blocking the advances of Western colonial forces, Wei strove to demonstrate the potential of tributary states in consolidating regional defense against Western penetration and thus the feasibility of forging alliances with these states.⁴⁷ Seeking to utilize Chinese diaspora societies scattered across Nanyang, Wei in addition fantasized about the possibility of constructing a buffer zone in the south by stirring up local insurrections against Western colonists and granting local Chinese headmen the status of state-appointed officials as an incentive.⁴⁸ The use of foreign powers for the Qing's gain could also extend to manipulate grudges among Western states. Inspired by the history of France and Britain vying for colonial hegemony in North America as well as the United States' allegiance with France in the War of Independence, Wei believed that by exploiting animosities toward the British, the Qing could at least deter British intrusion through diplomatic maneuverings. Contriving an account of how the British blockade of trade during the Opium War had sparked widespread protests among other Western powers, Wei further estimated that when properly coordinated by qualified Qing officials, the rivals of Britain lured by profits from trade with the Qing would easily turn against the British in Nanyang.⁴⁹ Therefore, the Qing's military weakness could for Wei be temporarily compensated by its economic and diplomatic leverage to halt further intrusion from the sea.

If Wei's strategic design put the Qing on defense in the face of British intrusion from Nanyang, he nevertheless adopted a more aggressive stance toward British India in securing the Qing's

⁴⁷ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 5, 6, 10," 355, 368, 458–9. See also Leonard, *China's Rediscovery*, 121–52, 179–80.

⁴⁸ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 12," 498. See also Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 431–4.

⁴⁹ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 2," 26–7. See also Yi and Yi, *Pingzhuan*, 231–7.

southwestern border. Upon realizing Britain's overwhelming reliance on India for financial and military resources, Wei proposed that a coordinated land offensive would effectively dismantle British rule in India and thus impair its colonial expansion into Nanyang. Russia and Gurkha (modern-day Nepal) were regarded as the ideal allies in this grand operation, as the former had been engaged in the Great Game and the latter was allegedly willing to help the Qing to attack the British-occupied Bengal during the Opium War.⁵⁰ In *Shengwu ji*, Wei elaborated his audacious plan by recounting the history of the Qing pacification of Gurkha in the late Qianlong period. For Wei, the mixed outcomes of Qing military engagements with Gurkha had only resulted in Gurkha's submission to Qing overlordship because of Britain's encroachment into Gurkha's southern borders. Now that Britain's imperialist arrogance had dragged it into hostility with both Gurkha and Russia in the region, the Qing could exploit such enmities and sponsor a Gurkha attack into Britain's wealthiest colonies of India. Russia being a longstanding trading partner with the Qing had also rivaled with Britain for dominance over India. Appending a translated 1839 article in the *Chinese Repository* on allegations of a Russian manipulation in rising Sino-British tensions, Wei argued that Anglo-Russian rivalries could be harnessed by permitting Russian trade at Guangzhou, thus forming a maritime bloc alongside France and the United States against Britain.⁵¹ Recognizing Britain as an emerging global power, Wei at the same time saw its vulnerability as lying precisely in its avaricious expansion which had outstripped its military strength and turned local societies into its enemies. Through carefully planned strategies, the Qing could well prevent a second disgrace like the Opium War using a

⁵⁰ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 2, 19," 25–6, 653–4.

⁵¹ Wei, "Shengwu ji," 231–5, 245–6. See also discussions in Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 291–3. For a study of the *Chinese Repository* in the early stage of Sino-Western communication, see Elizabeth L. Malcolm, "The *Chinese Repository* and Western Literature on China 1800 to 1850," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973): 165–78.

joint alliance of both indigenous and Western states against the British. Acknowledging the weakness of the Qing naval force, Wei sought to exploit tributary ties with the Qing in Nanyang and internal struggles between Western powers to fend off the British threat from the sea. As for the Indian subcontinent where land offensive could be more easily carried out against Britain's prized colonies, Wei was unmistakably militant in devising a deathblow to cripple British rule in the region and end its colonial enterprise along the southern border. The strategic design laid out by Wei Yuan was thus neither Nanyang-centered nor Indian-centered.⁵² Rather, both maritime Asia and British India acted as sub-theaters in Wei's comprehensive plan to defend the Qing state in a global scene.

In targeting British power as the Qing's major threat from a global perspective, Wei had transformed his eclectic scholarship into a syncretic outlook on Qing foreign relations. Mosca observes that by synthesizing previously incommensurable information gathered from various Qing frontiers and constructing a standardized account of the history of foreign powers, Wei managed to establish a unified worldview in which the Qing was being dragged into the global expansion of the West.⁵³ This syncretism, however, functioned as a two-way street which altered how Qing literati came to conceptualize the state. As early as in 1826 when editing *Huangchao jingshi wenbian*, Wei had composed an essay on the Qing's northwestern frontier. Largely following Gong Zizhen's rationale behind mass immigration into Xinjiang as a means to ease the demographic pressure of China's inland and utilize local resources, Wei in addition denounced the ignorant view of abandoning the "useless" land of Xinjiang by claiming that it was the sages' adherence to *dao* that they "take from the excessive to aid the insufficient" (*pouduo yigua* 裒多

⁵² Cf. Leonard, *China's Rediscovery*; Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 286–95.

⁵³ Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 271–95.

益寡). Therefore, to let those in abject poverty find a new life along the frontiers was both in deference to the will of Heaven and conducive to strengthening the state through generating extra wealth in the northwestern “virgin land.” Yet despite such ideological rhetoric, Wei’s advocacy of consolidating Qing rule in Xinjiang also served a practical end of strategic defense. Arguing that the conquest of Zungharia and the subsequent pacification of Muslim rebellions during the High Qing had been a costly enterprise, Wei saw peace and stability in the region could only be achieved by actively imposing Qing imperial might upon local societies.⁵⁴ Writing in *Shengwu ji*, Wei again asserted his conviction that through effective control of Xinjiang during the Qianlong reign, the Qing had extirpated the threat of bellicose nomads troubling Kangxi and Yongzheng. Now that agrarian colonies (*tuntian* 屯田) in northern Xinjiang established by immigrants had started to produce a steady flow of revenue, such a transformation was destined to take place in southern Xinjiang as well.⁵⁵ Commenting on the Daoguang suppression of the Jahangir rebellion, Wei reiterated the necessity of incorporating southern Xinjiang into direct administration out of both demographic and strategic concerns. For Wei, the decision to leave governance at the hands of local Muslims was the root of social unrest which continued to pose a nonnegligible threat to the Qing state. Only through the gradual implementation of agrarian colonies could loyal immigrants outnumber the local population and generate adequate revenues in support of Qing garrisons, thus achieving effective governance over Muslim societies while tackling inland overpopulation.⁵⁶ Wei’s view on changing modes of administration in Xinjiang reverberated with Gong Zizhen’s proposal composed in the immediate aftermath of pacifying Jahangir in 1829.

⁵⁴ Wei Yuan, “Da renwen xibei bianyu shu,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 17 (Hunan: Yuelu shushe, 2004), 385–6.

⁵⁵ Wei, “Shengwu ji,” 154–6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 186. On the Jahangir rebellion and its repercussions, see Wu, *Jishi benmo*, 2179–201; James A. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 211–21; *idem*, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 111–4.

Arguing that the failure of previous dynasties to consolidate governance in the western frontier had resulted from the loosely controlled *jimi* (羈縻) system which had relied on constant military presence for peace and order and left local powers with too much autonomy, Gong imagined Qing rule in Xinjiang as differing from the past in actively incorporating the region into centralized administration. The local population in southern Xinjiang, Gong stressed, was in general more loyal to their headmen (*beg* 伯克) than to military commanders of the Qing. To alter the situation in Qing's favor, the land quota for military colonies should be abolished to encourage private cultivation of uninhabited areas by immigrants. When centrally administered prefectures were established over these agrarian lands, local residents would eventually become hired labor and thus submissive to state-appointed officials. Tax collected from agricultural production could additionally be used to fund garrisons stationed in northern Xinjiang, rendering Qing troops more self-sufficient while overawing the fickle locals.⁵⁷ Sensing the looming threats of local uprisings and foreign intrusion that were dismantling Qing rule along the borderlands, Gong and Wei attempted to transform Qing frontier management by advocating direct administration over the conquered land to strengthen state capacity in border defense.

By espousing the idea of centralized governance in Xinjiang, Gong and Wei were in effect shifting the Qing's pluralist stance toward managing the northwestern frontier since Qianlong's conquest of Zungharia. Through the establishment of parallel administrations and a loose segregation of immigrants and locals, the Qing state endeavored to maintain a precarious balance between promoting commerce dominated by Chinese merchants and protecting agrarian societies concentrated in southern Xinjiang.⁵⁸ Propagating instead the streamlining of such a complex and

⁵⁷ Gong Zizhen, "Yushi anbian sui yuan shu," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, 281–3.

⁵⁸ Millward, *Beyond the Pass*, 44–193.

multilayered system into a centralized administration, Gong and especially Wei began to reconceptualize what the basic structure of state governance in response to waxing internal and external challenges. In line with literati activism, the state itself ought to adopt an activist stance toward ruling over the realm by resorting to a more centralized mode of governance which would unify the inland and the frontier under a single authority. The logic behind such a reconceptualization was closely related to the strategic concern of defending the Qing against foreign intrusion by improving its capacity of mobilization for war. Among the war-making states in early modern Europe, similar concerns had also initiated growing monopolization of military force and taxation which served to finance increasingly centralized state apparatus while surviving protracted warfare.⁵⁹ Faced with encroaching Western powers, Gong and Wei eventually headed in the same direction by steering the Qing imperial enterprise toward building a unified state with strengthened capacities to extract local resources for military purposes. Wang Hui notes the New Text culturalist claim to political legitimacy through the rhetoric of Grand Unity was transformed by Wei into the call for unitary sovereignty in response to domestic and foreign threats. Once propagated by scholars like Liu Fenglu, the notion of Grand Unity sought to downplay ethnic distinctions within the Qing empire by constructing a common cultural sphere that transcended local customs and aligned political legitimacy with Confucian ideals. By reinventing the culturalist notion of unity as political unity under a monolithic state, Wei appropriated the New Text rhetoric to reconceptualize the state, which caused the imperial vision in Qing ideology to converge with the proto-nationalist conception of China.⁶⁰ My analysis shows that this transformation was equally based on the statist thinking among literati activists

⁵⁹ Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility*, vol. 2 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 104; Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and the European States*, 67–95.

⁶⁰ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 590–643.

who sought legitimacy of their empowerment in constructing a powerful state. Appropriating rising challenges in Qing border defense, they upheld the central authority of an activist state that would bring order and prosperity to the realm in collaboration with qualified literati. The New Text rhetoric was arguably a neat expression of such an aspiration. Therefore, Wei's strategic design had transformed his earlier statecraft agendas into a reappraisal of the Qing imperial model, besides unifying the previously fragmented outlooks on the outside world in Qing frontier management. Although Wei's plan had rested predominantly on his idealized conception of the problematic tributary relations in late imperial China and his tactic of "using foreigners against foreigners" had been deemed by many contemporaries as perilously impractical since it could entrap the Qing into the quagmire of global conflicts, the ideas advocated by Wei reflected how literati activists reinvented their statist aspirations in response to Western intrusion.⁶¹ Gong Zizhen's radical move in 1820 to advocate the provincialization of Xinjiang had been taken one step further by Wei in the global theater.

As Wei kept editing and expanding *Haiguo tuzhi* into the years beyond the Opium War, his knowledge of the West gradually shifted his attitude toward the "barbarians." While on a brief journey to Guangdong in 1847, Wei sojourned in Macau and Hong Kong and took a glance at Western-style governance in the cities. From his poetry recording the experience, it is not difficult to detect Wei's implicit praise for order and prosperity under foreign rule.⁶² Such an extolment of Western politics became more manifest in Wei's preface to the chapter on North

⁶¹ For revisions of Chinese tributary system, see Wang and Huang, *Xinbian jindai shi*, 1–41; Peter C. Perdue, "The Tenacious Tributary System," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (November 1, 2015): 1002–14; Suisheng Zhao, "Rethinking the Chinese World Order: The Imperial Cycle and the Rise of China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 96 (November 1, 2015): 961–82. For critiques of Wei's strategic plan, see Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 296–304; Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 412–20.

⁶² Wei Yuan, "Guwei tang shiji, vol. 6," in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 12, 630–1. See also Yi and Yi, *Pingzhuan*, 238–40; Wang, *Nianpu*, 115–7.

America in *Haiguo tuzhi*, in which he lauded the United States with unequivocal enthusiasm. For Wei, the heroic act of American militia to fight against British forces for independence was the prime example of martial prowess (*wu* 武); the diplomatic strategy to ally with France in repelling the British was true wisdom; the electoral system and term limit of powerholders ensured the representation of public interest (*gong* 公); the decision-making process of the parliamentary system took public opinion well into consideration and was thus deliberate (*zhou* 周); unlike Britain that expropriated China's wealth through opium trade, the United States supplied China with abundant silver in addition to regular goods and can therefore be called affluent (*fu* 富); in contrast to British imperialism, the United States had never abused lesser states, which showed its friendliness (*yi* 誼). Ignorance of a country as such, Wei argued, would blind one's sight in devising long-term plans for Qing foreign relations.⁶³

Wang Hui argues that Wei's goodwill toward the United States can be explained through his strategic design that envisaged the country as a potential ally of the Qing against the British. The history of the American Revolution and the role US diplomats played in opposing the British embargo in Guangzhou during the Opium War might also have led Wei to view the country as an amicable Western power. Moreover, Wang deems Wei's accolade of the federal system in the United States as linked to his New Text conception of legitimacy, since both were against the autocratic power of political authority.⁶⁴ It may be the case that Wei's idealization of American politics was shaped by his understanding of Qing domestic politics. Such an understanding should nevertheless be viewed in light of Wei's statist aspiration for literati empowerment. Writing about the dilapidation (*huang* 荒) of politics which signaled the decline of state

⁶³ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 59," 1585–6.

⁶⁴ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 671–5.

governance into chaos, Wei warned that such phenomena usually grew out of the age of prosperity. When rulers and ministers became derelict, governance would gradually deteriorate, resulting in growing financial deficit. Talents could not be promoted within the bureaucracy because of the long-entrenched powerholders and thus local customs would become frivolous without supervision from upright officials. All these would eventually lead to instabilities on the frontier. Chiefly responsible for such degeneration were the ignorant fellows (*bifu* 鄙夫), i.e., insidious officeholders who strove to appease their superiors instead of seeking ways to restore state capacity in governance.⁶⁵ In contrast, the political system of the United States had prevented such a problem by vesting the power of official appointment to the public, thus ensuring qualified personnel from below to enter office. Even without the dictation of a monarch, these laudable talents had managed to achieve effective governance comparable to that under merited kings (*xianbi* 賢辟).⁶⁶ Although it was unlikely that Wei fully understood the federalist system which prized the separation of powers and self-governance, he found a new window of opportunity to propagate his statist agenda of empowering righteous literati against corrupt officeholders through the idealized portrayal of Western politics.⁶⁷ In this way, his knowledge of the West was appropriated to address Wei's overriding concern of literati empowerment, which was a prerequisite for restoring state power in response to domestic and foreign challenges.

On the other hand, as Wei could no longer remain blind to the ascendance of Western civilizations, he gradually felt uneasy about the fate of Chinese culture in an increasingly West-dominated world. Such uneasiness was revealed in his acknowledgement of the inadequacy of

⁶⁵ Wei, "Mogu," 64–5.

⁶⁶ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 59, 60," 1613, 1635.

⁶⁷ Small wonder that Wei readily overlooked the trias politica model of the US government. See Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 675.

the term “Yi” when translating foreign documents. The reason Yi had been used to designate foreign people, argued Wei, was due to the fact that in history those inhabiting the Chinese frontiers were mostly uncivilized savages. In the contemporary world, it would be ignorant to refer to anyone from afar as “Yi” when their cultures could in reality be equally advanced like that of China.⁶⁸ The New Text culturalist conception of ethnic distinctions had now been applied by Wei to the global context. Such a conception, which upheld Confucian cultural supremacy, nevertheless hinted at the potential loss of such a supremacy signaled by the Qing’s defeat in the Opium War. If *dao* was to be manifested in the mighty power of the state, the inability to quell foreign aggression would indicate that the state was no longer the abode of *dao*, which in turn endangered the literati’s self-identity as true disciples of past sages and thus the qualified few to transmit *dao*. It was then imperative, besides the acquirement of Western technologies, to illuminate sagely teachings that would restore literati morale and align their statecraft endeavors with strengthening state power. Similar to their predecessors during the Ming-Qing transition who sought to secure literati identity by advocating a purist stance toward Confucianism to eliminate heterodox teachings, the likes of Wei also endeavored to promulgate what they perceived as Confucian orthodoxy. But unlike the effort by Ming-Qing scholars to “cleanse” Confucianism through academic pursuits (i.e., Evidential Scholarship), they saw the preservation of Confucian cultural supremacy as inextricably tied with the restoration of state power in domestic governance and foreign relations. The unity of scholarship and statecraft thus served to justify their political re-ascendance since only through their empowerment could the state be resuscitated and Chinese culture saved from foreign domination. Gong Zizhen, when partaking his Palace examination in early 1829, would emphasize the gravity of illuminating authentic

⁶⁸ Wei, “Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 76,” in *Wei Yuan quanji*, vol. 7, 1866.

Confucian teachings in revitalizing the state apart from addressing contemporary issues by observing the peculiarities of conditions (*shi* 勢). The pivot for Gong was to rectify the human mind through Confucian orthodoxy and to promote those with wholehearted devotions to sagely teachings in the officialdom. When empowered in local administration without much intervention from their superiors, these righteous literati would eventually bring order and prosperity by civilizing the people and managing local affairs as they saw fit.⁶⁹ Yao Ying, a protagonist of literati activism in the wake of the 1813 Eight Trigrams uprising, also regarded his geographical study of the Qing's southwestern frontier as a statecraft enterprise transcending mere scholarly pursuit. After being demoted to Sichuan for his hardline stance against the British during the Opium War, Yao was able to collect intelligence on Tibet, Gurkha and British India that had informed Wei Yuan in his compilation of *Haiguo tuzhi*. In line with Wei's accusation of corrupt powerholders, Yao downplayed China's technological backwardness and attributed the defeat to the unfounded fear of Western powers among high officials. Therefore, Yao had hoped his work on foreign intelligence would help enlighten those dedicated to revitalizing state power in avenging Western insult.⁷⁰ As growing Sino-Western communications sparked a sense of imminent threat posed to China's cultural supremacy, literati activists necessitated their political empowerment as indispensable to revitalizing state power, which saw the consolidation of their statist thinking.

Conclusion

⁶⁹ Gong Zizhen, "Duice," in *Gong Zizhen quanji*, ed. Wang Peizheng (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1975), 114–7.

⁷⁰ Yao Ying, "Fu Guang Lüyuan shu," "Yu Yu Xiaopo yan xishi shu," in *Dongming waiji* (Anfu, 1867), 8:10a3–11b6, 19b4–20a11. For Yao's statecraft endeavor and his implication in the Opium War, see Wang Ermin, *Jindai jingshi xiaoru* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008), 33–67. See also Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy*, 276–9.

In the afterword of *Haiguo tuzhi*, Wei Yuan wondered whether the arrival of Western powers could harbinge an era of transforming Chinese and foreign civilizations into one (*zhongwai yijia* 中外一家) due to the movement of the vital force (*qiyun* 氣運).⁷¹ Wang Ermin notes that the rhetoric of *qiyun* was deployed by many of Wei's contemporaries to make sense of the unprecedented situation after the Opium War.⁷² Nevertheless, Wei's messianic vision was arguably linked to his long-standing political aspirations. Disappointed by bureaucratic malfeasance across the Qing, literati activists like Wei sought to carry out urgent reform through their political empowerment. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, their activism had to proceed in the daunting shadow of factionalism. Elman argues the growing sense of moral crisis after Heshen's demise eventually led more literati to be concerned about the abdication of political responsibility rather than being implicated in factions, thus sparking a new wave of literati activism.⁷³ Similarly, Polachek sees moral rectitude as a key weapon wielded by literati activists against accusations of factionalism. By emphasizing adherence to Confucian orthodoxy in scholarship, they sought to demonstrate their moral superiority and therefore the right to political empowerment.⁷⁴ The analysis in this chapter shows that the justification of literati empowerment is better understood in light of the emerging statism as manifested in the rationale behind Wei Yuan's statecraft agendas. When Wei united moral cultivation, scholarly pursuit and statecraft endeavor under *dao* and stressed such unity in ordering the world, it follows that the construction of a powerful state for sagely rule had to be achieved in the hands of morally righteous literati with expert skills in "ordering the state." Faced with declining central authority and institutional breakdown in the Daoguang era, these activists naturally regarded the

⁷¹ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi houxu," 7–8.

⁷² Wang Ermin, *Sixiang shilun*, 10–1.

⁷³ Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 301–6.

⁷⁴ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 87–94.

restoration of the state's central power as indispensable to stemming corrupt officeholders and replacing them with men of their kind. Therefore, as Wei stressed the role of great figures (*daren*) in reform, the implication was clear that such qualified few in transmitting *dao* had no conflict of interest with the state as the embodiment of *dao* and should accordingly take charge of high office. Here we see the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation is again at work. The issue of morality thus constituted merely a part of the overall statist line of thinking for literati activism. Such statist thinking paradoxically fostered an anti-bureaucratic undertone in Wei's reform proposals, as he held evildoers in the officialdom responsible for dynastic decline. Only through institutional reform could the bureaucracy be purified and state capacity in governance restored with the help of upright literati. Contrary to Hao Chang's claim that resurging statecraft concerns among the likes of Wei were focused on fixing the nuts-and-bolts of state institutions,⁷⁵ the statism behind their reform agendas would potentially fuel political criticism as they aspired for an idealized state.

Such a potential was profoundly complicated by the fateful Opium War. Wang Hui argues that in *Haiguo tuzhi* Wei Yuan attempted to incorporate his understanding of rising Western powers into the New Text framework of reference, thus transforming the Qing imperial vision of a multiethnic empire unified by the Manchu ruling clan into the aspiration for a monolithic state under centralized bureaucratic administration. *Haiguo tuzhi* is accordingly a military handbook designed to construct this proto-nation state by consolidating Qing border defense and revealing the secrets behind Western expansion.⁷⁶ Wang's interpretation is certainly more nuanced than the oversimplified modernist narrative where Wei is portrayed as the trailblazer in China's

⁷⁵ Chang, *You'an Yishi*, 90–3.

⁷⁶ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 609–79.

modernization by introducing advanced foreign knowledge to the Chinese populace.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, this chapter shows that Wei appropriated his initial perception of the war to launch moralist accusations targeting treacherous officeholders accountable for the Qing's defeat, which in turn implied the urgency of empowering literati activists against foreign threat. This concern propelled Wei to adopt a unified outlook in Qing strategic defense and situate the Qing in juxtaposition with the West on the world stage. In response to Western expansion, the Qing should actively defend its realm by transforming multi-layered frontier administration into a centralized mode of governance, while seeking international alliance against hostile forces. Through the idealization of Western politics, Wei in addition legitimized broadened political participation as the underlying cause of Western ascension. What united these three facets of interpreting the West was the incipient statism in Wei's political aspiration that appropriated waxing domestic crises and foreign threat for the construction of a strong state through literati empowerment. In line with the materialist understanding of *dao*, the ever-changing *qiyun* indicated that *dao* might shift its abode due to the Qing's declining state power. On the other hand, success in tackling domestic and foreign challenges would entail that *dao* was still embodied in such a state run by qualified literati, whose moral rectitude and statecraft expertise would ensure the preservation of China's cultural supremacy amid Western powers. The looming Western impact therefore saw the consolidation of statism among literati activists. How this line of thinking became popularized during the mid-century transition will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁷⁷ E.g., Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*, 437–515; Chen, *Gongyang xue*, 203–64.

Chapter Four: The Mid-century Transition

This chapter focuses on the transitional period of the mid-nineteenth century. It first discusses the political and social transformations that steered the Qing from dynastic decline toward restoration as a general background. Then it examines the changing intellectual landscape vis-à-vis statist thinking by looking at writings of Neo-Confucian scholars and reformers open to Western learning.

In the modernist narrative, intellectual dynamics of this period are summarized as the story of how pioneering reformers gradually opened up their eyes and became enlightened by Western knowledge and technology.¹ Diverging from this simplistic view, recent scholarship starts to pay due attention to literati perceptions of the changing world on their own terms.² Wang Fan-sen discusses the lasting impact of banned books reemerging since the mid-nineteenth century due to faltered literary inquisition. For Wang, these hidden materials became a key source of inspiration for concerned literati to reconstruct late Ming history in calling for renewed political activism amid devastating mid-century rebellions. Seeking to establish moral exemplars in history, they instigated a growing emphasis on moral righteousness to resuscitate literati morale for dynastic restoration.³ Moral concerns in an age of turmoil, as Shi Gexin notes, further led to the revival of Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism. By reinventing the ideal of “inner sagehood and outer kingliness (*neisheng waiwang* 內聖外王)” to accommodate resurging statecraft reformism, Neo-

¹ Wang Ermin, *Sixiang shilun*, 5–15; Xiong Yuezhi, *Feng Guifen pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2004), 123–46; Li Shaojun, *Yinglai jindai jubian de jingshi xueren: Wei Yuan yu Feng Guifen* (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999); Chen and Liu, *Pingzhuan*.

² E.g., Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 873–6; Zhang Yaonan, *Zhongguo ruxue shi: Jindai juan* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2011).

³ Wang, *Quanli de maoxiguan zuoyong*, 605–28.

Confucian advocates came to regard practical statecraft as an integral part of outer kingliness, guided by one's innate goodness through moral cultivation.⁴

Building upon such scholarship, I argue that as statecraft became the common orientation for opposing camps in Confucian learning, the simultaneously growing moralism inherited the statist logic of literati activists in the early nineteenth century. By seeing moral cultivation and statecraft as unified endeavors under *dao*, Neo-Confucian advocates continued to justify literati empowerment as a prerequisite for saving the time (*jiushi* 救時). In line with the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation, they regarded the construction of a powerful state as the unshirkable duty for true guardians of *dao* in an age of turmoil. Meanwhile, literati informed by Western learning also started to seek alternatives in actualizing their visions for the state, which would potentially contradict Confucian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, they all sought to legitimize their agendas by consolidating state power with the help of qualified literati. As a result, a strong state capable of extirpating internal rebellions and arresting foreign intrusion became a shared assumption among these activists. Such a state would be able to set the Qing on track toward restoring sagely rule and naturally become idealized as the embodiment of *dao*. Statist thinking was accordingly popularized on the eve of dynastic restoration.

Qing imperial politics of the mid-nineteenth century

This section sketches the political dynamics from the post-Opium War era to the eve of the Tongzhi-Guangxu Restoration. In the post Opium War decade, literati activists found themselves caught between growing Western influence and the relentless crackdown on their hardline diplomacy from the peacemaking clique headed by Daoguang's minion Mujangga (穆彰阿,

⁴ Shi Gexin, *Wan Qing lixue yanjiu* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007), 140–62.

1782-1856). Yet with the succession of the Xianfeng Emperor to the throne, Mujangga soon fell out of favor as the new emperor resorted to a hardline ruling style in response to burgeoning internal rebellions. Taking the advice from his close minister Sušūn (肅順, 1816-1861), Xianfeng eventually averted the throne's alliance with the Manchu-Mongol aristocracy by promoting a number of Han Chinese literati to key positions. With the rise to power of Han officials like Zeng Guofan (曾國藩, 1811-1872) and Li Hongzhang (李鴻章, 1823-1901), the aspiration of literati empowerment seemed to be realized at the onset of the Tongzhi-Guangxu Restoration.

Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of the Opium War, political realities actually shifted further away from such an aspiration. What Wei Yuan described as “ignorant fellows” in high office had found an explicit target—Mujangga—in the eyes of many activists. Having emerged as a close servant to the royal house, Mujangga earned the trust of the newly enthroned Daoguang Emperor through his dexterous management of the Jiaqing Emperor’s mausoleum construction. As a result, he was charged with the task to supervise several other imperial projects of construction. His diligence then led him to the task of coordinating the 1826 sea transportation of Tribute Grain in Zhili, which he completed with flying colors. In the following years, Mujangga swiftly rose to the Grand Council on the eve of the opium embargo.⁵ Being a perspicacious servant, Mujangga successfully navigated through Daoguang’s fickle attitudes toward the opium trade and British aggression, which eventually made him the kingpin of the peacemaking clique toward the end of the war. Keenly aware that Daoguang had since then “grown weary of being involved in foreign affairs,” Mujangga and his clique struggled to

⁵ *Qingshi gao*, vol. 38 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 11415–6, hereafter *QSG*; Liu Haifeng, “Mujangga yu Daoguang chao zhengzhi” (PhD diss., Xiamen University, 2007), 17–28.

appease Western powers during the initial establishment of the treaty system, sparking widespread rage among literati activists.⁶ Yet with the emperor's acquiescence, Mujangga remained firmly in power. Within the Grand Council, the senior official Pan Shi'en (潘世恩, 1769-1854) was too aged to confront Mujangga even as Pan had many reservations about Mujangga's appeasement policy. Both He Rulin (何汝霖, 1781-1852) and Saixangga (賽尚阿, 1794-1875) refrained from meddling with Mujangga's decisions. The newly promoted Qi Junzao (祁寯藻, 1793-1866), though with strong opinions, was then isolated and unable to insert any influence on policy debates. Therefore, Mujangga monopolized the management of foreign affairs and gradually gained unchallenged power at court.⁷

Demoralized by the Qing's disgraceful defeat, Daoguang lost his ambition for revitalizing state power in the postwar era and grew increasingly suspicious of literati activists. When speaking with one official to be dispatched to Sichuan, Zhang Jixin (張集馨, 1800-1879), Daoguang downplayed the ideal of reform by making the metaphor that like an old house, state institutions needed only occasional mending so as to avoid complete renovation, which would be utterly undesirable.⁸ The emperor's weariness of literati opinions was further manifested in an 1844 edict accusing the allegation of bureaucratic malfeasance submitted by one censor against a provincial magistrate as baseless and hijacked by demeaning riddles among the people. For Daoguang, the established practice of supervision was sufficient to deal with official misconduct. As the emperor, he also had his own considerations regarding personnel selection, which simply

⁶ Chong Yi. *Dao-Xian yilai chaoye zaji* (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1982), 56.

⁷ Laoli, "Nucai xiaoshi," in *Manqing baishi*, vol. A, ed. Lu Baoxuan (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1987), 4a2-4b7; Sun Jing'an, *Qixia ge yesheng* (Taiyuan: Shanxi guji chubanshe, 1997), 18.

⁸ Zhang Jixin, *Dao-Xian huanhai jianwen lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 89.

should not be subject to unjustified criticism by those outside office.⁹ In contrast to the encouragement of literati political activism during his early reign, Daoguang now deemed the pathway of remonstrance a disruption to the proper functioning of state apparatus. This mentality of system maintenance was fully grasped by Mujangga as he expanded the crackdown on literati activists beyond the clashes in foreign policy. Through deft maneuverings, Mujangga's clique managed to suppress the influence of literati activists in top leadership by forcing their magnates out of office, such as the mastermind behind the initiative of the opium embargo, Huang Juezi (黃爵滋, 1793-1853), and two hardliners Tang Jinzhao (湯金釗, 1772-1856) and Wang Ding (王鼎, 1768-1842) who had contradicted the peacemaking clique even before the negotiations with the British.¹⁰ Replacing these key patrons of literati activism with his own henchmen, Mujangga ensured that the postwar peacemaking government was here to stay as long as the throne remained antipathetic to statecraft reformism.

Such a purge unsurprisingly aroused widespread literati resentment toward the current regime, which nevertheless proved to be futile with no meaningful opposition to Mujangga's abuse of power. Worse still, the emission of Mujangga's power fueled the practice of abiding by established norms (*yinxun* 因循) throughout the officialdom which barred any reformist agenda. Writing to the newly enthroned Xianfeng Emperor in 1850, Zeng Guofan would therefore lament the final years of the Daoguang reign as marked by shocking inertia of state officials. For Zeng, in the past decade "there has not been one among the Nine Ministers (*jiuqing* 九卿) to speak out about the gains and losses of government policies or one among the provincial governors (*sidao*

⁹ Zhongguo diyi lishi dangangan ed, *Jiaqing Daoguang liangchao shangyu dang*, vol. 49 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2000), 447.

¹⁰ Liu, "Mujangga," 95–6; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 211–7.

司道) to discuss the advantages and shortcomings of local governance.” Even when someone had voiced their concern, they dared not to openly criticize bureaucratic malfeasance.¹¹ Besides draining the literati morale, Mujangga in addition strove to create the illusion of peace to comfort the disheartened Daoguang by soft-pedaling the waxing internal rebellions and natural disasters. In doing so, those outside his clique were virtually excluded from decision-making or supervising government policies so that dissident voices could be stemmed. Recalling at the beginning of the Tongzhi reign, the former magistrate of Shuntian (順天) Prefecture Jiang Qiling (蔣琦齡,?-?) thus described such realities as the hallmark of political degeneration as state affairs “tended to be kept in secrecy so that (Mujangga’s) conspiracy of deceiving (the emperor) would get its way.” Consequently, Mujangga’s henchmen would prevaricate and downplay the severity of rebellion when they were forced to disclose such issues to the public. “Such conduct,” claimed Jiang, “had lingered on for long enough to be taken for granted.”¹²

Unable to rival Mujangga’s power, literati activists were nevertheless unwilling to succumb to such grim circumstances. Inheriting the spirit of the already dissolved Spring Purification circle, a new association centered around the establishment of the Gu Yanwu Shrine (*Gu Yanwu ci* 顧炎武祠) began to take shape as a means to preserve literati integrity against contemporary odds and unite like-minded allies for opposition. Under the banner of statecraft as opposed to academic inaction, the association’s political implications gradually drew scholars of variegated intellectual orientations to the common endeavor of retaking the literati’s rightful place in

¹¹ Zeng Guofan, “Yingzhao chenyan shu,” in *Huangchao jingshiwen xubian*, ed. Ge Shijun (Shanghai: Shanghai shuju, 1898), 348.

¹² Jiang Qiling, “Yingzhao shang zhongxing shi’er ce shu,” in *Huangchao jingshiwen xubian*, ed. Sheng Kang (Wujin: Shengshi sibu lou, 1897), 13:22a3–22a7.

politics.¹³ Portraying Gu as the “progenitor of our dynasty’s academic prosperity,” Zhang Mu (張穆, 1805-1849), chief organizer of the association further asserted that Gu’s scholarship had excelled among later generations because he was able to illuminate the “gist of governance” so that his erudition could be put to good use for ordering the world.¹⁴ Agitated by deteriorating political realities, the concerned literati gradually joined forces and became ever more aligned with statecraft ideals in the final decade of the Daoguang reign. Once the time was right, they would drudge every effort at political participation to salvage the falling empire.

Mujangga’s grip on power did not last long. Since the ending years of the Daoguang reign, escalating situations of social unrest in the province of Guangxi (廣西) had in the eyes of many become a breeding ground for massive rebellion and were thus used by literati activists to attack the Mujangga regime.¹⁵ With the succession of the Xianfeng Emperor to the throne, it had become increasingly clear that the *yinxun* mode of governance could no longer tackle the imminent crises. Under the influence of his mentor Du Shoutian (杜受田, 1788-1852), who had offered the new emperor essential advice to gain Daoguang’s favor in choosing the heir,¹⁶ Xianfeng decided to reinstate previously demoted literati activists such as Lin Zexu and Yao Ying to quash the Taiping rebellion.¹⁷ Disdained by Mujangga’s deceptive style of governance especially the recent cover-up of diplomatic confrontations with Britain over the issue of British residency in the city of Guangzhou,¹⁸ Xianfeng eventually ousted Mujangga from office and

¹³ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 217–35. See also Wei, *Shilin jiaoyou*, 151–69.

¹⁴ Zhang Mu, *Gu Tinglin xiansheng nianpu* (1844), 1a1–1a2

¹⁵ See Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 258–65.

¹⁶ Li Mengfu, *Chunbing shi yesheng*, annot. Zhang Jihong (Taiyuan: Shanxi Guji chubanshe, 1995), 64–5; Xiaohengxiang shi zhuren, *Qingchao yeshi daguan*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1915), 112.

¹⁷ *QSG*, 11674.

¹⁸ Wu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 7, 2402–8; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 242–57. See also Mao Haijian, *Jindai de chidu: Liangci Yapien Zhanzheng junshi yu waijiao* (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1998), 99–128.

ended the crackdown on literati activism. Issuing a decree condemning Mujangga's political persecution of upright literati, Xianfeng hoped that with the removal of his clique, suggestions "beneficial to the state and the people's livelihood" would again be brought forward to the throne without reservation.¹⁹ Yet for literati activists to regain political recognition, it would have to rely upon another rising star in Qing politics of the Xianfeng reign— Sušūn.

Though Sušūn was born into the royal clan, his rise in the bureaucracy was mostly the result of his own sedulity. When summoned by Xianfeng for the first time, Sušūn had advocated state activism by disciplining the bureaucracy through draconian laws and severe punishments in response to contemporary odds, which won the emperor's approbation. This hardline stance on governance gradually made him stand out in subsequent court debates. Under the patronage of Prince Yi Dzai Yūwan (載垣, 1816-1861) and Prince Zheng Duwanhūwa (端華, 1807-1861), Sušūn eventually became one of Xianfeng's closest ministers at court.²⁰ Having a reputation of being harsh and gruff, Sušūn was nevertheless courteous to Han literati in appreciation of their statecraft expertise. Deeply aware of Manchu ministers' incompetence in administration and military affairs, Sušūn keenly reached out to Han literati with statecraft ambitions and invited these talents into his own circle.²¹ Through conversations with Hunanese activists like Zeng Guofan and Hu Linyi (胡林翼, 1812-1861), Sušūn realized that only these esteemed statesmen could turn the tide and save the Qing from crumbling under escalating rebellions. He thus unreservedly promoted the appointment of Han literati in local administration and military operations against the Taipings.²² Repudiating those opposing the empowerment of provincial

¹⁹ *Qing Wenzong shilu*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 294–5.

²⁰ *QSG*, 11699; Woqiu Zhongzi, *Jindai mingren xiaozhuan* (Shanghai: Zhongyuan shuju), 74–5.

²¹ Laoli, "Nucai xiaoshi," 7b8–7b11.

²² Xue Fucheng, *Yong'an biji*, vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937), 13.

magistrates and Han officials, Sušūn would in every instance defend these rising stars during the pacification of the Taiping rebellion, even to the extent of openly exonerating Zuo Zongtang (左宗棠, 1812-1885) in front of Xianfeng when dealing with Zuo's impeachment.²³ Thanks to Sušūn's support, Han officials were able to assume key positions in local governance and organize effective defense against the Taipings by raising local militias, like the Hunan Army. The patronage of high officials also secured crucial support from loyal Han elites in extirpating the Taiping rebels, the absence of which might very well have overthrown Qing rule in the mid-century.²⁴ Sušūn thus played an indispensable role behind the rising prominence of Han ministers, shifting the Qing's political allegiance with the Manchu-Mongol aristocracy to collaboration with Han literati for dynastic restoration.²⁵

The unrelentingly hardline style of governance, combined with Sušūn's personal distaste of Manchu ministers, had on the other hand created deep aggrievement among the Qing royal clan especially from Prince Gong I Hin (奕訢, 1833-1898). Due to escalating Sino-Western hostilities during the Second Opium War in 1860, Sušūn insisted on Xianfeng's exile to Rehe (熱河) despite widespread oppositions from the officialdom. Consequently, I Hin was left in the capital to deal with the troublesome relations with Western powers. Yet Xianfeng's unexpected death helped to forge an alliance of I Hin and the future Empress Dowager Cixi (慈禧, 1835-1908), which eventually led to the 1861 coup that saw the elimination of Sušūn and his clique.²⁶ In spite

²³ Ibid, 14. See also Li, *Chunbing shi*, 95–6; Gao Zhonghua, *Sušūn yu Xianfeng zhengju* (Jinan: Qilu chubanshe, 2005), 60–5. For Zuo Zongtang's impeachment, see Zuo Jingyi, *Zuo Zongtang zhuan* (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1997), 89–95.

²⁴ Li, *Chunbing shi*, 95; Woqiu Zhongzi, *Jindai mingren*, 76. See also Philip A. Kuhn, "The Taiping Rebellion," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, 281–5.

²⁵ Huang Jun, *Huasui rensheng an zhiyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 784; *QSG*, 11700; Laoli, "Nucai xiaoshi," 7b11.

²⁶ *QSG*, 11700–1; Xiaohengxiang shi zhuren, *Qingchao yeshi*, vol. 8, 155–6; Fu Meilin, *Qingshi jishi benmo*, vol. 8, ed. Nan Bingwen and Bai Xinliang (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2006), 2702–9; Wang and Huang, eds.,

of Sušūn's demise, his policy of promoting shrewd Han literati within Qing officialdom to tackle internal rebellions and foreign affairs was largely kept. By the end of the protracted Taiping rebellion, the empowerment of eminent Han officials in provincial administration had become an irreversible trend.²⁷

With the influx of Han literati into key positions of provincial government, the ratio of Han to Manchu ministers as local governors was significantly altered, leading some scholars to describe it as a shift away from the Manchu-Han dyarchy in the pre-Taiping era where a delicate balance between the numbers of Han and Manchu officials had been maintained.²⁸ The eventual ascent of Han literati is in addition seen as the culmination literati opposition against the Manchu-Mongol aristocratic regime in central government, which saw the final victory of literati activists.²⁹ Nevertheless, the increasing proportion of Han provincial magistrates had been a growing trend since the early Daoguang reign as a move to tackle accumulating crises in local governance, as seen in the case of the Governor-general of Liangjiang.³⁰ The period of the Taiping rebellion could have been a mere catalyst of an on-going process rather than a sudden break away from previous patterns. Contemporary accounts also suggest the changing political landscape from the 1840s to the 60s was predicated on a number of contingent factors. Mujangga's monopoly of power, for instance, simply rose from his opportunist intent to appease the Daoguang Emperor. When Xianfeng decided to avert Mujangga's inert style of governance, Mujangga quickly lost

Xinbian jindai shi, vol. A, 283–6; Kwang-Ching Liu, “The Ch’ing Restoration,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch’ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, 415–21.

²⁷ Gao, *Sušūn*, 272–8.

²⁸ John K. Fairbank, “The Manchu-Chinese Dyarchy in the 1840’s and ’50’s,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (May 1, 1953): 265–78.

²⁹ Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 280–7.

³⁰ Gong Xiaofeng, “Qingdai Liangjiang zongdu qunti jiegou kaocha— Yi renzhi beijing he xingzheng jingli wei shijiao,” *Jiangsu shehui kexue*, no. 02 (2009): 182–8.

favor and his clique vanished in the blink of an eye.³¹ Besides Manchu and Mongol ministers, there were also Han officials among Mujangga's clique who had ascended from provincial administration, like the Governor-general of Fujian and Zhejiang Liu Yunke (劉韻珂, 1792-1864) and the Governor of Fujian Xu Jiyu (徐繼畬, 1795-1873).³² Even with Mujangga's removal, the initiative to empower Han ministers in provincial governance was persistently pushed by Manchu officials like Sušūn, which often contradicted with Han officials in top leadership such as Qi Junzao.³³ The issue of ethnic division might thus have played a less major role than is generally assumed. Whatever the underlying factors behind Han officials' ascent, the once sidelined literati activists were undoubtedly exhilarated as it signaled the emergence of a new era in which their aspirations of political empowerment could eventually be realized. In Jiang Qiling's words, with the pathway of remonstrance finally reopened, the state had set itself on the right course to restoration. Inspired by such a welcoming stance, righteous literati like him "would thoroughly contemplate past words from those in high office and among the people in hopes of alleviating present difficulties."³⁴ This mentality would continue to shape the political aspirations of literati activists during the Tongzhi-Guangxu Restoration.

Growing Western influence

The dynamics of Qing domestic politics were further complicated by changing Sino-Western relations in the aftermath of the Opium War, which saw China's incorporation into the modern international system and provided a convenient hub for missionary activities that deepened Sino-Western communications. Consequently, Western learning started to attract a wider audience as

³¹ Laoli, "Nucai xiaoshi," 4b10-4b12; *QSG*, 11674.

³² Liu, "Mujangga," 112-3.

³³ *QSG*, 11676.

³⁴ Jiang, "Yingzhao shang zhongxing shi'erce shu," 20a7-20b4.

more from the lettered class took interest in acquiring foreign knowledge. These transformations will be the focus of this section.

Seeking to consolidate trading relations with the Qing and secure the same benefits as the British had enjoyed, envoys from the United States, France and other European countries came thick and fast to conclude new treaties with the Qing government, which led to the establishment of a postwar treaty system along China's coastal areas.³⁵ In this way, it initiated the Qing's incorporation into the international system sanctioned by Western international law. Yet Chinese literati were slow to recognize the significance of such a transformation and treated the treaties as merely a strategic move to temporarily halt foreign aggression. As early as in 1839, Lin Zexu had asked his translator Yuan Dehui (袁德輝,?-?) to prepare a Chinese version of sections on trade and war in Emmerich de Vattel's (1714-1767) *Law of Nations* to better understand the rules of engagement on the British part. Excerpts of Yuan's translation, preserved in *Haiguo tuzhi*, suggest a largely Sinicized interpretation of Western legal concepts which uses the language familiar to the literati and tends to obscure differences in the perception of international relations, such as translating "right" as *daoli* (道理, roughly meaning sense in English) and "sovereignty" as *fuyou tianxia* (撫有天下, literally meaning the nurturing of all under Heaven).³⁶ In hopes of persuading Daoguang to cease futile resistance, the Governor-general of Liangjiang Niu Jian (牛鑑, 1785-1858) also regarded concluding treaties on foreign terms as a way to soothe the belligerent barbarians through peaceful means (*jimi*). For Niu, conceding to the demands of the

³⁵ Wu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 7, 2190–7; John K. Fairbank, "The Creation of the Treaty System," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, 213–27.

³⁶ Yuan Dehui trans., "Falü benxing zhengli suozai di sanshijiu tiao," in *Haiguo tuzhi*, vol. 83, 1981–2. See also discussions in Rune Svarverud, *International Law as World Order in Late Imperial China: Translation, Reception and Discourse, 1847-1911* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 75–87; Wang Weijian, "Lin Zexu fanyi xifang guoji fa zhuzuo kaolue," *Zhongshan daxue xuebao*, no. 01 (1985): 58–67.

semi-civilized British was like throwing meat at barking dogs and could in no way damage the might of the Qing empire. Ending military conflicts would in addition relieve the people of suffering and thus showcase the benevolence of the state.³⁷ Such a conception of treaties as expedients in quelling foreign intrusions was further adopted in the Guangdong Governor Cheng Yucai's (程燾采, 1783-1858) 1844 letter to the American ambassador Caleb Cushing (1800-1879), in response to the latter's request of concluding a treaty between the two countries. Cheng stressed that the Treaty of Nanjing was only a makeshift measure to restore peaceful relations. Since the United States had always maintained an amicable relationship with the Qing, he was confused by Cushing's request and found it utterly unnecessary.³⁸ The rationale behind the treaty system thus echoed with that of the appeasement policy advocated by Mujangga's clique, which fell well within the mentality of system maintenance.

The management of foreign affairs in addition provided bullets for domestic political struggles. Mujangga's rise and fall was a prime example of how Western intrusion was appropriated by literati activists to influence the power dynamics at court during the mid-century.³⁹ Determined to revitalize Qing imperial might, the Xianfeng Emperor sought to consolidate state power in response to escalating rebellions and thus remained uncompromising in diplomatic disputes with the West. Such a hardline stance led to the Qing's repeated refusal of treaty revision and increasing hostility toward Britain and France, which nevertheless resulted in the catastrophic Second Opium War. Faced with novel situations in which the Qing could no longer sustain its might against the gunboat diplomacy of Western nations, officials headed by I Hin were forced to accept foreign terms when negotiating new treaties in the aftermath of defeat. Under Western

³⁷ *Chouban yiwu shimo (Daoguang chao)*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 2040, hereafter *CBYWSM-DG*.

³⁸ *CBYWSM-DG*, vol. 6, 2808–9.

³⁹ Laoli, "Nucai xiaoshi," 4b1–4b3; *QSG*, 11417. See also Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 242–71.

demand, the Qing eventually yielded to honoring modern diplomatic relations by agreeing on the settlement of Western envoys in the capital. The establishment of the Office for the General Management of All Nations (Zongli Yamen 總理衙門) also signaled the institutional adaptation to changing circumstances by the Qing, which saw its further incorporation into the modern international system.⁴⁰ Alongside the distressing turn of events came renewed perceptions of Sino-Western relations. I Hin, for instance, reasoned that as Britain and France pulled back their military forces following treaty agreements, these rebellious “barbarians” were nevertheless different from the dishonorable marauders that had plagued China before. Hence, it was possible to establish mutual trust and even military alliance to crack down internal rebellions, much like the allegiance forged between the states of Shu and Wu against Wei in the Three Kingdom era.⁴¹ No longer trapped in the fantasy of universal sovereignty for all under Heaven, realist literati began to reappraise the Qing’s place in the world from a pragmatic point of view, as the ambition to construct a strong state became increasingly challenged by Western intrusion.⁴²

Meanwhile, missionary activities grew apace with Western expansion. Since the ban on missionaries in the eighteenth century, the influence of Roman Catholicism declined steadily in the Qing. Yet beginning in the early nineteenth century, renewed interest in the missionary cause, headed by Protestant societies, started to gain momentum in the coastal region of Guangdong. After the establishment of the treaty system, the Qing government was forced to relax certain restrictions on Western missionaries. Consequently, both Catholic and Protestant

⁴⁰ Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2589–95, 2618–26, 2687–94; Fairbank, “The Creation of the Treaty System,” 243–63; Mao, *Jindai de chidu*, 166–254.

⁴¹ *Chouban yiwu shimo (Xianfeng chao)*, vol. 8 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 2674–5.

⁴² For a brief discussion of such reappraisals, see Wang, *Sixiang shilun*, 11–5. See also Yen-P’ing Hao and Erh-Min Wang, “Changing Chinese views of Western relations, 1840-95,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch’ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, eds. John K. Fairbank and Kwang-Ching Liu (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 156–61.

missionaries expanded their operations in China, gradually moving from the coast to the inland. Accordingly, Western learning began to spread to a wider audience alongside the missionaries' religious endeavor. Besides the relocation of missionary schools like the Anglo-Chinese College from Malacca to Hong Kong, publications on Western learning also helped foster Sino-Western communications with the founding of modern publishing ventures in treaty ports, such as the 1843 London Missionary Society Press by Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857) in Shanghai.⁴³ In this way, more Chinese became acquainted with new types of knowledge than ever before.

The introduction of Western learning at this stage, though limited, had nevertheless supplied China's lettered class with up-to-date information on the contemporary world and prompted some to revisit established views on Sino-foreign relations. Following the tradition of geographical studies now aided by Western knowledge, scholars strove to popularize such information vital to statecraft endeavors through systematic works on geopolitics. Apart from Wei Yuan's *Haiguo tuzhi*, Xu Jiyu, when compiling his *A Concise Account of the Maritime Circuit* (*Yinghuan zhilue* 瀛環志略), acquired a considerable number of materials through personal communications with missionaries in Fujian like David Abeel (1804-1846).⁴⁴ The flourishing of treaty ports and subsequent growth of Western communities also acted as a bridge for increasing Sino-Western communications. Accordingly, growing numbers of the literati felt the need to learn from the West in strengthening the Qing state. Feng Guifen (馮桂芬, 1809-1874), having reached a bottleneck in his bureaucratic career, moved to Shanghai in 1860 after a short return to his hometown from the capital. Though associated with the Gu Yanwu Shrine

⁴³ Paul A. Cohen, "Christian Missions and Their Impact to 1900," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800-1911, Part 1*, 545-52; Xiong Yuezhi, *Xixue dongjian yu wan Qing shehui* (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1994), 93-219; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 1036-47.

⁴⁴ Xu Jiyu, "Zi xu," in *Yinghuan zhilue* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2001), 6. See also Xiong, *Xixue dongjian*, 239-44.

circle, Feng remained open to Western learning and personally observed Western culture in the concession. It was during his four-year stay in Shanghai that Feng completed his magnum opus *Essays of Protest* (*Jiaobinlu kangyi* 校邠廬抗議), which would serve as an intellectual cornerstone for the self-strengthening movement.⁴⁵ Wang Tao was deeply influenced by his early years in Shanghai as well. After setbacks in earning his *jurem* degree, Wang came to Shanghai following his father's footsteps and was later employed by the London Missionary Society Press. Medhurst was then taking on an ambitious task of translating the entire volume of Old and New Testaments into Chinese and relied on Wang for his literary expertise. Though incurious about religious writings of Christianity, Wang was impressed by works on Western science and technology during translation. He spoke highly of Western mathematics and geometry, praising them as "ten times more accurate" than Chinese counterparts.⁴⁶ In a letter to the Jiangsu Governor Xu Youren (徐有壬, 1800-1860), Wang disregarded the naïve diplomatic maneuvering of "using barbarians against barbarians" as China was too weak in military, financial and technological terms to form any meaningful alliance without being used by Western powers. For Wang, it was only through the acquisition of advanced Western technologies that the Qing could strengthen its power and thus arrest Western intrusions.⁴⁷ No longer confined by Confucian learning, the emerging treaty port intellectuals like Wang Tao would increasingly appreciate alternate solutions to China's problems with the help of Western learning.⁴⁸ Such developments

⁴⁵ Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 99–122.

⁴⁶ Wang Tao, "Yu Han Luqing xiaolian," in *Taoyuan chidu*, annot. Wang Beiping and Liu Lin (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 14.

⁴⁷ Wang Tao, "Shang Xu Junqing zhongcheng di'er shu," in *Taoyuan chidu*, 40–1.

⁴⁸ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 9–31; Zhang Hailin, *Wang Tao pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1993), 25–60.

would in time generate repercussions in the intellectual world, which had been undergoing profound transformations in response to unprecedented sociopolitical circumstances.

Changing intellectual landscape

The sociopolitical transformations discussed above generated continuous repercussions in the intellectual world. This section investigates such repercussions by looking at how the accentuated sense of literati responsibility to save the time (*jiushi*) and the growing Western impact had popularized statist thinking. The reinterpretation of Gu Yanwu by Shrine associates as the master of studies in governance rather than the precursor of Evidential Scholarship was highly representative of how the flourishing fashion in the Qing academia had shifted from pedantic philological inquiries toward practical statecraft.⁴⁹ In this way, the gravity of righteous literati came to the foreground. Tang Jian (唐鑑, 1778-1861), master of Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism (*lixue*) in the late Qing, thus emphasized the role of man as the guardian of *dao* in an age of turmoil:

There have been people preserving *dao* for all under Heaven who are little known. Yet these people always existed... Today these people are the ones able to save the time and their means to save the time is through *dao*... Each time I encounter such a man, I would straighten my clothes in respect and sit properly in introspection. Even though these men are long gone, their lasting influence remains and illuminates us between Heaven and Earth.⁵⁰

In line with the conviction of literati activists that upheld *dao* in ordering the world, Tang nevertheless elevated the status of man in transmitting *dao*. He would therefore appropriate the concept of *quan* (weighing circumstances) valued by Liu Fenglu in New Text classicism to stress

⁴⁹ Chu Jin, "Daoguang xueshu," in *Zhonghe yuekan*, vol.2, no.1 (Beijing: Xinmin yinshuguan, 1941), 3–4.

⁵⁰ Tang Jian, "Tiyao," in *Guochao xue'an xiaoshi* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935), 11a10–11b1.

the practical output of moral cultivation. Departing from Zhang Xuecheng and coming closer to Gong Zizhen, Tang implicitly promulgated greater intellectual autonomy for the literati that was necessitated by the enterprise of *jiushi*. Advocating a greater role for morally upright literati to play, Tang had at the same time espoused the ideal of statecraft in defense of his scholarly agendas. Like Gong Zizhen, Tang believed the rising prominence of literati would ultimately translate into the state's strengthened capacity of ruling the realm.⁵¹ Tang's student, Zeng Guofan, in addition singled out statecraft as a separate category of Confucian learning apart from meanings and principles (*yili*), literature (*cizhang* 詞章) and Evidential Scholarship (*kaoju*). As a devout Confucian scholar, Zeng argued that these four types of learning were equally indispensable and formed the foundation of one's academic training.⁵² Such was his assertion in 1851, a decade after serving in the Hanlin Academy and witnessing the dysfunctional bureaucracy, that Zeng firmly grounded the mission to propagate the learning of past sages in the statecraft output of scholarship. He would thus actively respond to the newly enthroned Xianfeng Emperor's decree in search for advice on governance. Regarding the promotion of talents in the officialdom as the key to restoring governance, Zeng suggested that the young and robust emperor should take the sage king Kangxi as model by routinely summoning ministers to openly debate state affairs. The emperor should also treat each memorial with solemnity as a way to inquire opinions from a wider range of social groups. Furthermore, junior officials should be given the opportunity to work closely with their superiors so that the talents among them could be more easily found and promoted.⁵³ Determined to turn the tide against accumulating crises threatening Qing rule, Neo-Confucian scholars like Zeng saw the preservation of their prestige as

⁵¹ Li Ling, "Lun Tang Jian de yili jingshi sixiang," *Qiusuo*, no. 06 (2008): 213.

⁵² *Zeng Guofan riji leichao*, ed. Wang Qiyuan and annot. Tao Leqin (Shanghai: Taidong tushuju, 1923), 9–10.

⁵³ Zeng, "Yingzhao chenyan shu," 346–8.

transmitters of *dao* as now inextricably tied to statecraft endeavors. The construction of a powerful state thus became an integral part of their civilizing mission. Zeng Guofan would go further by submitting a series of memorials on reforming the failing system, to the extent of admonishing Xianfeng to be more sedulous and vigilant, an audacious act that deeply offended the emperor who later imposed underhand retaliation by repeatedly contradicting Zeng in suppressing the Taipings.⁵⁴ Literati activism was therefore increasingly enhanced by growing statecraft calls within Confucian scholarship.

The statecraft re-orientation of Confucian learning was not confined to the Neo-Confucian community. Worried about the inefficacy of pedantic philological studies in addressing urgent needs of the day, Evidential scholars in the early nineteenth century also began to emphasize the practical output of scholarship. Dai Zhen's Evidential approach to investigating meanings and principles with the aim of re-enliven sagely rule in the present therefore gained more currency. Consequently, statecraft ideals became a converging point for the once opposing camps of Han Learning and Song Learning, as scholars were gradually united by political agendas of similar goals.⁵⁵ The leading Evidential scholar of the period, Ruan Yuan (阮元, 1764-1849), thus offered a syncretic theory of the heart-mind that emphasized the guidance of classics and the practical output of one's moral cultivation.⁵⁶ Such a tendency of steering scholarly agendas toward practical statecraft was succinctly put by Zeng Guofan's close friend, Liu Rong (劉蓉, 1816-1873), as the inseparability of principle (*li*) and human affair (*shi* 事):

⁵⁴ Zhang Hongjie, *Zeng Guofan zhuan* (Beijing: Minzhu yu jianshe chubanshe, 2018), 64–80.

⁵⁵ Wang Huirong, "Shilun Daoguang nianjian de Hanxue," *Lishi dang'an*, no. 01 (2014): 94–5.

⁵⁶ Li Jingfeng, "Ruan Yuan de xinxing lun jiqi dui Han Song xue de tiaohu," *Zhexue yanjiu*, no. 09 (2016): 68–76.

There are no affairs existing outside (the regulation of) principle or principle outside (the actual manifestation of) affairs under Heaven. Hence, those good at investigating principle cannot do so without seeking proof in actual affairs, those good at talking about Heaven must find supporting evidence in the human realm, and those good at studying antiquity must think about its practical application to the present.⁵⁷

Virtually repeating the logic behind Wei Yuan's compilation of *Huangchao jingshiwen bian*, Liu again confirmed the gravity of Confucian scholarship in tackling urgent issues of the time. The ultimate goal of cogitating the all-encompassing principle should therefore lie in practical statecraft rather than in sheer self-perfection. Writing in 1841 when the Qing was struggling to maintain its military might against escalating British intrusion, Liu certainly felt the pressure for scholars to transform their academic quest into practical outputs that would alleviate the hardships of the state. Small wonder that he would value the study of history to thoroughly explore the heavenly principle manifested in actual affairs of the past as a means to better tackle contemporary odds.⁵⁸ The unity of scholarship and statecraft thus became more widely accepted as more literati were drawn to the common orientation of statecraft.

Yet for Neo-Confucian scholars, emphasis on statecraft in no way entailed a utilitarian stance that could potentially disregard the sagely teachings of Confucianism when seeking solutions to practical matters. Without the guidance of principle in managing human affairs, statecraft endeavors would eventually degenerate into the ravage of unorthodox stratagems (*zashu* 雜術) used by Guan Zhong (管仲, c. 720-645 BCE) and Shang Yang (商鞅, c. 390-338 BCE), as argued by Liu Rong. Only those reverent to the subtlety of principle can help bring about sagely

⁵⁷ Liu Rong, "Fu Peng Zhuxi shu," In *Yanghui tang wenji* (Changsha: Sixian jiangshe, 1885), 3:20a8–20a10.

⁵⁸ Lu Baoqian, *Liu Rong nianpu* (Taipei: The Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica, 1979), 24–5.

rule through the proper management of changing circumstances.⁵⁹ Just like the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器) formulated by Zhang Xuecheng that consolidated his statist stance in ordering the world, the aspiration of seeking unity in scholarship and statecraft also served as a two-way street which promulgated orthodox views of Confucianism, apart from stressing the practical output of Confucian learning. Success in statecraft endeavors was thus equally dependent on the adequate grasp of *dao* and the ingenious application of such an understanding to dealing with practical issues. Hence, the Hunanese Neo-Confucian scholar and magnate in the early establishment of the Hunan Army, Luo Zenan (羅澤南, 1807-1856), emphasized the way of sage-kings as the gist for ordering the world in his day:

The laws of the Two Emperors (Yao and Shun) and Three Kings (Yu, Tang of Shang and King Wen of Zhou) originated from *dao*, and their *dao* originated from Heaven ... *Dao* is not subject to differences in the past and the present, but its practical application is. To intransigently hold on to *dao*'s manifestation in history is not the way of statecraft for comprehensive Confucianists (*tongru* 通儒) ... Master Lu (Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵, 1139-1193) said: "Is it not possible to restore the governance of the Three Dynasties (in the present)? When doing so, one must resort to a piece-meal method (in accordance with specific circumstances) instead of rushing for the end result."⁶⁰

In line with the presentist agenda of realizing *dao* by observing its contemporary manifestation, Luo nevertheless stressed the bright-line distinction between *dao* and its application to the vicissitudes of human affairs. The enterprise of saving the time through practical statecraft should therefore be predicated on propagating teachings of past sages that harbored *dao*.

⁵⁹ Liu, "Fu Peng Zhuxi shu," 20b1–20b9.

⁶⁰ Luo Zenan, "Renji yanyi," in *Luo Zenan ji*, annot. Fu Jing (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2010), 197.

Combined with the dire situations of the mid-century, this assertion readily translated into the statist aspiration of restoring order under the aegis of state power. Hence, the ruler today ought to “erect the ultimate authority (*liji* 立極)” as the Son of Heaven to achieve “equilibrium and harmony (*zhonghe* 中和)” for the realm. High officials as the vital force for ordering the world were supposed to assist the ruler in attaining such a noble end. Junior officials should also take up their responsibility to resuscitate the flourishing fashion (*fengqi*) in the four directions (*sifang* 四方) that would eventually subsume to the ultimate authority endowed by Heaven.⁶¹ The emerging statecraft orientation of Confucian scholarship thus served to enhance the statist stance of literati activists in the face of dynastic decline. The moralist undertone among the likes of Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen became popularized as well, as more Neo-Confucian scholars sought to materialize their visions of moral cultivation through statecraft agendas aimed at saving the time.⁶² In this way, statist thinking was increasingly intertwined with the moralist strain of Confucianism that strove to erect orthodox learning for dynastic restoration.

At the same time, the profound sociopolitical transformations had led to the emergence of visions for the future Qing state not entirely in line with Confucian ideals. Having acquainted himself with Western culture in Shanghai, Feng Guifen increasingly felt the need for the state to promote professional talents specialized in modern diplomatic negotiations (*zhuandui* 專對) in the management of foreign affairs. For Feng, the existence of such talents could be traced back to the Spring and Autumn period. Quoting Confucius’ words in the *Analects*, Feng argued that without mastering the argumentative skills required for *zhuandui*, one would be of no use for practical matters, even if he was able to recite the *Book of Odes* without difficulty. Now faced

⁶¹ Ibid, 194.

⁶² Shi, *Wan Qing lixue*, 156–62.

with imminent Western threat, the Qing should reintroduce this long-neglected tradition due to the striking similarities between Western powers and the rival states of the Spring and Autumn period:

Even though they vie for dominant power, they would value reason in exchange of words. Even though they use deception (in diplomacy), they would treasure trust on the lips. When at war, they would not stop sending envoys to each other. Once peace is restored, they would seek to reestablish normal diplomatic relations... How then could we talk about statecraft today without such talents of *zhuandui*?⁶³

Deeply aware that the West had posed a challenge entirely different in nature from that of the barbarous nomads in history, Feng argued for a realist reevaluation of the Qing's place in a world that was being rapidly conquered by Western powers. The much-needed talents at the moment were accordingly the kind that professed in practical knowledge of Western learning, rather than those inanelly chanting moralist credos dictated by orthodox teachings of Confucianism.⁶⁴ Feng's advocacy of new mechanisms for the evaluation of officials, in which the final decision had to be subject to public opinion (*gonglun* 公論) instead of senior officials, was thus seen by Kuhn as a transition toward modern politics and impinging upon the established practice of personnel selection in imperial China.⁶⁵ A closer look at Feng's rationale, nevertheless, reveals that Feng regarded this method of nomination through public consultation (*huitui* 會推) as only feasible within the lettered class. Since the exact method of official selection in the Three Dynasties was long lost, it would be the next best thing for true disciples

⁶³ Feng Guifen, "Zhong zhuandui yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, eds. Kai Vogelsang and Xiong Mingxin (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue yuan chubanshe, 2015), 129.

⁶⁴ Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 219–23.

⁶⁵ Kuhn, *Origins*, 60–1.

of sagely teachings to seek out their kind and staff them in state institutions. Implicitly, Feng was confident that *huitui* could restore state governance comparable to that of antiquity.⁶⁶ Viewed in light of the anti-bureaucratic undertone in statism, Feng's proposal can also be seen as an attempt to empower non-officeholding literati against corrupt powerholders through institutional reform, which was deemed as a prerequisite for sagely rule. The same goes for Feng's reform proposal on local governance, where he sought to replace county clerks in the lower bureaucracy with more qualified local headmen elected by rural households. For Feng, to rule all under Heaven it was equally important to rely on centralized and decentralized modes of governance. Now that local government had been compromised by predatory clerks, it became necessary to empower local elites by granting them quasi-official status. Only by incorporating these qualified men into the officialdom could social customs (*fengsu*) be rectified for dynastic restoration.⁶⁷ Feng's preference for local autonomy was thus merely of instrumental value and constituted an integral part of revitalizing the bureaucracy to consolidate state power in domestic governance. Though Feng might have been inspired by the federalist government in Western democracy,⁶⁸ he asserted that only officials (properly trained and supervised) were qualified to govern the people rather than clerks of motley social origins.⁶⁹ The question then was less about the division of state power than about ensuring such power was in the right hands.

Determined to save the time through strengthening state capacity in ruling the realm, Feng Guifen nevertheless differed from Neo-Confucian advocates, as growing Western influence generated new understandings of statecraft apart from those rooted in orthodox Confucian ideals. The search for a strong state could thus very well rely on learning from advanced Western

⁶⁶ Feng, "Gong chuzhi yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 6–7.

⁶⁷ Feng, "Fu xiangzhi yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 20–3.

⁶⁸ Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 215.

⁶⁹ Feng, "Fu xiangzhi yi," 21.

culture instead of blindly holding on to Confucian orthodoxy in attempts to pacify aggressive “barbarians.” Wang Tao therefore regarded the impact of Western expansion as an opportunity for literati activists to actualize their statecraft endeavors:

If we end up isolating ourselves (from the West) for fears of the damage they might cause, it is like giving up consuming food due to the danger of choking. Hence, those good at governance worry not about the growing arrogance of Western people but about China’s (Zhongguo) refusal of opening up to foreign influence (*ziyu* 自域). Today Heaven’s dispatch of a dozen Western states to China is not for the purpose of enfeebling China but for the goal of strengthening her. It is meant for the heroic and extraordinary Chinese to harness this occasion and strengthen themselves.⁷⁰

Having long sensed the unprecedented transformation brought by Western powers on a global scale, Wang repeatedly urged his readers to seriously reexamine the changing situations if they wished to see China survive and thrive.⁷¹ In the above-quoted letter to Li Hongzhang, he again called for reform in the mechanism of personnel selection by adding tests for mathematics, current affairs and foreign languages into the imperial examination system so that real talents needed for the moment could be selected and appointed to proper positions.⁷² Faced with mounting Western pressure and internal rebellions that undermined Qing imperial might, growing numbers of literati informed by Western learning as well as staunch advocates of Confucian orthodoxy strove to materialize their responsibility as savers of the time by seeking means to revitalize state power in tackling the distressing crises. With diversified intellectual orientations, their visions of constructing a strong state led to different and potentially opposing

⁷⁰ Wang Tao, “Daishang Sufu Li Gongbao shu,” in *Taoyuan chidu*, annot. Wang Beiping and Liu Lin (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 80.

⁷¹ Wang, *Jingshi xiaoru*, 91–8.

⁷² Wang, “Daishang Sufu Li Gongbao shu,” 83.

conceptions of the qualification for talents who deserved a greater role in politics. Nevertheless, they all regarded literati empowerment as only justifiable if the literati could transform their scholarly and political energies into strengthening state power amid the mid-century crises. Such an aspiration fell well within the statist logic among pioneers of literati activism in the early nineteenth century and in turn consolidated their statist stance in envisioning the Qing restoration to showcase the validity of their respective agendas. Statist thinking thus gained currency among the Qing literati.

Conclusion

In the first year of the Tongzhi reign, the young emperor under the regency of the Empress Dowager Cixi issued an imperial edict on the promulgation of orthodox learning (*zhengxue*) for dynastic restoration:

Our dynasty has always revered Confucian learning to illuminate *dao*, which has fostered the thriving of orthodox learning. Students who study knowledge as such all know the gravity of upholding the school of Cheng-Zhu in propagating sagely teachings... (However,) students must not be complacent in merely reciting such teachings and neglect their practical applications... Once the practice of literati (*shixi* 士習) is rectified, the people's customs (*minfeng* 民風) will become genuine. The realm will accordingly enjoy extended peace as the wicked and the heterodox are unable to arise. This is how we observe the accomplishments of (uncorrupt) politics and (sagely) teachings.⁷³

Continuing the endorsement for Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism since the late Jiaqing reign, the edict pushed such an advocacy to a new height by equating the school of Cheng-Zhu

⁷³ *Qing Muzong shilu*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 609.

with orthodox learning which had long been propagated by the Qing state. And instead of paying lip service to propagating Confucian orthodoxy, the throne made it clear that students of *zhengxue* ought to seek its practical output in resuscitating literati morale. Ultimately, it would bring about sagely rule with the human mind rehabilitated by righteous men from the lettered class. Eager to secure political legitimacy following the 1861 coup, the imperial court strove to erect orthodox learning and consequently promoted famed advocates of Neo-Confucianism to high office, exemplified by the appointment of Wesin (倭仁, 1804-1871) as Tongzhi's mentor.⁷⁴ With internal rebellions running amok and Western powers encroaching, such an active patronage of Neo-Confucianism certainly emboldened many of its advocates to save the time through statecraft enterprises. It is then not surprising that, as Shi Gexin observes, the mid-century transition acted as a catalyst of growing statecraft aspirations within Confucian scholarship, which transcended intellectual debates between opposing camps and witnessed the revival of Neo-Confucianism.⁷⁵ In regard to statist thinking, the issue of literati empowerment was accordingly approached by a growing number of scholars, who deemed it their unshirkable duty to preserve *dao* in an age of chaos and degeneration. Faced with the distressing realities, they readily believed the consolidation of central authority in a powerful state was indispensable to such a duty. The emphasis on righteous literati by Tang Jian, Liu Rong and Luo Zenan thus points to how the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation had sparked them to assert a bigger role in state affairs to save the time. Their allegiance with the Qing in suppressing the devastating rebellions was also indicative of this conviction, which proved crucial for the Qing's survival.⁷⁶ When Zeng Guofan claimed statecraft to be a building block in Confucian scholarship

⁷⁴ Shi Gexin, "Cheng-Zhu lixue yu Wan Qing Tongzhi zhongxing," *Jindai shi yanjiu*, no. 06 (2003): 82–5.

⁷⁵ Shi, *Wan Qing lixue*, 132–62. See also Zhang Shu, "Wan Qing lixue fuxing de jingshi yiyun," *Tianfu xinlun*, no. 05 (2016): 54–6.

⁷⁶ Liu, "The Ch'ing Restoration," 477–90.

and Liu Rong stressed the practical output of investigating principle, they in addition exhibited the same logic behind Wei Yuan's statist agendas that united scholarship and statecraft. With rising prominence of Han ministers and the active patronage of orthodox learning, the empowerment of upright literati had seemed for many to be finally realized. Now that state affairs had become their proper business after decades of struggle, they were certainly eager to rebuild the established political framework of the Qing for dynastic restoration.

Yet challenges posed by the West also sparked reappraisals of the Qing in a brave new world. As Wang Ermin notes, these challenges lurking behind the scene were keenly felt by the likes of Feng Guifen and Wang Tao, who rallied under the slogan of "self-strengthening" in justification of introducing Western knowledge and technologies to rebuild the Qing's power.⁷⁷ To buttress the legitimacy of their agendas, they regarded Western methods (*xifa* 西法) as only desirable in so far as their technical efficacy could contribute to building a powerful state. Feng Guifen therefore argued though Western weaponry was not the way of the sages, it could fortify the might of the state and keep the West in awe and reverence. The key was for our state (*guojia*) to promote talents with manufacturing expertise so that their ingenuity would be put to good use and outmatch Westerners.⁷⁸ Hence, Feng's proposal of making official evaluation a public process arguably shared the rationale behind Zeng Guofan's encouragement of junior officials to submit memorials on state affairs directly to the emperor, as both aimed to seek out qualified men for strengthening the state. Wang Tao's conception of Western expansion as the harbinger for China's self-strengthening also echoed with Wei Yuan's rhetoric of *qiyun* which necessitated the consolidation of state power for the Chinese civilization to survive. The mid-century

⁷⁷ Wang, *Sixiang shilun*, 13–7.

⁷⁸ Feng, "Zhi yangqi yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 112–6. See also Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 132–6.

transition thus saw the popularization of statism among the literati. These dynamics would linger on as the question of Western learning became increasingly relevant to the construction of a strong state, as subsequent chapters will show.

Chapter Five: Self-strengthening I: State Activism and the Question of Talent

Having established a peaceful relationship with Western powers after 1860, the Qing was able to focus on suppressing the protracted internal rebellions. While extirpating the Taipings with Western military aid, high officials like Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang and Zuo Zongtang realized the necessity for a wider adoption of Western technologies in China's self-strengthening. With earnest support from the Zongli Yamen headed by I Hin, they initiated the first phase of the self-strengthening movement that saw the establishment of shipyards and arsenals in China's military modernization, formal recognition of modern diplomacy by honoring the treaty system, as well as educational reforms aimed at training specialists in Western knowledge. The following two chapters do not intend to regurgitate these well-documented facts in modern scholarship.¹ Instead, they attempt to examine the rationale behind advocates and opponents of self-strengthening in relation to statist thinking by looking at how the transcendental vision of a powerful state idealized as the embodiment of *dao* had influenced the self-strengthening discourse on the construction of a strong China.

The self-strengthening movement has long been regarded as a futile attempt to resuscitate the sagging empire by the modernist vein. Mary Wright, though acknowledging the relative success of the Qing restoration during the Tongzhi reign, argues that resurging Sino-foreign hostilities after the 1870s marked the failure of this enterprise and demonstrated "there is no way in which

¹ To list a few of the copious studies, see Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2761–896; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. A, 241–81; Ding Xianjun, *Yangwu yundong shihua* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011); Xia Dongyuan, *Yangwu yundong shi*, rev. ed. (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009); Kuhn, "The Taiping Rebellion," 298–310; Liu, "The Ch'ing Restoration," 409–34; Ting-Yee Kuo and Kwang-Ching Liu, "Self-strengthening: The Pursuit of Western Technology," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 10, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 1*, 491–542; Mary Clabaugh Wright, *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T'ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1874* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 1–67, 96–124, 196–250.

an effective modern state can be grafted onto a Confucian society.”² The ingrained fatalist assumption, accentuated by the Qing’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, therefore overshadows the historical investigation of this period, despite nuanced studies on the multiple aspects of self-strengthening.³ Accordingly, intellectual historians describe how conservative forces had rendered this period dominated by inertia and complacency without meaningful conceptual transformation toward institutional reform.⁴ More recent scholarship has nevertheless started to focus on the positive impacts of the movement. Xia Dongyuan stresses the pioneering role of self-strengthening in China’s long-term transformation, as it laid out the economic and institutional infrastructure for modernization.⁵ Stephen Halsey reassess the movement as part of the Qing state-building project that without the fixation on the Sino-Japanese War, has largely been a story of success since it transformed the Qing into a modern state in military, fiscal and administrative terms and ensured its survival from total colonization by foreign powers.⁶ In translational studies, scholars also begin to emphasize contingent historical and social factors in late Qing intellectual exchanges, which defies a simplistic dichotomy of tradition and modernity.⁷

This chapter builds upon the above-discussed dynamics and attempts to show how statist thinking was taken up by high officials in their debates on the key issues of personnel selection and border defense in self-strengthening. Focusing on how previous intellectual developments had shaped the discourse on self-strengthening, it argues that the statist line of thinking was

² Wright, *The Last Stand*, 300.

³ Paul A. Cohen and John E. Schrecker, eds., *Reform in Nineteenth-Century China*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 72 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); Kuo and Liu, “Self-strengthening.”

⁴ Hao Chang, “The Intellectual Context of Reform,” in *Reform in Nineteenth-Century China*, 145–9; Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 9–18.

⁵ Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 9–12.

⁶ Halsey, *Quest for Power*.

⁷ Lackner and Vittinghoff eds., *Mapping Meanings*; Lackner, Amelung, and Kurtz, eds., *New Terms for New Ideas*.

manifested in disputes over the curriculum of Tongwen guan and Qing border defense, which centered around the question of talent and frontier management already approached by literati activists in the early nineteenth century. Though advocates of Confucian orthodoxy like Wesin and promoters of Western learning represented by Li Hongzhang envisioned different qualifications for talents in the new era, they resorted to the same rationale behind literati empowerment in the sense that these talents ought to legitimize their power and recognition through wholehearted service to the state and transform their academic training into statecraft output for dynastic restoration. Faced with rising Sino-foreign tensions in the 1870s, Qing ministers further urged the state to actively defend its territory against foreign encroachment by adopting a proactive design of strategic defense and imposing a centralized mode of governance across the borderlands. Appropriating the presentist logic to necessitate reform of human institutions, these ministers regarded a monolithic state with strengthened central power as the ultimate point of reference. The rationale behind their strategic designs thus inherited the statist thinking of Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan. The nuts-and-bolts of the state envisioned by high officials (its organizational structure, mode of governance, etc.) differed inevitably, yet the idealization of a powerful state became the common aspiration and served to justify their political agendas. Statism accordingly started to consolidate in the discourse on self-strengthening.

The Tongwen Guan and the question of talent

The dispute over the Tongwen guan curriculum has been documented time and again as a story of how the effort to modernize education, even with the court's approval, was resisted by

“conservatives” and thus failed to attract high degree-holders to enroll.⁸ This section takes a closer look at the reasoning of these “backward” minds, which would be useful to understand the larger political discourse and its relation to statist thinking. As part of the institutional innovations in response to new diplomatic relations with the West, the Tongwen guan in Beijing was initially set up in 1862 as a new state-sponsored training school for specialists in foreign languages. With growing need for Chinese personnel specializing in Western knowledge and technology, similar institutions were established in Shanghai and Guangdong respectively in 1864 following Li Hongzhang’s proposal. Yet from the very beginning, all three schools were troubled by the lack of incentive for study among their students leading to their poor performance in mastering Western learning. Dissatisfied by the outcome of the training program, I Hin at the Zongli Yamen made a bold proposal in late 1866 to include more subjects of Western sciences into the curriculum and expand the basis of enrollment from recruiting only bannermen to encouraging degree-holders among the literati to apply. Upon completing their training, they should also be granted extraordinary recommendation for career advancement in the officialdom.

The proposal was met with staunch resistance led by Wesin. Besides his iconic remark that “the foundation of the state lies in emphasizing ritual propriety and righteousness instead of expedient schemes; the basic policy of the state is to rectify the human mind rather than pursuing techniques,”⁹ the chief rationale behind the opposition can be first detected in censor Zhang Shengzao’s (張盛藻, ?-?) memorial on the hidden danger of inducing degree-holding literati to learn the unorthodox matters of Western technique. For Zhang, the practical output of statecraft

⁸ For the controversy and general surveys of Tongwen guan, see Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2860–5; Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 103–21; Kuo and Liu, “Self-strengthening,” 525–32; Wright, *The Last Stand*, 241–8.

⁹ *Chouban yiwu shimo (Tongzhi chao)*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 2009. Hereafter *CBYWSM-TZ*.

(*shigong* 事功) must be based on moral principles (*qijie* 氣節), which could only be cultivated by adhering to the teachings of past sages. This was precisely why those who earned their degree in the imperial examination were appointed as officials charged with the grand endeavor to realize sagely rule. The enterprise of self-strengthening should also be materialized through the tracks set out in the sagely teachings from Yao and Shun to Confucius and Mencius, which was predicated on the cultivation of *qijie* by the state. The use of stipends and official promotion as enticements in promulgating Western learning, in Zhang's eyes, was therefore a blatant advocacy of fame and profit (*mingli* 名利) that contradicted *qijie* to the very core and risked corrupting junior literati.¹⁰ Wesin, following the same logic, added a racial dimension to his argument by condemning the disingenuous nature of Western "barbarians" and invoking the havoc wreaked upon the Qing by Anglo-French forces in 1860, thus making it shameful to honor the foreign enemy as teacher. Furthermore, the literati were a reliable line of defense to keep the Chinese people from being poisoned by the heterodoxy of Christianity. To let degree-holders be indoctrinated with Western knowledge, Wesin feared, would gravely contaminate their righteous minds. Even though they could eventually master the "magical computations" (*shushu* 術數) of Western learning, there was no guarantee they would use such skills to wholeheartedly serve the state. Reiterating the notion that "war is won at court" brought up by Wei Yuan, Wesin cautioned against the reckless move to alter the practice of personnel selection for state officials, which might very well end up in "upsetting the human mind first without producing any practical result."¹¹

¹⁰ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 5, 2001–2. See also discussions in Kuo and Liu, "Self-strengthening," 528–9.

¹¹ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 5, 2009–10, 2027–8.

Wesin's conviction of moral rectitude as the pivot in self-cultivation and statecraft not only resonated with the main arguments of Zhang Shengzao and later Yang Tingxi (楊廷熙, ?-?),¹² but reflected his long-standing conception of the literati's role in state affairs after years of Neo-Confucian training. Under the mentorship of Tang Jian, Wesin became closely connected with the Neo-Confucian circle in the capital and was particularly influenced by the moralist strain in the Cheng-Zhu school that stressed the centrality of moral cultivation in ordering the world.¹³ When writing to the Shandong Governor Yan Jingming (閻敬銘, 1817-1892), Wesin regarded the rectification of the literati's moral conduct (*shifeng* 士風) as the most pressing matter of his day:

People in the past have said that it is easy to transform the people's customs (*minfeng*) but hard to transform the literati's conduct; it is easy to transform the literati's conduct but hard to transform officials' conduct (*shifeng* 仕風). In my humble opinion, the literati serve as the model for the people and are thus the foundation of (righteous conducts of) officials. If the literati's customs are rectified, they can be decent Confucianists (*chunru* 醇儒) and the moral exemplar for the local population when out of office. When employed, they can be fine ministers (*liangchen* 良臣) and do good to the people. Can we say erecting orthodox learning in the academia and promoting talents (for the time) are the urgent tasks in the present?¹⁴

In line with the rationale of literati empowerment, Wesin endowed the literati class with the irreplaceable role in society to cultivate the human mind and heed the proper functioning of state bureaucracy. And to foster talents fit for the job, it was vital to erect the orthodoxy of the Cheng-

¹² For Yang's opposition, see *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 5, 2062–70.

¹³ Li Ling, "Tang Jian jiangxue jingshi yu Wan Qing lixue qunti de xingcheng," *Lanzhou xuekan*, no. 07 (2008): 137–40; Shi Gexin, "Wesin yu Wan Qing lixue," *Zhongzhou xuekan*, no. 04 (1997): 154–6.

¹⁴ Wesin, "Wesin zhi Yan Jingming," in *Jindaishi suo cang Qingdai mingren gaoben chaoben (Diyi ji)*, vol. 18, ed. Yu Heping (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2011), 443–4.

Zhu school in face of contemporary odds shaking the empire. When annotating a passage dissuading King Hui of Liang (梁惠王, 400-319 BCE) from the chase of profit in *Mencius*, one of the *Four Books* upheld by Zhu Xi, Wesin thus made it clear once again that only through the cultivation of morality rather than the pursuit of profit could one address present problems and put the troubled state on track toward restoration:

To love people with humanness (*ren* 仁), we can protect the Four Seas (from foreign intrusion). To tackle things with righteousness (*yi* 義), we can successfully govern a myriad of affairs. Then without speaking of profit, we can be benefited in every way... When talking about humanness and righteousness today, one is hardly not seen as stodgy and mocked at. Yet they do not know that there is no royal road but thorns apart from the Kingly Way (*wangdao* 王道) and no profit but calamities (without adhering to) humaneness and righteousness. The reason the human mind was rectified, the people's customs were pristine, good governance was promoted from above and (sagely) teachings flourished from below in the Three Dynasties is solely due to (the propagation of) humaneness and righteousness. And the reason in later generations the integrity of state officials (*lizhi*) was corrupted, the people's minds were tainted, the sense of shame was lost and rebellions flared up day by day is all because of (the uncontrolled search for) profit.¹⁵

For Wesin, the human mind would be easily corrupted without the proper guidance of moral principles sanctioned by Confucian orthodoxy, and such corruption would cause serious chain reactions undermining literati morale, official conduct and ultimately state authority in governance. This conviction therefore accorded with the general “formula” among Neo-Confucian scholars that linked the advocacy of orthodox learning to the proper functioning of the state apparatus in the late Qing, which was further linked to the transformation of social customs

¹⁵ Wesin, “Jiangyi,” in *Wo Wenduan gong yishu* (Lu'an: Qiuwo zhai, 1875), 1: 8a8–8b5.

(*fengsu*) and even the ebbs and flows of the fate of the present age (*shiyun* 世運).¹⁶ Moreover, Wesin's moralist undertone revealed an unmistakable statist concern of seeking ways to revitalize the enfeebled state by transforming moral cultivation into statecraft. For the state to maintain its overarching might over human society by living up to its image as the embodiment of *dao*, it was also necessary to grant the upright disciples of orthodox learning a bigger role in politics. As the mentor of the young Tongzhi emperor, Wesin certainly felt the unshirkable duty to materialize such a vision when he asserted that with the active patronage of Confucian orthodoxy from above and the propagation by Master-Confucianists (*shiru*) from below, the human mind and the people's customs could be transformed within years as more talents would become dedicated to the transmission of *dao*.¹⁷ Like Gong Zizhen who conceptualized *shiru* as eminent literati keenly aware of the urgent needs of the state, Wesin invested in such figures leading roles among the lettered class in assisting the state to realize sagely rule. And their prestige should be firmly rooted in the promulgation of orthodox learning as well as its statecraft output. The inclusion of Western knowledge in the education system thus transcended the mere mechanism of personnel selection and was directly connected to the welfare of the state.

Similar to Wesin, Qi Junzao also regarded the conduct of state officials as inextricably tied to dynastic restoration. When submitting a memorial to the throne in 1863, he emphasized the necessity of promoting obedient officials (*xunli*) in the face of current difficulties and proposed a revision of the *Biographies of Obedient Officials* (*Xunli zhuan* 循吏傳) edited by the State Academy of History (*Guoshi guan* 國史館). With the disastrous rebellions still running amok, Qi warned against the excessive focus on military affairs at the expense of *lizhi* in local

¹⁶ Shi, *Lixue yanjiu*, 135.

¹⁷ Wesin, "Riji," in *Wo Wenduan gong yishu* (Lu'an: Qiuwo zhai, 1875), 6:13a7–13a10.

administration. For Qi, virtuous officials were able to perfect the customs of the local population and thus prevent the hidden danger of rebellion, which was no less important than quelling rebels on the battlefield. Now that the *Biographies of Obedient Officials* had not been revised since the Jiaqing reign, it was imperative for magistrates to discover and report the conduct of righteous officials in recent years to the court so that they could be included in the newest edition to commend their heroic deeds and inspire the officialdom.¹⁸ Upon the official approval of his proposal, Qi further recommended several figures deemed eligible to be appraised as *xunli*, whose open advocacy of Neo-Confucianism had been recorded in Tang Jian's *Xue'an xiaoshi* (學案小識) then consulted by Guoshi guan in revising the *Biographies*. The writing of history in imperial China had been inextricably linked with the statecraft purpose of informing contemporary powerholders of moral lessons in the past to infer universal norms and principles of governance.¹⁹ In the eyes of Qi, the Guoshi guan as the state institution specifically charged with such a task therefore played an indispensable role in revitalizing state governance through the compilation of historical records. In line with the Jiaqing Emperor's approbation of *xunli* after the 1813 uprising, Qi earnestly sought ways to cultivate the integrity of state officials by promoting the moral exemplars of righteous literati in Qing history for dynastic restoration. His promotion of *xunli* was in this way prompted by Neo-Confucian moralism aimed at the statist

¹⁸ Qi Junzao, "Qing biao Zhang jili xunli shu," in *Tongzhi zhongxing jingwai zouyi yuebian*, ed. Chen Tao (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1984), 141–4.

¹⁹ Huang Chun-Chieh, "Historical Discourses in Traditional Chinese Historical Writings: Historiography as Philosophy," in *Chinese Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Discussion*, eds. Chun-chieh Huang and Jörn Rüsen, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 25–39; Ng On-cho, "Enshrining the Past in the Present: Moral Agency and Humanistic History," in *Chinese Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Discussion*, 159–70. For a comparison with Western ideas of history, see Kai Vogelsang, "Some Notions of Historical Judgment in China and the West," in *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism, and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, eds. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 143–75.

aspiration of setting the empire on the right course to restoration.²⁰ Also serving as Tongzhi's mentor, Qi frequently exchanged ideas with Wesin and the two undoubtedly had much in common given their shared political orientation. The academic circle headed by Wesin in the capital further contributed to growing Neo-Confucian influence in politics at the onset of the Tongzhi reign.²¹ In this light, the Tongwen guan controversy was more than the manifestation of ethnocentric culturalism among the likes of Wesin, Zhang Shengzao or Yang Tingxi, as it also revealed genuine statist concerns of how to steer the empire away from annihilation and toward restoration, a grand undertaking that they feared could be sabotaged by the erosive effect of heterodox Western learning on the literati, who were regarded as the building blocks of the state.

Interestingly, Li Hongzhang also approached the question of talent vis-à-vis strengthening the state when replying to the Zongli yamen's request in 1864 of sending troops stationed in the capital to Jiangsu for mastering Western weaponry. In this letter well-known for the claim that "everything in China's civil and military institutions is far superior to the West yet only in firearms is it absolutely impossible to catch up," Li explicated the reason behind such a gap which deserves a closer look in the present discussion:

It is because in China (Zhongguo) the way of machine manufacturing is for the literati to understand the principles, while the artisans (*jiangren* 匠人) put them into practice. Their respective competences are not coordinated; hence their achievements cannot complement each other... Foreigners, however, are different. He who can make a machine which benefits the state will become a prominent official, his family can live on their expertise for generations and keep their positions hereditary. Thus there are grandfathers and fathers who learn the art of a machine

²⁰ Yan Yuhao, "Lun Qi Junzao yu Wan Qing lixue: Yi Tongzhi chao xiu guoshi *Xunli zhuan wei zhongxin*," *Shehui kexue yanjiu*, no. 01 (2019): 165–75.

²¹ Zhang Chenyi, "Qing Tongzhi nianjian lixue renshi zaijing jiaoyou shulun," *Lantai shijie*, no. 08 (2017): 118–20; Yan, "Lun Qi Junzao yu Wan Qing lixue," 172–3.

but cannot thoroughly master it, and the sons and grandsons will practice it for generations, insisting upon mastering it before they stop.²²

During the pacification of internal rebellions (mainly the Taipings in the south and the Nian Army in the north), the Qing standing army had proven to be utterly ill-trained and incapable of sustaining the brutal campaigns. Consequently, the Qing government had to rely on local militias organized by the low-ranking literati who were open to receiving Western military aid in extirpating the rebels. Unbound by Confucian orthodoxy, many among these men emphasized the gravity of practical statecraft instead of moral cultivation in reforming the dilapidated state.²³ Li therefore viewed China's weakness as resulting not from the corruption of the human mind by heterodox techniques, but from the long-standing negligence of craftsmanship by narrow-minded literati which left these useful skills unguided by qualified men from the lettered class and eventually wasted. Therefore, talents in machine manufacturing were denied access to the officialdom and deprived of the opportunity to serve the state, leading to "what we use is not what we have learned and what we have learned is not what we could use." It seems for Li that Western countries had succeeded in making superior weaponry precisely because such endeavors were placed under state patronage so that the potential of their talents in respective fields could be effectively harnessed by the state. He further expressed the concern that without changing the status quo, the remaining rebels yet to be exterminated or some worthless rogues in the wild might secretly obtain and learn to master Western firearms well before officials and soldiers did,

²² *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 3, 1088. Translation adapted from Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 71; Kuo and Liu, "Self-strengthening," 498.

²³ Liu, "The Ch'ing Restoration," 409–34; Wright, *The Last Stand*, 96–124; Kuhn, "The Taiping Rebellion," 264–317; idem, *Rebellion and Its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 105–64. Recent studies suggest the decline of Qing military power, manifested in the mid-century crisis, was not evidenced in the early nineteenth century and thus could not be seen as part of a long-term trend. See Daniel McMahon, *Rethinking the Decline of China's Qing Dynasty: Imperial Activism and Borderland Management at the Turn of The Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2015).

thus posing a nonnegligible threat to Qing military forces. The solution, obviously, was for the state to treat such talents with respect and incorporate them into the officialdom through reforming the mechanism of personnel selection. Li suggested a special category in the imperial examination be established so that the literati could regard manufacturing techniques as “the lifelong goal by which to achieve wealth, rank and honor.” In doing so, “their skills will be perfected and talents will foregather.”²⁴

Having climbed up the ladder chiefly due to his military achievements instead of success in the imperial examination that valued literary skills, Li Hongzhang preferred practical solutions to contemporary problems instead of indulging in pedantic scholarly pursuits. This pragmatism jibed with his proposal on reforming personnel selection as well as a series of other reforms in military, economic and educational venues during his early years as the local magistrate of Jiangsu.²⁵ Yet the rationale behind Li’s practical agendas dovetailed with that of Neo-Confucian moralists, namely the state should actively seek out qualified men and put them in charge of self-strengthening programs. Such a conviction was also manifested in Li’s 1863 proposal of establishing a government school in Shanghai modeled after the Beijing Tongwen guan. Li lamented that for the past twenty years, diplomatic affairs had been overly reliant upon the exchange of information translated by foreign interpreters and Chinese middlemen (*tongshi* 通事). Apart from the prejudice and misunderstanding caused on the part of foreign interpreters, these *tongshi* were equally if not more untrustworthy, argued Li, since they were either from merchant families or impoverished local children enrolled in foreign schools. Undereducated and

²⁴ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 3, 1088–9. See also Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, 71–2 and a discussion of the letter in Kuo and Liu, “Self-strengthening,” 497–9.

²⁵ For a comprehensive study of Li Hongzhang’s early experience, see Kwang-Ching Liu, “The Confucian as Patriot and Pragmatist: Li Hung-chang’s Formative Years, 1823–1866,” in *Li Hung-chang and China’s Early Modernization*, eds. Samuel C. Chu and Kwang-Ching Liu (Armonk, N.Y.; London: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 17–48.

dishonorable, they resided outside the four classes of people (*simin* 四民, which denotes the four occupations of literati, peasant farmers, artisans and merchants) and were solely motivated by the lure of profit.²⁶ Therefore, Li feared that these scoundrels could very well benefit from secretly working with Western powers to blackmail the Qing when serving as translators. In no way, stated Li, should the grand enterprise of self-strengthening be laid in the hands of such men. With the opening of a Tongwen guan in Shanghai, Li hoped, children “of brilliant ability and refined and quiet character” could be selected and properly taught by both Western instructors of foreign languages and qualified *juren* or licentiates (*gongsheng* 貢生) of Confucian classics, thus ensuring talents emerging therefrom would be employed by governors-general and provincial governors in dealing with foreign affairs.²⁷

Li’s promulgation of setting up a specialized school in Western learning was directly influenced by Feng Guifen who came to serve as his advisor in 1862, as he was virtually repeating Feng’s words in a proposal submitted to him on the necessity of cultivating talents in diplomacy and Western knowledge by establishing state-sponsored schools.²⁸ Earlier in his writing on the adoption of Western learning, Feng had expressed similar views and saw such measures as transcending mere education reform. Asserting that the world today was no longer the same as it had been in the Three Dynasties, Feng sided with the presentist understanding of historical evolution which led him to acknowledge the West as equally if not more advanced in comparison to the Chinese civilization. It was thus an utter shame that Chinese literati had not

²⁶ These classes had nevertheless undergone profound transformation in late Qing. See Zhang Kaiyuan et al. eds., *Zhongguo jindai shishang de guan shen shang xue* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 2000); Marianne Bastid-Bruguere, “Currents of Social Change,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch’ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, 535–602.

²⁷ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 5, 610–2; Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, 74–5.

²⁸ Feng Guifen, “Shanghai sheli Tongwen guan yi,” in *Jiaobinlu kangyi*, annot. Dai Yangben (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1998), 250–3. For Feng’s involvement in opening Shanghai Tongwen guan, see Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 136–46.

paid adequate attention to Western learning, which was then pursued only by the treacherous *tongshi*. From Feng's observation, these middlemen were mostly untamed vagabonds or village juveniles educated by private philanthropic schools (*yixue* 義學) at best, whose fatuous and covetous nature would obstruct their comprehension of the intricacies in Western knowledge. It was only through the establishment of new government schools, in Feng's eyes, that the brilliant minds among junior literati could be carefully selected and properly educated by renowned teachers in classical studies as well as Western instructors in subjects like foreign languages and mathematics. Such fine students could then be able to master the type of Western knowledge conducive to the promotion of state finance and people's livelihood, without being misguided by the strange techniques and wicked crafts (*qiji yinqiao* 奇技淫巧) from the West. Convinced that "learning is where statecraft originates from," Feng further believed the propagation of the right kind of learning suited to the day must be carried out by the state and for the state, which was the sine qua non to acquire the right kind of men in pacifying foreign aggression.²⁹ This was also the rationale behind his proposal of granting *juren* or even *jinshi* degrees to those adept at Western manufacturing skills after their training under foreign instructors hired by Chinese officials. Such a gesture, Feng argued, would show the formal acknowledgement of these ingenious artisans by the state so that they could devout themselves to the enterprise of self-strengthening.³⁰ Stressing the practical output of adopting Western learning in strengthening the state, Feng at the same time linked such efforts to state activism in terms of patronizing the reformed learning to yield better results for statecraft through the cultivation of qualified talents. Like Li Hongzhang, Feng

²⁹ Feng Guifen, "Cai xixue yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 122–8.

³⁰ Feng Guifen, "Zhi yangqi yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 112–3. See also Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 126–36.

regarded the success of self-strengthening as desirable only through the close supervision and proper management by the literati class under the aegis of state authority.

Despite having starkly different attitudes toward Western learning, Li Hongzhang, Feng Guifen and the likes of Wesin each sought to legitimize their agendas through the aspiration of constructing a strong China. Moreover, their agendas were inextricably tied to the question of talent, which was aimed at seeking out qualified men in completing such a grand mission. For Wesin, it was only through the cultivation of the human mind by orthodox Confucian learning that the state could be put on the right track to restoration, since only in this way could the sagely king from above and upright ministers from below be equally committed to achieving good governance.³¹ Advocates of Confucian orthodoxy should therefore play a bigger role in imperial politics to materialize such a vision. Learning from “barbarians,” which represented a menacing source of heterodoxy, could seriously compromise the integrity of literati and lead to the dilapidation of state authority. Yet for Li and Feng, the most valuable components in Western learning were essential to strengthening state power, which had long been neglected by China’s lettered class indulgent in pedantic scholarly pursuits. And in order to harness the practical effect of Western knowledge for self-strengthening without being deluded by the *qiji yinqiao* element therein, it was imperative to reform the education system under state patronage to ensure the ideological conformity of talents trained in the new type of learning. What Wesin saw as the obstacle to dynastic restoration was a powerful instrument in the eyes of Li and Feng to fulfil the same undertaking. The West in this way became an opportunity for statecraft reformers to transform Confucian scholarship according to their respective political agendas, which would in turn see their rise to prominence had such agendas been successful. Feng Guifen therefore

³¹ Wu Mingui, “Shilun Wesin de qiangguo zhidao,” *Shilin*, no. 02 (1989): 36–41.

regarded the proposal of merging local academies with government schools as a crucial step in elevating the social status of teachers to cultivate more talents, since the supervision of state officials and their respect to local teachers would help to rectify the *fengqi* among the literati. Meanwhile, the employment of teachers in these state-sponsored institutions ought to be decided through the recommendation by junior literati instead of appointment from above so that renowned scholars in society could be selected to serve these crucial positions.³² Statist thinking thus continued to act as the justification for the political empowerment of literati against the monopoly of power by officeholders, with the discourse on self-strengthening being complicated by the question of talent due to Western challenge.

Strategic defense and statist thinking

The Restoration period in addition witnessed the Qing's further incorporation into the modern international system. This section investigates how changing foreign relations had led Qing ministers to adopt statist thinking in their strategic designs for border defense, epitomized by the 1874 policy debate on maritime defense and frontier defense. In Western scholarship, advocates of maritime defense headed by Li Hongzhang are often seen as progressive "modernizers" with logical plans for Qing strategic defense in face of Western powers, while supporters of frontier defense are deemed staunch conservatives clinging to the backward thinking of defending the Qing imperial tradition on the continent.³³ In the Chinese academia, nationalist sentiment has led scholars to view Zuo Zongtang as a laudable patriot fighting for the integrity of the Chinese state whereas Li Hongzhang's proposal of abandoning Xinjiang implicates him in the defeatist camp.

³² Feng Guifen, "Zhong ruguan yi," in *Jiaobinlu kangyi huijiao*, 89–91. See also Xiong, *Pingzhuan*, 252–7.

³³ S. C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia and their Disputed Frontier, 1858-1924* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 141–2; John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer and Albert Craig, *East Asia Tradition and Transformation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 600; Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, "The Great Policy Debate in China, 1874: Maritime Defense Vs. Frontier Defense," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25 (January 1, 1964): 212–28.

The debate is further seen by some as a power struggle between the factions of Li's Huai (淮) Army and Zuo's Chu (楚) Army.³⁴ I, however, argue that exponents of both camps called on the state to adopt an activist stance in centralizing its administration over the frontier against impinging foreign threat. The statism underlying their arguments inherited the political aspiration of Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen, which appropriated foreign intrusion for the justification of self-strengthening and resurging literati activism.

Having learned to honor the treaty system after 1860, Qing officials were quick to invest substantial efforts in understanding the modern international system. With the help of W. A. P. Martin (1827-1916), the Zongli Yamen organized the publication of the Chinese translation of *Elements of International Law* (*Wanguo gongfa* 萬國公法) by Henry Wheaton (1785-1848) in 1864 and sent some 300 copies to provincial ministers particularly those in treaty ports for their use in managing foreign affairs. Within a short period of time, the Qing had become adept at interpreting treaty terms for its own benefit and solving international disputes on its territory with the help of international law. As a new wave of Sino-Western hostility began to resurge toward the end of the Tongzhi reign, the question of how to prepare China for future intrusion came to the foreground.³⁵

The immediate cause of the 1874 debate was the Japanese invasion of Taiwan over the pretext of retaliation after several Ryukyuan sailors were killed by Taiwanese aborigines. Denying Qing sovereignty of eastern Taiwan due to the lack of effective control, Japan sought to speak for

³⁴ Yin Quanhai, "Xueshu shiye zhongde Wan Qing haifang yu saifang zhizheng," *Henan shehui kexue*, no. 01 (2007): 127–9; Luo Jianfeng, "Wan Qing haifang saifang zhizheng de zhaxue fansi," *Keji feng*, no. 08 (2014): 217.

³⁵ For the introduction of international law during the Restoration, see Svarverud, *International Law as World Order*, 87–112; Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations: The Diplomatic Phase, 1858-1880* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 121–45. For the modernization of Qing diplomacy, see Wright, *The Last Stand*, 222–38; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vols. A, B, 134–50, 914–33. For the end of the Qing's peaceful relationship with the West, see Wright, *The Last Stand*, 251–99.

Ryukyu over the confrontation and sent an expeditionary force to punish the aborigines, who it claimed were beyond Qing jurisdiction. Utterly unprepared in maritime defense on the southeastern border, let alone fighting a naval battle, the Qing state eventually succumbed to the mediation by British diplomat Thomas Wade (1818-1895) and agreed to pay half a million taels to Japan while not condemning its action. The fact that the Qing was willing to buy off the aggressor for not being invaded was a brutal revelation of its weakness, which would only invite further foreign intrusion.³⁶ I Hin first expressed his grave concern by submitting a memorial on the urgency of establishing maritime defense along China's coastline to the imperial court in early November of 1874. Lamenting that little had been achieved in self-strengthening since the Anglo-French invasion of 1860, I Hin blamed the dire situation on the stubborn opponents to the self-strengthening programs that he and his fellow ministers had meticulously planned and repeatedly advocated. Lacking sufficient funds and more importantly consensus within the officialdom, such assiduous efforts simply could not sustain. It was therefore imperative that high officials in central government and provincial magistrates seriously consider the six issues of military training (*lianbing* 練兵), adoption of Western weaponry (*jianqi* 簡器), battleship manufacturing (*zaochuan* 造船), raising of funds (*chouxiang* 籌餉), personnel selection (*yongren* 用人) and ways to sustain the endeavor (*chijiu* 持久), and provide their feedbacks for further deliberation.³⁷ Concurring with I Hin's advice, the court referred his memorial to selected officials as acting heads of administration in the provinces of South and East China for comment. A subsequent "Six-Item Naval Proposal" drafted by the former Jiangsu Governor Ding Richang

³⁶ Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2903–9; Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, "Late Ch'ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, 85–8; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 844–7.

³⁷ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 3951–2.

(丁日昌, 1823-1882) in response to I Hin's call was also sent out for opinions on its feasibility.³⁸

Li Hongzhang, depicted as the leading proponent of maritime defense in modern scholarship, was among the senior officials selected during this first round of inquiry.

It should be noted that Li Hongzhang's suggestion of halting the westward campaign to recover Xinjiang, then under the occupation of a Khoqandi military strongman Ya'qub Beg (1820-1877) in the south and Russian troops in the north following a protracted Muslim rebellion since 1864, was merely one of his solutions to the issue of fundraising and the only one of its kind.³⁹ Other officials had proposed either to open up more revenues of state finance, such as increasing customs duties on opium imports, collecting *likin* (釐金) on salt trade and expanding the mining industry, or to cut down non-urgent expenses by encouraging frugality in the officialdom, some of which were also brought up in Li's memorial. To get a better look at Li's rationale behind his prioritization of naval building for maritime defense at the expense of frontier defense beyond the passes (*guanwai* 關外), we need to consider how it fits into Li's overall argument on the strategic design of shielding the Qing from foreign invasion. Acknowledging that the Northwest had mostly been the central concern of border defense for previous dynasties, Li nevertheless pointed out that the Western encroachment into China's coastal areas through commercial expansion and missionary activities was an unprecedented change of situation (*bianju* 變局) in a thousand years. Equipped with modern military and communication technologies, these Western powers could easily stir up Sino-foreign hostilities for their own gains through collective actions that posed serious threats to the Qing state. Applying Zhang Xuecheng's presentist logic, Li

³⁸ Ibid, 3952–3, 3955–8.

³⁹ Ibid, 3994–7. For the revolt and foreign occupation of Xinjiang, see Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 116–23; Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 37–97; Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard J. Smith, “The Military Challenge: The North-west and the Coast,” in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, 221–5.

criticized the perilous reliance on established methods (*chengfa* 成法) in dealing with current circumstances. Instead, the state should actively reform old methods (*bianfa* 變法) and employ new talents in carrying out such timely endeavors. It is then obvious that Li had used the occasion to push for his prior agendas on cultivating the right kind of talents for self-strengthening, the necessity of which was reiterated in his response to the issue of personnel selection.⁴⁰ In doing so, he further transformed the mode of strategic thinking on Qing border defense in the Southeast. Concurring with Ding Richang's proposal of creating three fleets for the defense of north, central and south China coasts, Li added that effective coordination between the three squadrons of battleships was essential to the success of arresting foreign aggression from the sea. Informed of the newly translated treatise on coastal defense by a Prussian Viktor Ernst Karl Rudolf Von Scheliha (1826-1899), Li asserted that failures in previous designs of maritime defense during the Daoguang and Xianfeng reigns were due to the scattering of troops for the impractical goal of defending every single part of China's long-stretched coastline. Given the insufficient number of gunboats especially ironclads in the current Qing navy, it was more sensible to prioritize certain strategically important locations, such as the coastal area of Dagu (大沽) guarding the capital and the Lower Yangtze delta, for the construction of naval fortresses and the stationing of elite forces. Moreover, a centralized mode of the administration of Qing troops should be adopted to replace the fragmented structure of command left in the hands of provincial governors or governors-general. Quoting the recently deceased Zeng Guofan, Li proposed that the administrative authority of maritime defense for several adjacent coastal provinces be combined into one so that a well-trained standing army equipped with Western weaponry could respond to foreign intrusion with enhanced mobility. In

⁴⁰ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 3987–8, 3998–9.

coordination with the new fleets that would regularly patrol Chinese waters, they should form a better line of defense than the existing military establishments.⁴¹

Li Hongzhang was not alone in advocating the streamlining of Qing military administration for greater efficacy in modern warfare. Zhu Cai (朱采, 1833-1901), a practical-minded scholar serving in Li's secretariat, also emphasized the gravity of shifting the old thinking of passively defending China's coastline toward active preparation in advance for future naval battle. To do so, three ministers acting as regional commanders-in-chief should be appointed apart from modernizing the navy with Western warships. Zhu proposed that one minister charged with the defense of the Southern Seas administer the military affairs of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang; one charged with the defense of the Northern Seas administer the military affairs of Zhili, Fengtian (奉天) and Shandong; one charged with the defense of the Yangtze River administer the military affairs of Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi and Hubei. Comparable to the power of Imperial Commissioners, they would oversee the implementation of military reform in each province and command provincial governors when necessary. And it was pivotal that local magistrates in these provinces obey the jurisdiction of these ministers while all three join forces to achieve one common end. In a possible Japanese invasion, Zhu imagined that a northern fleet from Liaoning and a southern fleet from Taiwan could engage in a coordinated pincer movement like wrapping around one's two arms (*hebao* 合抱) to halt Japanese forces. Zhu was confident that such a restructuring of the administration would substantially boost morale and increase combat effectiveness, making the Qing able to fend off foreign aggression and even launch an offensive

⁴¹ Ibid, 3989, 3991–4. For the inefficacy of Qing coastal defense during the Opium War, see Mao, *Tianchao de bengkui*, 49–67.

on French-occupied Vietnam or British India when bad fortune occurs in the West.⁴² Though not sharing Zhu's optimism, officials such as the acting Shandong Governor and Director-general of Grain Transport Wenbin (文彬, 1825-1880), the Zhejiang Governor Yang Changjun (楊昌濬, 1825-1897) and the Fujian Governor Wang Kaitai (王凱泰, 1823-1875) all expressed similar views on reconfiguring maritime defense of the coastal provinces into three new administrative bodies. For them, such a streamlined mode of administration could result in better coordination among regional forces to deter foreign intrusion in a proactive way through combined efforts.⁴³ With the wide circulation of Scheliha's work among literati in support of the self-strengthening reforms, it is not hard to speculate that their espousal of a unified outlook on China's maritime defense transcending parochial local interests was influenced by Western theories on modern naval warfare.⁴⁴ Yet the rationale behind their vision can also be seen as a logical continuation of the pioneering thoughts on Qing border defense by forerunners of statecraft reform such as Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen. Much like Wei's global consciousness that put the Qing in a single theater with the rivaling forces of Western powers, advocates of maritime defense also took China's vast coastal areas as a whole beyond provincial jurisdiction. And similar to the endorsement of centralized governance by Gong and Wei in the Qing's northwestern frontier, they regarded streamlining the current mode of military administration managed by a bloated bureaucracy as the sine qua non to strengthen state capacity in organizing effective border defense. Zhu Cai's bold idea of having the reformed Qing navy attack British India was even reminiscent of Wei Yuan's strategic design aimed at crippling Britain's eastward expansion by

⁴² Zhu Cai, "Haifang yi," in *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 1, ed. Zhongguo shixue hui (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1961), 343–4.

⁴³ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 3963, 4004, 4011.

⁴⁴ For a systematic discussion of such influence, see Wang Hongbin, "Fanghai xinlun yu Tong-Guang zhiji haifang da taolun," *Shixue yuekan*, no. 08 (2002): 58–62.

striking its prized colonies in South Asia.⁴⁵ In sum, foreign military pressures had led many in the officialdom to propagate a unified vision and an activist stance in Qing border defense.

Bearing this unified outlook in mind, we are in a better position to assess Li Hongzhang's rather peculiar proposal of suspending the Xinjiang campaign. Deeply aware of the fiscal problem that had persistently troubled the Qing, Li urged the court to adopt a panoramic point of view in planning its fiscal expenditure on border defense. With such limited resources at the moment, Li found it impractical to fixate on recovering the barren land of Xinjiang, which would become a financial drain just to maintain Qing military presence. Moreover, the hostile environment surrounding Xinjiang had been exacerbated by the Great Game between Russia and Britain, both vying for dominance of the region and neither willing to see the ascendancy of Chinese power. A cursory march into Xinjiang might therefore stir up an unexpected chain of reactions and render the Qing troops unable to hold the region for long. Hence, instead of rushing to reestablish direct control, the Qing should resort to an alternate mode of governance by granting autonomy to local Muslim headmen in exchange for their acknowledgement of Chinese suzerainty. Making comparisons to the Native Chieftain (*tusi* 土司) System in southwest China and the Qing's relations with its tributary states like Vietnam and Korea, Li argued that the creation of such a buffer zone west of the Chinese inland would in no way undermine the Chinese imperium. Rather, the preservation of local autonomous tribes could ensure a balance of power and block foreign attempts to annex Xinjiang. Li further used a corporeal metaphor to downplay the strategic importance of Xinjiang as its loss would not harm one's body and spirit (*zhiti yuanqi* 肢體元氣), while inadequate maritime defense was like troubles of one's heart and gut (*xinpu* 心

⁴⁵ See ch. 3.

腹). To avoid thoroughly exhausting China's finance, it was then necessary to stop the hasty expedition into Xinjiang and shift its funds to maritime defense.⁴⁶ Li's proposal of ditching the Xinjiang campaign was echoed by the Shanxi (山西) Governor Bao Yuanshen (鮑源深, 1811-1884) in his memorial submitted in early 1875. Stating that the way to manage financial resources was to prioritize expenditures of the inland over those on the frontiers, Bao cautioned against the peremptory call for western expedition regardless of the already overstretched provincial revenues. Taking Shanxi as an example, Bao calculated that the annual revenue of the province was merely over 3 million taels, 1.06 million of which was supposed to be transferred to the central government and 1.9 million to funding military operations. Yet the annual provincial expenditure amounted to 1.67 million, posing a nonnegligible fiscal problem. Making a metaphor similar to Li's that the inland was like one's heart and gut while the frontiers were like the four limbs, Bao contended that just like the illness of one's limbs could not be cured at the expense of the body's vital force, halting the expedition was not an unfilial renunciation of past emperors' grand enterprise but a sensible expedient to preserve China's strength under present circumstances. In addition, he suggested that troops mobilized for the campaign be redeployed to establish agrarian colonies beyond the passes where they were stationed to both generate profit and fortify the current line of defense. Once financial resources became sufficient, the Qing should unhesitatingly march westward again to recover Xinjiang and restore its imperial might over the region.⁴⁷ Unlike Li Hongzhang who focused on pouring funds saved from the Xinjiang campaign into his naval program and suggested shifting to a different mode of governing the Western Territory, Bao was more concerned about the immediate aftermath of

⁴⁶ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 3994–5. See also Hsu, "The Great Policy Debate," 216–7.

⁴⁷ Zhu Shoupeng ed., *Guangxu chao donghua lu*, vol. 1, annot. Zhang Jinglu et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 23–5.

fiscal deficit like the dilapidation of state capacity in keeping domestic order or disaster relief. Yet despite not stressing the priority of maritime defense, Bao was in agreement with Li in taking a panoramic stance when it comes to financial planning vis-à-vis strategic defense of the Qing state. Both assigned Xinjiang to a lesser role in China's overall strategic design and refused to acknowledge the urgency of recovering the vast barren land which might aggravate Qing's financial burden.⁴⁸ And both were unreserved in calling for the Qing court to reevaluate the present needs of the state as a whole and actively respond to the current situation through centralized actions. We should therefore situate arguments against frontier defense into these conceptual transformations.

The advocacy for the state to take an active stance in border defense further led ministers in support of maritime defense to shift toward an outward-looking approach to Qing foreign relations. Having proposed to send commissioners to Japan after the signing of a Sino-Japanese commercial treaty in 1871, Li Hongzhang again brought up his formerly unheeded suggestion to the court in a separate memorial. Claiming that border defense since ancient times had been dependent on qualified men with expertise in both military and diplomatic affairs, Li saw the exchange of envoys as a necessary step in gathering foreign intelligence with increasing Sino-foreign communications. In an implicitly rueful tone, Li advised the court that had there been Chinese consuls in Japan during the 1874 incident, they would have warned the Chinese government in the first place and sought ways to stop Japanese aggression. Even after the outbreak of military confrontations, they could still have hampered the Japanese advance through diplomatic negotiations on Japanese soil instead of in Beijing. It was then imperative that Chinese commissioners be immediately dispatched to Japan for the purpose of observing its

⁴⁸ Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 850–3.

domestic situation, protecting Chinese subjects and forestalling future hostilities.⁴⁹ Likewise, Wang Kaitai stated that foreign nations had sent ambassadors to the Qing capital and consuls to the provinces not only for maintaining peaceful relationship but to acquire intelligence on China. As long as the state remained passive in accepting Western presence at its doorstep instead of sending officials abroad, China would be at a disadvantage in understanding the outside world. For Wang, Japan had been subjugated to Qing imperial might for two hundred years before being forced to open up to the West. Impoverished by Western exploitation, the country was further thrown into the turmoil of an unsettling reform (i.e., the Meiji Restoration) and therefore recklessly took the risk of invading Taiwan. To prevent the West from turning Japan into their vassal state, China should dispatch envoys to both cultivate friendship with the country and enlighten the Japanese people about the importance of their independence so that Japan could act as a buffer state in the Eastern Seas. Similar to Wei Yuan's plan of utilizing Qing tributary ties with its neighboring states in fending off Western intrusion, Wang also urged the state to actively reassert its former imperium abroad in face of foreign threats. He thus suggested that once in foreign countries, Chinese consuls should seek to cultivate relationships with overseas Chinese societies and protect the rights of Chinese merchants so that these people would be willing to serve the Chinese state instead of foreigners.⁵⁰ Wang's proposal was echoed by the Governor-general of Liangjiang Li Zongxi (李宗羲, 1818-1884) who saw overseas Chinese as a viable asset for Qing strategic defense as well. Asserting that most Chinese residing in Southeast Asia, San Francisco and Melbourne were Fujianese or Cantonese merchants who constantly missed their homeland and treated fellow Chinese stopping by with generous hospitality, Li advised the

⁴⁹ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 4000–2. For the treaty of 1871, see Hsu, “Late Ch’ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905,” 85–6; idem, *China’s Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 172–3.

⁵⁰ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 4014–6.

court to harness such sentiment by sending envoys to persuade their headmen into cooperating with the Qing state. Mediated by the Zongli Yamen, these competent leaders could be granted titles of state officials and assigned the task of training local Chinese militia, which might turn out to be a considerable leverage in future confrontations. Again resembling Wei Yuan's design for Qing maritime defense in Nanyang, Li attempted to extend state activism beyond the conventional realm of Qing rule. The same activism in addition led Li to reappraise the strategic importance of the island of Taiwan. For Li, Taiwan had been a long-neglected link in constructing an outer ring of defensive line for China. Unlike the other desolate islands off the Chinese coast, Taiwan was rich in mineral resources and home to bellicose Chinese immigrants suitable for navy recruits. With the adoption of Western machinery, Taiwan could establish its own shipyard and create a navy within a few years, making it a convenient reinforcement for coastal provinces and a substantial deterrence to foreign powers.⁵¹ Faced with mounting military pressure from the sea, Qing officials started to cast new light on foreign affairs and frontier management in relation to maritime defense. In doing so, they continued the political aspiration among literati activists which called for the emergence of an activist state with a unified vision in rivaling foreign powers on the world stage. The rationale of maritime defense supporters thus fell well within the statist line of thinking.

While few ministers denied the urgency of building up maritime defense, some had at the same time expressed their concerns about the fate of the westward campaign to recover Xinjiang. These frontier defense "firsters", as Immanuel Hsu puts it,⁵² nevertheless shared many similarities with supporters of maritime defense in their reasoning despite the insistence on the

⁵¹ Ibid, 4031–2.

⁵² Hsu, "The Great Policy Debate," 218.

Xinjiang campaign. Li Hanzhang (李瀚章, 1821-1899), the Governor-general of Huguang (湖廣, modern day Hunan and Hubei), followed the same line of argument for a unified vision in border defense by stating that though maritime defense in the southeast could not be delayed, military expedition in the northwest should not be aborted either with Muslim rebels still running amok. To alleviate the financial burden, it was vital to economize by streamlining the administration of expeditionary forces and eliminating redundant personnel for the campaign.⁵³ The Shandong Governor Ding Baozhen (丁寶楨, 1820-1886) likewise advised the court not to neglect pressures on the northwestern frontier from Russia when tackling Japanese aggression in the southeast. In Ding's view, Russia posed a much greater threat to the Qing than Japan or Western nations since the latter two could only reach China by water while Russia shared a continuous land frontier with China from Xinjiang in the northwest to Heilongjiang in the northeast. Moreover, Russia had always been cunning in foreign diplomacy by acting as a mediator between China and the West to profit from both ends. Analogizing the Russian threat to illness of one's heart and gut and the maritime threat to illness of the limbs, Ding warned that without effective border defense, Manchuria could easily fall under a Russian backdoor raid to Beijing. And if Japan were to stir up hostilities again in the southeast, Russia might collude by fanning insurrections in the northwest. Ding thus suggested the establishment of a standing army in each of the three northeastern provinces (Heilongjiang, Jilin and Fengtian) and Mongolia in response to the Russian military challenge.⁵⁴ The need for a panoramic viewpoint in strategic design further led advocates of frontier defense to propagate state activism in defending the Qing's northwestern border. Wang Wenshao (王文韶, 1832-1908), the Governor of Hunan, stressed that the Qing

⁵³ *CBYWSM-TZ*, vol. 10, 4035.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 4057–8.

should actively showcase its military power in face of foreign nations by continuing the westward campaign until the final pacification of Xinjiang. Foreign threats from the sea, Wang contended, came for a reason which was directly linked to China's struggle of recovering Xinjiang. Failure to reestablish Qing rule in the region would only signal China's weakness and invite more foreign intrusion. Fearing that Russians currently occupying Yili in northern Xinjiang might gradually encroach eastward if Qing forces delayed the westward expedition, Wang urged the court to unabatedly focus on the Xinjiang campaign so that the Russian ambition could be frustrated and other nations would refrain from intruding upon the maritime frontier.⁵⁵ In contrast to the likes of Li Hongzhang who discredited the magnitude of restoring Chinese governance in Xinjiang, ministers in support of frontier defense saw the Chinese grip on Xinjiang as an integral part of the grand design for Qing strategic defense. Yet they also espoused a unified outlook for the state to take proactive measures in defending its land frontier against threats from the continent, which would serve to exhibit China's competency in maintaining the integrity of its territory and lessen pressures on maritime defense.⁵⁶ Advocates of maritime defense and frontier defense therefore shared some basic assumptions in arguing for the reappraisal of Qing strategic defense, despite their differing views on the strategic value of Xinjiang to the Qing.

The first round of inquiry, followed by a court debate in the early 1875, did not suffice for the court to make a final decision. After summarizing the gist of arguments by leading ministers of the two camps, the court sent a creed to Zuo Zongtang then stationed in Gansu (甘肅) for his

⁵⁵ Ibid, 4023–4.

⁵⁶ See also discussions in Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 856–9; Hsu, “The Great Policy Debate,” 218–9.

opinion.⁵⁷ Zuo's reply, together with his memorials on the reconstruction of Xinjiang, was another prime example of how the rationales behind maritime defense and frontier defense were closely related. Responding to the court's inquiry by first acknowledging that impingement on China's coastal region by Western maritime nations should not be taken lightly, Zuo nevertheless claimed that maritime powers in no way posed an imminent threat to the security of the Qing state. For Zuo, these nations were solely driven by profits through trade and therefore fought for domination over harbors and ports instead of land and people. With established treaty relations, they were even more restrained from inciting confrontation as it would be both unreasonable and unprofitable. After downplaying foreign threat from the sea, Zuo went on to contradict maritime defense supporters on the practical issue of funding by making meticulous calculations to show how limited his budget for the westward campaign already was and how little the naval program would need for extra expenditure. He then proceeded to explicate on the necessity of recovering the city of Urumqi and the whole of Xinjiang. With Muslim rebels still entrenched in Xinjiang, Zuo argued, a sudden halt of the expedition would not only leave the land beyond the passes vulnerable but threaten the stability of Outer Mongolia. Evoking the history of the Qing conquest of the Zunghars, Zuo saw the Qianlong Emperor's insistence on establishing Qing rule over all of Xinjiang as a visionary enterprise that ensured lasting peace along the northwestern frontier. In line with Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan, Zuo asserted that the active exertion of state authority in Xinjiang was an approach to frontier management "appropriate to the occasion." Repeating the geopolitical analysis of Xinjiang by Gong and Wei, Zuo further stressed that while the terrain of northern Xinjiang was more suitable to station troops in controlling the region, it would also depend upon the agricultural output of the fertile lands in southern Xinjiang to generate revenues

⁵⁷ For Zuo's role in the pacification of Muslim rebellions around the time of the debate, see Zuo, *Zuo Zongtang zhuan*, 233–96.

for military expenses. Now that Russians had occupied Yili with no intention of returning it to China, it became all the more imperative to concentrate efforts on extirpating rebels and reasserting Qing sovereignty in northern Xinjiang so as to crush the Russian encroachment. In this way, pressures on the maritime border in the southeast could also be lessened as foreign aggression would be kept in check by Qing imperial might. As for Ya'qub Beg's occupation of southern Xinjiang, Zuo suggested retaking Urumqi first as a bridgehead for subsequent advancement and then proceed with a close eye on international reactions. The bottom line was that Qing forces should not retreat at the moment which might reignite the rebellion and complicate the situation in the northwest.⁵⁸

Concurring with Wang Wenshao in urging the state to take an activist stance in showcasing China's power in response to foreign aggression, Zuo put special emphasis on the role of Xinjiang to the Qing in maintaining its rule over the frontier of Inner Asia. Apart from resorting to the authority of past emperors in making his point, Zuo approached the issue by addressing the particularities of Qing frontier management, which was more manifest in an 1877 memorial on the necessity of consolidating Qing rule in Xinjiang:

In laying the foundations of the state, there are common principles applicable to the past and the present. The grand design (of the state) is preserved in its political institutions and such institutions must be established in accordance with particular situations... Since ancient times, troubles along the Chinese border in the northwest had constantly exceeded those in the southeast... Our dynasty has chosen Beijing as the capital with the Mongols guarding it in the north. For over a hundred years, there has been no menace of war. This is not only what people in previous dynasties had called all borderlands had become the inland. From Kobdo (科布多) and

⁵⁸ Zuo Zongtang, "Fuchen haifang saifang ji guanwai jiaofu liangyun qingxing zhe," in *Zuo Wenxiang gong (Zongtang) quanji*, ed. Yang Shulin (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1979), 1842–7.

Uliastai (烏里雅蘇台) all the way to Zhangjiakou (張家口), there have been garrisons working in collaboration so that the capital area could remain peaceful. This is what the enterprise of pacifying Xinjiang and establishing military governance by past emperors had gifted us. Therefore, the point on (the recovery of) Xinjiang is to defend Mongolia and the defense of Mongolia is to protect the capital. If the northwestern territory can be kept intact like the whole of a limb from arm to fingers, there would be no advantage for foreign powers to take. If (our rule in) Xinjiang is not consolidated, the Mongols will feel insecure. When that is the case, not only the borderlands along the provinces of Gansu, Shaanxi and Shanxi would become susceptible to foreign invasion, but the region north of Zhili would be in danger. Moreover, the situation today is starkly different from that of the past. Russians have been conquering vast areas from the west to the east totaling tens of thousands of *li*. There is only Mongolia to the north acting as a buffer zone. We really have to think of long-term plans in advance.⁵⁹

Zuo was unmistakable in acknowledging the superiority of present-day border defense as the Qing had transcended the passivity in frontier management of past dynasties by actively incorporating its borderlands into direct rule. Sagely emperors of the High Qing were able to utilize the geography of Inner Asia in coming up with the grand design of connecting the frontier regions as a whole, which endowed the Qing with peace and prosperity. With Russian intrusion threatening to crumble such a design, it would be detrimental by reverting to the old way of abandoning the northwestern borderlands. Emboldened by the rather smooth expedition in Xinjiang, Zuo asserted that the Qing should take active measures in consolidating its control over the frontier following the positive experience of High Qing border defense.⁶⁰ His advocacy of continuing the westward campaign was thus also based on a unified vision of Qing frontier

⁵⁹ Zuo Zongtang, “Zunzhi tongchou quanju zhe,” in *Zuo Wenxiang gong (Zongtang) quanji*, 2018.

⁶⁰ On the Qing reconquest of Xinjiang, see Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 127–30; Kim, *Holy War in China*, 166–78; Liu and Smith, “The Military Challenge,” 235–42.

defense and a presentist logic not unlike Li Hongzhang's in assessing the current situation. With a stronger focus on the conquest history of Qing Inner Asia, Zuo placed a higher value on the territorial integrity of the Qing northwest and viewed the encroachment of maritime powers as posing less of a threat in contrast to Li. In terms of adopting an activist stance in restoring state governance along the frontiers, Zuo was an even more devout follower of presentism compared to Li's abandonment of direct rule in Xinjiang, which was reminiscent of China's past practice in border defense. Zuo's defense of the Xinjiang campaign therefore catered to the peculiar experience of Qing frontier management with a presentist orientation, instead of representing "vestiges of the steppe-oriented mentality."⁶¹ His use of Qianlong's example could also be said to have helped buttress his claim for keeping up the activist stance in frontier defense, rather than appealing to filial piety in search for broader support from the literati class.⁶² Hence, Zuo Zongtang joined forces with advocates of maritime defense and frontier defense in calling for state activism with a unified outlook to protect the Qing against foreign powers, which placed his strategic vision within the statist line of thinking as well.

The influence of statist thinking in addition led Zuo to side with Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan in advocating the idea of centralized governance in Xinjiang. In an 1878 memorial to update the court on Xinjiang's circumstances, Zuo reiterated the necessity of direct rule by provincializing the entire region. Once again following the presentist logic, Zuo found it appropriate to the occasion to shift toward a centralized mode of governance in Xinjiang since the gradual reconstruction of the war-torn area had seen a steady increase of the local population which laid the demographic foundation for provincialization. Continuing Gong and Wei's rationale that the

⁶¹ Cf. Hsu, "The Great Policy Debate," 224–6.

⁶² Cf. Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 863–4; Hsu, "The Great Policy Debate," 221–2. The connection between recovering Xinjiang and deference to ancestors' accomplishments was more explicitly made in Bao Yuanshen's argument, see Zhu ed., *Guangxu chao donghua lu*, vol. 1, 24.

multilayered system of administration previously established in Xinjiang had allowed too much power to local headmen, Zuo feared that these middlemen might act as a barrier between state officials and the local populace. Therefore, a centralized bureaucracy would serve to consolidate Qing rule by streamlining the administration and cultivating the people's loyalty to the state. With strengthened state capacity in governing Xinjiang, the Qing could also benefit from the expanded agricultural production by growing numbers of migrants and the rich natural resources, which would eventually generate more revenues rather than draining state finance. Repudiating proposals to abandon the land beyond the passes, Zuo stressed that while the local geography (and the financial burden it might put on the inland) remained unchanged for thousands of years, human institutions did change with specific situations of each historical period. Referring once more to the conquest history of the High Qing, he was confident that with the unwavering state activism peculiar to Qing frontier management, people would enjoy peace and prosperity again in the Qing northwest.⁶³ Emphasizing the change of situation like Li Hongzhang, Zuo nevertheless saw the present occasion as felicitous to strengthen the Qing grip on its northwestern borderland instead of pooling resources to maritime defense at the expense of frontier defense. Yet in doing so, Zuo also demonstrated a shift in conceptions of the Qing frontier similar to Li Zongxi's reevaluation of Taiwan, which applied the logic of Gong and Wei for a monolithic state with centralized rule in face of mounting foreign pressures. The eventual provincialization of Xinjiang was thus unmistakably linked to the popularization of statist thinking among Qing ministers in their reconceptualization of state governance and frontier management.⁶⁴

⁶³ Zuo Zongtang, "Fuchen Xinjiang qingxing zhe," in *Zuo Wenxiang gong (Zongtang) quanji*, 2133–8. See also Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 862–3.

⁶⁴ On the creation of the Xinjiang province, see Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*, 136–42; Liu and Smith, "The Military Challenge," 242–3.

The 1874 policy deliberation on Qing border defense has mostly been understood by modern scholars as a battle between “progressive” and “traditional” mindsets. Nevertheless, my investigation shows that despite differences in specific plans of defending the Qing against foreign aggression, proposals on maritime defense and frontier defense exhibited shared assumptions and orientations that could be traced back to the statist agendas of literati activists in the early nineteenth century. Seeking to transcend the previously fragmented structure of Qing border defense, high officials adopted a unified vision in their strategic planning that viewed the Qing as a monolithic state with centralized rule, which in turn called for an active stance by the state in centralizing administration across the frontier. Moreover, the rationale behind their arguments exhibited the same statist line of thinking as seen in Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan, which appropriated waxing foreign threat for literati empowerment. Though the anti-bureaucratic undertone was less explicit given their status in the officialdom, it can be observed that these ministers continued to justify their agendas in the name of strengthening the state when Li Hongzhang brought up the issue of promoting diplomatic talents in arresting Japanese invasion. Disputes between maritime defense and frontier defense can then be seen as the competition between different versions of state activism in the sense that both camps upheld the construction of a strong state as their ultimate point of reference. In Zuo Zongtang’s words, they “all demonstrated (unquestionable) loyalty to the state (*guo*) instead of acting on selfish calculations.”⁶⁵ Statist thinking in this way became consolidated in the political discourse on self-strengthening.

Conclusion

⁶⁵ Zuo, “Fuchen haifang saifang ji guanwai jiaofu liangyun qingxing zhe,” 1842. It is thus far-fetched to speculate that the debate had betrayed a hint of factional struggles, see Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 866–8.

In response to the immediate concerns of restoring domestic governance and arresting foreign intrusion after 1860, the Qing government permitted the adoption of Western learning to rebuild its administrative capacity and military power in the name of self-strengthening. Such an enterprise provided China's lettered class with an opportunity to seek alternatives to the sagely teachings of Confucianism in fulfilling their statecraft aspirations. Through Western learning, increasing numbers of the literati increasingly felt the need for institutional reform in emulation of the Western model, which was deemed necessary to construct a strong China. At the same time, however, following the mid-century transition that saw the Neo-Confucian revival, many of the literati were equally eager to revitalize the Qing modeled after Confucian orthodoxy. As Yang Guoqiang notes, this growing division among the literati in their visions for a future China became a significant factor for the intellectual and political transformations in the post-1860 era.⁶⁶ From my discussion in this chapter, such a division is particularly helpful for our understanding of the development of statist thinking vis-à-vis self-strengthening. As we have seen, the question of talent had been approached by literati activists since the early nineteenth century for their political empowerment. During the early stage of self-strengthening, it was again brought up by ministers who embraced conflicting attitudes toward Western learning. Nevertheless, they adopted the same statist line of thinking to promote qualified talents in the construction of a strong state against foreign intrusion. Meanwhile, aggravating foreign threats propelled the Qing to shift its inert stance on foreign relations, which in turn instigated growing calls by Qing ministers for state activism in border defense amid resurging Sino-foreign tensions. In line with proposals of constructing a monolithic state with centralized rule in the early nineteenth century, they deemed it essential to streamline the Qing's multilayered frontier

⁶⁶ Yang Guoqiang, *Yili yu shigong zhijian de huihuang: Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang jiqi shidai* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008), 193–6.

management and integrate fragmented structures of local administration into a single bureaucracy under state authority. In this way, they reconceptualized the Qing as an activist state ardently consolidating its rule along the frontiers against foreign intrusion, which popularized the statist aspirations of literati activists like Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan. Mounting foreign pressure therefore became an opportunity for statist thinking to gain currency among the literati.

Such intellectual dynamics would in addition initiate conceptual transformations on the state over time. Scholars have noted that a separate sphere of public management (*gong* 公) started to develop apace after the mid-nineteenth century in contrast to the state sphere of administration (*guan* 官) and private activities (*si* 私). This signaled changing conceptions of the role of the state in governance as well as its relation to society.⁶⁷ When deemed as an institutional entity, the state (*guo*) unmistakably began to take on different meanings during the self-strengthening movement. For Li Hongzhang and Feng Guifen, the reformed imperial examination system ought to cultivate experts in Western learning, which indicated that the state staffed with these new talents would require further institutional innovations in response to foreign pressures. The debate over Qing border defense also showed increasing reappraisals of the state with respect to its organizational structure and mode of governance. Yet in the transcendental dimension, the state as the embodiment of *dao* continued to be appropriated by the literati in justification of their political agendas. When Wesin discredited change in the education system, his rationale was arguably shaped by the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation that saw state power as inextricably tied with literati morale. Likewise, Li and Feng regarded the adoption of Western

⁶⁷ Mary B. Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 15; idem, "The Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere: Local Elites and Community Affairs in the Late Imperial Period," *Études Chinoises* 9, no. 2 (1990): 13–60; idem, "Some Observations on a Chinese Public Sphere," *Modern China* 19, no. 2 (1993): 158–82; William T. Rowe, "The Public Sphere in Modern China," *Modern China* 16, no. 3 (1990): 309–29.

learning not as an end in itself but the sine qua non to build a powerful state. Only in this way could the expertise of these talents be put to good use. The urge for the state to actively consolidate its rule across the frontiers against foreign intrusion can also be said to reflect the statist concern of showcasing state power as proof of its ability to harbor *dao*. In this light, when Mary Rankin identifies *gong* as simultaneously conveying the moral meanings of “just” and “public-spirited” while denoting extra-bureaucratic activities for communal interests,⁶⁸ it is arguably the case that the emerging rhetoric of *gong* shared the statist rationale behind Wei Yuan’s reform proposals that sought extra-bureaucratic forces in revitalizing state institutions, which must be led by morally righteous literati deserving political empowerment. Rankin’s observation that local elite activism was not “sharply distinguished from the state” and more oriented to collective interests can be explained through the symbiosis of the literati and the state as well, apart from “the intimidating strength of the state in pre-modern China.”⁶⁹ Statist thinking was therefore consolidated in the self-strengthening discourse, which would be even more manifest when we look at writings by the fledgling subgroups within the literati such as treaty port intellectuals and diplomatic ministers. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

⁶⁸ Rankin, “The Origins of a Chinese Public Sphere,” 37–44.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 53, 56.

Chapter Six: Self-strengthening II: Voices from the Margins

This chapter looks at statist thinking vis-à-vis the self-strengthening movement from the perspective of treaty port intellectuals and diplomatic ministers. It aims to show how the reform agendas of these subgroups within the literati class were predicated on prior intellectual development especially statist thinking. While the Qing ministers had envisioned the self-strengthening movement to restore state power by adopting Western learning, the emerging treaty port intellectuals began to reappraise the state with altered cosmic visions informed by foreign knowledge. Meanwhile, pressed by legal obligations and the practical need to acquire intelligence on the outside world, the Qing eventually started to dispatch envoys and consuls to foreign countries from the 1870s. With permanent diplomatic presence in the West, more officials started to travel abroad and develop their own conceptions of the Qing in the world.

Scholars have generally understood such dynamics as a tragic story of how pioneering voices of reform had been utterly neglected and foreshadowed the Qing's decadence after the Sino-Japanese War. Cohen, through his examination of Wang Tao's life and thought, discusses how Wang's reform proposals represented the harbinger of modernization in late Qing China. Despite acknowledging Wang's intellectual ingenuity in response to conflicts between modernity and the Chinese tradition, Cohen sees Wang as the exemplar of the littoral voices set to conquer China's hinterland in its modern transformation.¹ In a similar vein, Wong Young-tsu argues that controversies around the diplomatic minister Guo Songtao (郭嵩燾, 1818-1891) revealed how the hubris of "conservative" forces had overlooked Guo's farsighted urge for reform and impeded China's modernization, compared to Japan's unequivocal stance on reform in the Meiji

¹ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, esp. 244–76.

Restoration.² Wang Hui situates the intellectual transformation of the period within the expansion of the modern international system and investigates how the ritual order sanctioned by Confucian classics became increasingly incompatible with modern state-building, which eventually led to Kang Youwei's radical reinvention of the New Text classical tradition.³ The teleological undertone permeates throughout.

In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of the above intellectual dynamics less troubled by the hindsight of the Sino-Japanese War. In particular, I argue that statist thinking was manifest in reformist voices from both treaty port intellectuals and diplomatic ministers in their conceptions of the state. Having developed alternate perceptions of cosmic reality informed by Western learning, treaty port intellectuals like Wang Tao idealized Western technology as “divine instruments (*fawu* 法物)” among the actual things and affairs to bring about the eventual unification of *dao*.⁴ In line with the materialist understanding of *dao*, they believed reform in emulation of the West were bound to help construct a powerful state capable of safeguarding China's cultural supremacy and thus harboring *dao*. The advocacy of newspaper as an extra-bureaucratic venue for political participation and the call for a parliamentary system accordingly inherited the logic of statist thinking which stressed the leading role of qualified literati to ensure the outcome of these reforms would strengthen rather than undermine state power. Similar aspirations were also appropriated by diplomatic ministers to advocate state activism on the international stage headed by shrewd talents in foreign diplomacy. Utilizing the normative and strategic functions of the international law system, they had hoped, would defend the Qing

² Wong Young-tsu, *Zouxiang shijie de cuozhe: Guo Songtao yu Dao Xian Tong Guang shidai* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2000).

³ Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 679–736.

⁴ Wang Tao, “Yuan dao,” in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, annot. Wang Beiping and Liu Lin (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 1–2. The bulk of essays in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian* were produced during Wang's years in Hong Kong and contain his systematic proposals on China's reform.

against foreign intrusion and showcase state power in the international community. The idealization of a powerful state in this way continued to inspire institutional innovations in the reform agendas of these literati, who constantly sought justification of their agendas from the demonstration of state power in both domestic and international arenas. As newly emerged subgroups, their voices were yet to occupy the center stage of the evolving discourse on the state. Yet it was through their intellectual endeavors that statist thinking became further concretized in late Qing political thought.

Changing views from the littoral

This section discusses how treaty port intellectuals inherited statist thinking in their reform proposals through the analysis of works by Wang Tao and opinion piece writers. Aided by modern printing technology, treaty port intellectuals were able to introduce new forms of media like newspapers to those outside the upper echelon of the literati class as a powerful tool for political participation. Breaking the monopoly of the official *Imperial Gazette* (*dibao* 邸報), modern newspapers became a convenient platform for information on state affairs to circulate among a wider audience.⁵ As an active figure in such a transformation, Wang Tao is generally depicted in modern scholarship as a pioneer who anticipated many of the institutional reforms to modernize China.⁶ A closer look at Wang's thought, nevertheless, will reveal the lasting impact

⁵ For a foundational study on the history of newspaper in China, see Ge Gongzhen, *Zhongguo baoxue shi* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2003). Originally published in 1927 by Shanghai Shangwu yinshu guan). For the *Imperial Gazette* of the Qing dynasty, see L. J. Harris, *The Peking Gazette: A Reader in Nineteenth-century Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), esp. 1–15; Xiaotan Zhang, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press: The Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China* (Routledge, 2007), 12–29. For the emergence of modern newspaper in China, see Wu Tingjun, *Zhongguo xinwen shi xinxiu* (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2008), 27–68; Zhang, *Origins of the Modern Chinese Press*, 30–74; Barbera Mittler, *A Newspaper for China? Power, Identity and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872-1912*, Harvard East Asian Studies Monographs, 226 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).

⁶ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*; Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 178–349.

of statist thinking in shaping his transcendental vision apart from his reform agendas for mundane sociopolitical orders.

After fleeing Shanghai in 1862 for being implicated with the Taipings, Wang Tao settled in Hong Kong and started to work closely with the renowned Scottish missionary scholar James Legge (1815-1897) on an ambitious project of translating the entire canon of Confucian classics into English. Wang's expertise in classical scholarship and his experience of working with missionary publishers in Shanghai made him perfect for the job. Having been impressed by Wang's hard work and developed a good friendship with Wang, Legge invited Wang to visit Europe after returning to Britain in 1867. Gladly accepting the invitation, Wang spent over two years touring around Europe and delivering lectures on Chinese culture in Britain. As a keen observer, Wang Tao was amazed by Western technological advancement and became convinced that such progress was inseparable from the political institutions and education systems in Europe. Implicitly, he also sensed the looming threat posed to the Chinese civilization by the ascending West. This journey would prove to have a deep and lasting impact on Wang's perception of China's fate in a changing world.⁷

When lecturing at the University of Oxford, Wang was asked by undergraduates about the difference between Heaven's *dao* (*tiandao* 天道) in the West and Confucius' *dao* in China. Replying that Confucius saw *dao* as ultimately the *dao* of man (*rendao* 人道), Wang pointed out that Western people also regarded the propagation of *dao* as essentially a human endeavor despite attributing the origin of *dao* to Heaven. He went on to state that "Heaven's *dao* knows no selfishness and would in the end unite everything as one." Though the two conceptions of *dao*

⁷ Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 96–121; Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 57–84; Zhang Zhichun, *Wang Tao nianpu* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994), 69–99.

seemed different in the present, sages East and West were all aware that they would eventually become one and the same. In a word, “*dao* will be in great unity (*qidao datong* 其道大同).”⁸ Such was his conviction of *dao*’s manifestation in his age that in an essay on the investigation of *dao* composed around the time of his exile in Hong Kong, Wang declared that for all under Heaven, *dao* was one and the same in the beginning but became differentiated in its later manifestation. Nevertheless, *dao* remained one instead of turning into two and would unite its different manifestations once more. Believing that “there is no *dao* outside of man and no man outside of *dao*,” Wang felt the current trends in the world were an unmistakable sign that the reunification of *dao* was on the threshold:

Today the European states are becoming more and more powerful. Their intelligent people have manufactured steamboats and trains that connect continents across the world. They have left footprints around the Eastern and Western hemispheres, reaching remote islands and distant peoples. This is where the process of (re)unification starts. While the human race is turning from being separated to being connected, *dao* will turn its different manifestations back into one as well. That which is antecedent to the material form exists as *dao*, that which is subsequent to the material form exists as actual things and affairs (*qi* 器). Whereas *dao* cannot be united instantly, man will first connect (with each other) through *qi* (器). The steamboats and trains are all things that *dao* embodies itself into... Therefore, what the West has relied on to humiliate China (Zhongguo) today are all divine instruments created by sages of later generations to mingle (*huntong* 混同) the nations of the world.⁹

Concurring with his earlier assertion that Western encroachment was in fact an opportunity to build a stronger China through timely reform (*bianfa*), Wang in addition saw this cause as

⁸ Wang Tao, *Manyou suilu*, annot. Gu Jun (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007), 78–9.

⁹ Wang, “Yuan *dao*,” 1–2..

justified by the cosmic authority of *dao*. In line with Zhang Xuecheng's conviction of the unity of *dao* and actual things and affairs, Wang deemed it necessary on the part of man to actively respond to *dao*'s reunification as harbingers of such a cosmic process were becoming manifest with the global expansion of the West. Arranged as the first essay in volume one of *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, *Yuan dao* argues for the universalist understanding of the supremacy of *dao* in directing human affairs, which transcends Sino-Western distinctions in the experiential realm and illuminates the common destiny of humanity. Implicitly conceding that the Qing was no longer the natural embodiment of *dao*, Wang sought to help China regain *dao*'s endorsement by legitimizing reform through a presentist understanding of Chinese history. Refuting the view that Chinese history had been marked by stagnation, Wang argued that from the times of Yao and Shun to the Three Dynasties and then to the Qin dynasty, profound institutional changes had undeniably occurred. Since the Han and Tang dynasties, things had remained roughly the same but changes were already taking place once more. Claiming that the gist of Confucius' attitude toward antiquity was to "provide convenience to the present" (*yihu jin* 宜乎今) while not "defying (the principles of) ancient teachings" (*beiyu gu* 悖于古), Wang imagined if Confucius had lived in his day, the sage would have to embrace change as well. And quite the contrary to being irreverent to *dao*, the implementation of reform was an act in deference to the cosmic process of *dao*'s transformation since "*dao* values benefiting the particularities of the time." With recent events in the human realm signaling change in Heaven's mind (*tianxin* 天心) from above, it would be increasingly intolerable to refuse change as it could violate Heaven's mind and harm China for failing to address new dynamics in human affairs.¹⁰

¹⁰ Wang Tao, "Bianfa shang," "Bianfa zhong," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 10–4.

Though fearing that resistance to change could endanger the entire Chinese civilization, Wang remained optimistic that once China had mastered the crux of Western learning, she would soon return to the center of the world endowed with the heavenly *dao*. Writing on the vicissitudes of state power in Chinese history, Wang argued that while previous dynasties had not always been able to secure political supremacy over the realm, China (Zhongguo) retained its orthodoxy (*zhengtong* 正統) as the embodiment of *dao* and could thus survive domination by foreign powers time after time. As China's power had not been constantly dominant, its current weakness was not permanent either. Once the inherent primacy of the Chinese civilization was reasserted through proper governance under the right regime, Heaven's endorsement was bound to again fall upon China and "the powerful (states) will lose its strength while the distinction between superior and inferior will be made clear."¹¹ Wang's understanding of history, like Zhang Xuecheng's historicist interpretation of the classics, thus pointed to the presentist concern of institutional reform in a new era. And similar to Zhang's statist stance that grew out of this presentism, Wang believed such reforms must be carried out by the state and for the state, so that Western technologies as embodiments of *dao* could be harnessed by a strengthened China to lead the world toward unity (*hunyi tuyu* 混一土宇).¹² He thus claimed that China's problems today lay in the fact that large numbers of talents were not employed by the state; vast lands were not being effectively administered for the welfare of the state; troops were not being properly trained to showcase state power; wealth was not being correctly managed (for the use of reform) and laws and institutions of the state were not being observed.¹³ In line with Wei Yuan who viewed a strong state as the guardian of the Chinese civilization against growing Western threat, Wang

¹¹ Wang Tao, "Zhongguo ziyou changzun," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 139–40.

¹² Wang Tao, "Liuhe jianghun weiyi," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 138.

¹³ Wang, "Bianfa zhong," 14.

was convinced that only a powerful state could ensure China's cultural supremacy amid *dao's* imminent reunification. Writing to Ding Richang in 1870 after returning to Hong Kong from Britain, Wang further asserted that "moral authority can only be erected after the mastery of (advanced) weaponry and ritual righteousness can only flourish with the support of military power." Repudiating the accusation that to reform was to adopt the stratagems of Guan Zhong and Shang Yang in place of Confucian ethics, Wang saw the consolidation of Confucian orthodoxy as guaranteed only by strengthening the state and *bianfa* was the sine qua non to achieve such a noble end.¹⁴ Hence, Wang Tao's cyclical understanding of the historical ebbs and flows of human civilizations and his ethnocentric sentiment for China's rise, despite being products of the Chinese tradition,¹⁵ served to buttress his statist aspiration for a strong state and a near eschatological vision for a future China in the unprecedented age of Western expansion.

The question then, was what kind of reform was urgently needed. When touring in England, Wang Tao had already been amazed by the "pure and kind (*chunhou* 醇厚)" British customs apart from the country's advanced material culture. For Wang, the level of moral cultivation exhibited in the lives of British people was rarely seen outside of China.¹⁶ Reflecting on his impressions, Wang was convinced that the rise of Britain was not prompted by its military might or commercial expansion but by its political system which was at the root of its wealth and power:

What Britain has relied on are the smooth conveyance of messages between the people from below and officials from above and the close relationship between the monarch and the people. The foundation of the state is (in this way) consolidated for peace to last long. When observing

¹⁴ Wang Tao, "Shang Ding zhongcheng," in *Taoyuan chidu*, 112.

¹⁵ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 133–9.

¹⁶ Wang, *Manyou suilu*, 90.

the everyday politics in the country, one could actually detect the heritage of governance from the Three Dynasties. The officials are selected through recommendation and only those with good reputation and moral excellence are put in charge of the people... The people also abide by law for the common good and no one dares to break rules... When the state encounters major issues, officials will gather in parliament (for deliberation) and only come up with a plan after reaching a consensus. As for military policy, inquiries must be sent out to the people and the state would only declare or end wars with public consent. Therefore, military actions are not commenced arbitrarily and the will of the public is always in solidarity.¹⁷

Before leaving Shanghai, Wang belittled the political system of Western nations as being close to “heterodox stratagems used by hegemons” instead of the kingly way. Despite acknowledging the superiority of Western technology, Wang still believed that China must prevail by adhering to *dao*, which was best manifested in the governance of the Three Dynasties.¹⁸ Yet through personal observation of Western politics, Wang came to the conclusion that the spirit of the Golden Age of antiquity was paradoxically inherited by these “barbarian” states that most Chinese literati looked down upon. Such a farfetched comparison, though possibly influenced by the urge to solve tensions arising from his ethnocentric culturalism, might also have been appropriated by Wang to demonstrate the desirability of reform. If the West had achieved global dominance by civilizing their people with political institutions similar to those in China’s golden past, the Chinese state could be revitalized as well by simply returning to its long-lost tradition of governance. And the gist of governance in the Three Dynasties, according to Wang, was that the monarch and the people could work closely together in state politics. With the establishment of

¹⁷ Wang Tao, “Ji Yingguo zhengzhi,” in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 107–8.

¹⁸ Wang Tao, “Yu Zhou Taofu zhengjun,” in *Taoyuan chidu*, 30. See also Li Dong and Yang Ying, “Yangwu yundong shiqi Wang Tao duidai xifang fazheng zhishi de renzhi yu luoji,” *Gaungdong shehui kexue*, no. 02 (2019): 221–3.

political institutions under the Qin dynasty, the monarch's superior status as opposed to his inferior subjects began to take hold and governance degenerated over time. Wang further argued that among the many types of regimes in the West, only constitutional monarchy (*junmin gongzhu* 君民共主) represented by Britain, instead of monarchy and democracy, had succeeded in uniting the monarch and the people like the Three Dynasties. This was the reason behind Britain's unparalleled might and what made British politics the "envy" of Western nations. Apparently, Wang Tao had aspired to an idealized mode of governance which denied the overarching rule of the monarch. Rather, the foundation of the state must be solidified with "the monarch taking charge from above and the people taking charge from below."¹⁹

But who were the people and in what ways could their political participation translate into the strengthening of the state? Here Wang Tao seemed to encounter the same question that had troubled Wei Yuan, namely who should be included in the legitimate sphere of broadened political participation apart from long-entrenched powerholders.²⁰ And similar to Wei, Wang believed it was the talents who were qualified to engage in high politics if good governance were to be achieved:

It cannot be said that there are no talents under Heaven. The problem lies in the imperfect method of selection for talents, the lack of determination to use talents and moreover the inability of those in high office to know and uncover real talents... Worthy talents (*xiancai* 賢才) are the vital force (*yuanqi* 元氣) of the state. When they are employed in high office, the state will be in good governance; when they are not in charge, the state will be in chaos. And if the state does not know what to do with its worthy talents, it will subsequently demise.²¹

¹⁹ Wang Tao, "Zhongmin xia," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 23–4.

²⁰ Kuhn, *Origins*, 41–3.

²¹ Wang Tao, "Yuan cai," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 6.

Though the people were the building blocks of the state, it depended on an extraordinary few to properly run the state, who would act like the vital force in keeping one's body alive. Yet within the current system of personnel selection, only those with useless literary skills instead of expertise in state administration or self-strengthening strategies were promoted. Lacking the mastery of practical learning (i.e., statecraft expertise), such degree-holders did not deserve the title of "literati" but rather belonged to the category of the commoners. Only through the gradual replacement of empty literature by practical learning in the imperial examination could the state overcome the ostensible shortage of talents and the literati class be purified to better serve the state.²² Concurring with his earlier proposals of educational reform in Shanghai, Wang found the fostering of such new elites all the more imperative after his journey to Europe. Admitting that *dao* might not be solely embodied in the sagely learning of Confucianism, he consequently regarded experts in Western technology as also belonging to the category of talents, whose importance ought to be more widely recognized. Moreover, the indulgence in literary skills were to be blamed for the literati's ignorance of current politics and the outside world, as it had led younger generations to focus solely on classical texts and historical records instead of necessary skills of statecraft.²³ If qualified talents were promoted in a reformed education system, they would fittingly administer the people by instructing agricultural production and oversee tax collection. They would also encourage the growth of private industries and oversee the redistribution of profits so that both the wealthy and the poor could strive for the better. In addition, they would ensure the smooth conveyance of government decision-making to the public, thus honoring the spirit of ruling alongside the people in antiquity. In this way, the people

²² Ibid, 6–7; idem, "Yuan shi," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 8–10.

²³ Wang Tao, "Bianfa zhong," "Bianfa ziqiang zhong," "Yangwu zai yongqi suochang," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 14, 37–8, 82–3. See also Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 337–42.

would view the state as representing interests of their own.²⁴ Wang Tao's emphasis on the role of the people in self-strengthening therefore revealed his statist aspiration that sought the political empowerment of qualified literati. The people were commoners outside the elite circle of the lettered class. For them to "take charge from below," they had to be placed under the guidance of talents so that their economic activities could be harnessed for the enterprise of strengthening the state. As the vital force that connected the state and the people, these literati were the guarantee that the state would safeguard the people's livelihoods and the people would wholeheartedly seek to benefit the state. Rather than advocating elements of democratic values, Wang fantasized a scenario in which the people had little autonomy but to cooperate in the grand enterprise of self-strengthening run by worthy talents.²⁵ His search for connecting the powerholders above and the people below in state politics was also predicated on the statist logic of literati empowerment against the incompetent bureaucracy, instead of trying to construct a national identity for China's political reform.²⁶

Apart from education, Wang's reform agenda covered a number of issues such as military, economy and political institutions. And despite his repeated stress on the urgency of institutional reform, Wang largely adhered to a piecemeal approach especially in the establishment of a modern education system.²⁷ In the meantime, he actively sought to create alternative venues for the solicitous yet marginalized literati like himself to engage in state politics, which led to the founding of the renowned newspaper *Universal Circulating Herald* (*Xunhuan ribao* 循環日報)

²⁴ Wang Tao, "Zhongmin zhong," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 22.

²⁵ Cf. Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 188–96. Wang's conviction of the necessity to discipline the people through institutionalized control overseen by state officials and gentry elites constituted an integral part of his reform agenda. See for example Wang, "Shang Ding zhongcheng," 111; idem, "Dunben," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 363.

²⁶ Cf. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 230–5; idem, "Wang T'ao and Incipient Chinese Nationalism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1967): 560–70.

²⁷ Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 203–15, 227–58, 342–9.

in 1874 in Hong Kong.²⁸ For Wang, such a new form of media could effectively “broaden one’s view” while “connect the (state from) above and the (people from) below.” Western states had been benefiting from the popularization of newspapers, but China was lagging behind in utilizing the press for “the welfare of the state and people’s livelihoods.” The reason was that the existing press, though employing Chinese editors, was owned by foreigners and thus unable to synthesize the hodgepodge of domestic and foreign information for cogent political commentaries. It was only through Chinese-owned newspaper that proper analyses of current affairs could be carried out.²⁹ Being more than a platform for the exchange of information, newspapers were “politicized” in Wang’s view and provided an accessible way for the political participation of literati outside high office. Therefore, rather than earning a modest living, newspaper editors and columnists should strive to heed public opinion and sociopolitical problems of the day.³⁰ Wang would thus refute accusations that writing on political issues for newspapers was trespassing his lowly position in society (*weibei yangao* 位卑言高):

The grave peril of the state can be no more than the circumstances of the people (*minqing* 民情) being blocked from those in high positions (of government). When that is the case, news of natural disasters or larcenies cannot reach officials and they have no way of acquiring such information. Like the human body with hampered circulation of vital force, the eyes and ears would subsequently lose their normal functions and the limbs would be difficult to move... Literati today are blinded by their limited minds. When someone talks about current politics, they would accuse him of boasting without shame; when someone talks about foreign affairs, they would accuse him of succumbing to foreign temptations. How could they know that even with the

²⁸ On the establishment of *Xunhuan ribao*, see Xia Liangcai, “Wang Tao de jindai yulun yishi he *Xunhuan ribao* de chuangan,” *Lishi yanjiu*, no. 02 (1990): 157–68; Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 146–54; Wu, *Xinwen shi*, 61–5.

²⁹ “Changshe ribao xiaoyin,” *Xunhuan ribao* 12.2.1874. Cited in Xia, “Wang Tao de jindai yulun yishi,” 163, 166.

³⁰ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 78.

sun and the moon cleaving to Heaven, the light of a candle is not discarded. It is because their brilliance cannot illuminate everything.³¹

For Wang, it was his unshirkable duty to assist the monarch in achieving sagely rule and spread the benevolence of the state to its people (*zhijun zemin* 致君澤民). Even as his political aspiration had been frustrated by an unsuccessful career in the officialdom, he would work hard to avoid reducing his academic training into empty words.³² Hence, Wang found it well justified to harness the convenience of the newspaper to transform the communication between officials and the people so that they could join hands in strengthening the state. In this way, a broader range of literati could also actively participate in state politics by voicing their opinions on contemporary affairs to shape government decision-making and actualize their statecraft visions of building a strong China.

Wang Tao's view on the role of newspaper in state politics was shared by Chinese editors of emerging non-missionary newspapers. As the first-generation Chinese newspapermen, these people with a classical education and affiliation with foreign institutions (e.g., modern press and missionary societies) upheld similar aspirations of making newspapers a legitimate supplement to existing political institutions in achieving good governance.³³ In 1872, the influential *Shanghai News* (*Shenbao* 申報) stated in its editorial announcement that the modern newspaper had transcended the limitations of previous forms of media which were either mythical or esoteric and consequently conducive to mere empty talk by a scholastic few. As a befitting forum

³¹ “Benju ribao tongqi,” *Xunhuan ribao* 12.2.1874. Cited in Xia, “Wang Tao de jindai yulun yishi,” 163–4.

³² “Ribao youbi yu shizheng lun,” *Xunhuan ribao* 6.2.1874. Cited in Xia, “Wang Tao de jindai yulun yishi,” 163.

³³ For the formation of early Chinese journalists, see Natasha Gentz, “Useful Knowledge and Appropriate Communication: The Field of Journalistic Production in Late Nineteenth Century China,” in *Joining the Global Public: Word, Image, and City in Early Chinese Newspapers, 1870-1910*, ed. Rudolf G. Wagner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 47–104.

for the compilation and spread of current events scattered across the globe, the newspaper was in contrast an accessible platform for the lettered class and commoners alike to acquire essential information on state politics, transformations of customs, key issues in foreign relations and vicissitudes of commerce. Therefore, those interested in contemporary affairs and those out to earn a living could all be properly informed, which was a huge benefit for all under Heaven.³⁴ Such a statecraft character assumed by *Shenbao* surely echoed with the aspiration of its contributors, who like Wang Tao called for institutional reform necessary to constructing a strong state with changing perceptions of history and the present world. In an anonymous opinion piece published in 1873, the author claimed that after thirty years of attending Western affairs he had come to ridicule the notion that the power of Western states had originated from their advanced weaponry. Compared to the four-thousand-year historical evolution of China, the author argued, Western civilizations were merely two millennia old and thus similar to the times of Qin and Han in Chinese history. Hence, the customs of the West were simple and sincere (*hou 厚*) while the mind of the people was determined (*zhuan 專*), which was the ultimate reason behind Western dominance of the world:

With simple and sincere customs, there are hardly any people who are destitute and helpless. With the determined mind of the people, there is no enterprise aborted halfway. This is why the West could achieve and utilize its power manifested in the realm of actual things and affairs (*qi*)... The power of Western people lies in their everyday activities without them knowing (their strength), rather than in their strange crafts or refined manufactures... Within the state, monarchs and ministers all adhere to the old customs without the influence of frivolous behavior. Therefore,

³⁴ “Benguan gaobai,” *Shenbao* 30.4.1872.

people are accustomed to such good deeds and unaware of how praiseworthy it is. After another millennium or so, the scenario would no longer be as solemn and sincere like today.³⁵

Similar to Wang's impression of British customs, the author was convinced that Western people were better at preserving the way of life in antiquity, which constituted the foundation of their rising power. And like Wang's advocacy of returning to the tradition of governance in the Three Dynasties, the author argued that by simply modeling after ancestors in the Three Dynasties, China would be on the right path toward restoration. Nevertheless, beneath such a conservative and moralist rhetoric, the author in effect exposed the inadequacy of adopting Western military technology alone in self-strengthening since Western power relied on the purity of people's customs and the rectitude of the human mind. If the West had inherited more from antiquity, propagating Western learning was actually a way to honor China's golden past instead of subjugating to "barbarian" heterodoxy. Situating China and the West on the same evolutionary scale, the author in addition paved the road for thorough institutional reform, as the adoption of Western methods in the realm of actual things and affairs would seem more acceptable if both civilizations were governed by the same principles of the cosmos. Just as Wang Tao's breakdown of the monopoly of *dao* by China's codes and institutions sought to legitimize further reform, the author also urged a bolder step to be taken in self-strengthening by offering a revised view of China and the West in history.

The changing perceptions of cosmic reality consequently prompted further calls for institutional reform. In 1874, a Kemin Liantangsheng (客閩蓮塘生, literally means someone from Liantang residing in Fujian) wrote in *Shenbao* that just like a person ought to strive for self-perfection, a state should regard self-strengthening as the basis of its existence. Acknowledging that modern

³⁵ "Lun waiguo zhiqiang buzai chuanpao qiqiang benzai yu fengsu zhihou fadu zhiyan," *Shenbao* 27.9.1873.

armaments were an integral part of state power, the author nevertheless regarded Western weaponry as insufficient for self-strengthening. Rather, properly trained personnel for modern warfare constituted the central aspect of military modernization. The state should therefore actively seek ways of promoting these much-needed talents for the self-strengthening enterprise. The author suggested that institutions like Tongwen guan be established in every province for a wider circulation of works on Western learning. People eager to study abroad should also be allowed to do so in search for advanced knowledge, be they men of letters or merchants. Upon their return, they should be granted either the opportunity to open private factories or teaching positions in state academies for the education of younger generations on Western learning. Claiming that the human history had been a perpetual scene of struggle (*zhengju* 爭局), the author urged state officials to break the confinement of old thinking and assured that once encouraged by the state, the Chinese people would endeavor to master Western learning and China's restoration would soon take off.³⁶ Convinced that the quest for power was the foundation of the state, the author implicitly called the fixation on moralist teachings of Confucian orthodoxy into question. Accordingly, talents of Western learning rather than established literati deserved a bigger role in building a strong China. Sharing the optimism of Li Hongzhang and Feng Guifen, the author also believed that when under state patronage, the propagation of Western learning in China would naturally enter the next level and the Chinese state, as predicted by Wang Tao, would eventually be on a par with Western powers. Writing in the early years of the fledgling education program of sending officially-sponsored students overseas to acquire Western knowledge,³⁷ the author was certainly emboldened by such a decision from the Qing

³⁶ “Zhongguo dangyi ziqiang weiben lun,” *Shenbao* 26.12.1874.

³⁷ On the education mission and its fate, see Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 262–71; Kuo and Liu, “Self-strengthening,” 537–42.

court and advocated for a wider adoption of similar reform measures in response to Western intrusion. Still, in line with the statist aspiration of literati activists, the author maintained that qualified talents had to take on leading roles in state politics if China's self-strengthening were to be successful.

The emphasis on talents was echoed by an 1876 opinion piece, which lamented that the spread of Western methods in China had only been supported by the likes of artisans and merchants (*gongshang zhibei* 工商之輩) instead of the literati class. For the author, though there were good reasons for literati to belittle Western learning as it was unproductive for their career in the officialdom, the appropriation of Western learning by the ingenious Chinese people would undoubtedly see China superseding the West. Taking the increasing Sino-Western commercial exchange as an example, the author argued that just like more Chinese merchants were going abroad to do business, Chinese methods (*zhongfa* 中法) might eventually be adopted in the West as well and both civilizations would transform into one (*zhongwai yijia*). Therefore, Chinese literati should by no means neglect Western learning. Instead, they ought to start thinking about how to contribute to general human welfare using Western methods.³⁸ Acknowledging the superiority of Western learning, the author was again confident that a reformed state in emulation of the Western model was bound to reassume its leading role in the world. The gist of statist thinking was in this way inherited in arguments that advocated the necessity of learning from the West by opinion piece authors. The emerging literary genre of newspaper was thus consciously domesticated by literati activists in service of their preexisting political agendas.³⁹

³⁸ “Lun Zhongguo jianggai xifa,” *Shenbao* 11.3.1876.

³⁹ Jia Meiling, “Lun wenyi zaidao zai jindai Zhongguo de xin bianhua——Yi Wang Tao baokan sixiang weili,” *Xiandai jiaoji*, no. 24 (2019): 88–9. On the adaptation of newspaper to the Chinese tradition of public discourse, see Mittler, *A Newspaper for China*, 43–117.

More specifically, it was utilized by treaty port intellectuals as a convenient platform to propagate their statist aspirations similar to those of Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan, which sought for the political empowerment of qualified literati in strengthening state power.

Paul Cohen describes the littoral as a distinct cultural type that represented the reformist strain of thought in China's transition to modernity initiated by the spread of Western learning from treaty ports, as opposed to the hinterland which indicates the tenacity of traditional thinking. Accordingly, political thinkers in late Qing and Republican China can all be placed in a continuum between the two ends.⁴⁰ This section shows that even the staunch advocacy of reform through Western methods was substantially influenced by prior developments in the Chinese world of thought. More specifically, the statist line of thinking adopted by literati activists in the early nineteenth century left indelible marks on reformist thinkers from the littoral in their aspiration of constructing a strong state. Boasting cosmic visions influenced by Western learning, treaty port intellectuals inevitably had different views on the institutional setup of such a state from those eager to consolidate Confucian orthodoxy. Wang Tao, in particular, used the rhetoric of *dao*'s great unity (*datong*) to argue for the necessity of reform in emulation of the Western model that would see broadened political participation of non-officeholding literati. Though his conception of *datong* was rudimentary compared to Kang Youwei's theorization of the idea based on *Gongyang* classicism and could be more associated with the belief in "Universal religion" as stated in writings of Westerners like the English instructor in Tongwen guan John Fryer (1839-1928),⁴¹ Wang nevertheless championed the cosmic vision in support of his statist aspiration where a powerful state run by qualified literati would assume the leading

⁴⁰ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 244–76.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 136–8. For a recent study of Kang's vision of *datong*, see Peter G. Zarrow, *Abolishing Boundaries: Global Utopias in the Formation of Modern Chinese Political Thought, 1880–1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 23–52.

role for *dao*'s eventual unification. Hence, besides the practical need for reform and the emotional attachment to the Chinese past, Wang's understanding of *datong* might very well have been informed by statist thinking that regarded the state as *the* point of reference to propagate his political agenda. His pioneering usage of the term in legitimizing reform was then also linked to a larger context of evolving statism in the political discourse from the margins of the Qing empire.⁴² The same line of thinking also shaped how diplomatic ministers came to view the state in the international community, which will be discussed next.

Diplomatic ministers and statist thinking

Having established modern diplomatic relations with the West, the Qing was nevertheless slow to recognize the importance of permanent diplomatic representations in foreign countries. Initial diplomatic missions abroad were only approved due to contingent considerations for the specific need of gaining leverage ahead of treaty revision and consequently contributed little to conceptual transformations on diplomacy.⁴³ After the Margary Affair in 1875, the Qing court was forced to send an apology mission to Britain in hopes of easing tensions set off by the killing of a British officer in Yunnan. Following Li Hongzhang's advice, the court also decided to turn members of the mission into the first legation abroad with the realization that it was to the Qing's own advantage as timely communication was vital to solving international conflicts. Such a process is understood by some scholars as the Qing's eventual coming to terms with modern

⁴² A search in *Shenbao* for *datong* in the pre-1880 period fails to come up with any meaningful discussion of the idea. It was only referred to rhetorically in an 1887 article introducing Western concepts of freedom and love ("Lun xiguo ziyou zhili xiang'ai zhiqing," *Shenbao* 2.10.1887) which reveals the author's optimism for all humanity. Between 1890 and 1895, the term appeared in two opinion pieces from 1892, both of which used the rhetoric to refute any fundamental distinctions between China and the West, thus advocating reform ("Lun yi huadao yumin yigu bangjiao," *Shenbao* 21.2.1892; "Lun shizhi zebian," *Shenbao* 27.3.1892). This attests to Wang's idiosyncratic usage of the term in the pre-1895 era.

⁴³ For the transformation of Qing diplomatic practice, see Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 149–98; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. A, 260–3; Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2848–52; Wright, *The Last Stand*, 277–9.

international relations and the modernization of its diplomatic practice.⁴⁴ More recent studies, on the other hand, examine the multifaceted interpretations of this transformation from the perspectives of direct participants in late Qing diplomatic exchanges.⁴⁵ This section continues this localized approach and discusses how diplomatic ministers appropriated statist thinking in their changing conceptions of the Qing in the international community, starting with Guo Songtao who was appointed chief of the Margary apology mission based on his expertise in foreign affairs.⁴⁶

In the beginning, Guo was reluctant and tried to refuse the appointment on multiple occasions. For him, sending legations abroad should be the least urgent concern at the moment since it was a job “anyone can do.” Rather, the Qing government needed to reflect on its way of handling disputes with foreign nations to avoid similar incidents in the future. Guo suggested in his memorial to the court that when dealing with foreign affairs, there were no better ways other than relying on principles (*li* 理) and the observation of circumstances (*shi* 勢). The conquest history of the High Qing, in Guo’s view, was a prime example of success through principled actions based on honesty and justice, as well as shrewd strategies in response to changing circumstances. Now that the West had posed an unprecedented threat, circumstances were unlike anything faced by previous generations. Yet the majority of officials had blindly repeated arguments since the Southern Song dynasty that depreciated peaceful relations and upheld anti-

⁴⁴ Hsu, *China’s Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 163–72; idem, “Late Ch’ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905,” 71–8; Wright, *The Last Stand*, 277–9.

⁴⁵ Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*; Par Kristoffer Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Svarverud, *International Law as World Order*.

⁴⁶ For the Margary Affair, see Mi Zhenbo, *Qingshi jishi benmo*, vol. 9, ed. Nan Bingwen and Bai Xinliang (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2006), 2953–6; Hsu, *China’s Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 176–9; idem, “Late Ch’ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905,” 82–4. For the first Qing legation abroad and Guo Songtao’s role, see Wong, *Zouxiang shijie*, 166–243; Wang Xingguo, *Guo Songtao pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2000), 134–56; Hsu, *China’s Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 180–5.

foreign animosity. It thus became imperative for upright and talented ministers to understand the realpolitik in the contemporary world and stifle ignorant opinions so that proper diplomatic relations could be maintained for the self-strengthening programs to be carried out in order.⁴⁷ Such a stance not only echoed with his memorial on maritime defense in which Guo asserted that mounting pressures on border defense were first and foremost a result of dynastic decline and should therefore be tackled by focusing on restoring effective governance,⁴⁸ but accorded with Guo's earlier conviction of the root of foreign aggression. Having resided in the war-torn Zhejiang province between 1840 and 1841, Guo was unmistakably enraged by British intrusion. But through his 1843 conversations with local officials in his native Hunan province on the opium embargo, Guo was quick to realize that the outbreak of Sino-foreign hostilities was largely due to "the mishandling of foreign affairs (by state officials)."⁴⁹ Since then, he had been observant of prior diplomatic practice in Chinese history and grew increasingly critical of the hardline diplomacy ascending at the Xianfeng court. When working as a Hanlin scholar in the capital, Guo submitted a memorial to Xianfeng on the restoration of domestic governance before being dispatched to Tianjin in 1859. Claiming that the crux of present difficulties lay in the obstruction of communication between those high above and those below, as well as in the apathy of state institutions to tackle accumulating crises causing widespread deception within the officialdom, Guo implicitly cautioned against the belligerent attitude toward foreigners advocated by officials clueless about Western nations.⁵⁰ After repudiating the hardline diplomacy to no avail, Guo continued to suffer from setbacks in his career even after the establishment of

⁴⁷ Guo Songtao, "Ni xiaojia lun yangwu shu," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 4 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2012), 793–6.

⁴⁸ Guo Songtao, "Tiaoyi haifang shiyi shu," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 4, 781–2.

⁴⁹ Guo Songtao, "Zuiyan cunlue xiaoyin," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 14 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2012), 298.

⁵⁰ Guo Songtao, "Jin tuichen zhili zhiyuan shu," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 4, 3–5.

peaceful foreign relations in the Restoration age. Eventually, he withdrew from the officialdom and concentrated on academic pursuits before being recalled to the capital in 1874 for inquiry on foreign affairs.⁵¹

Upon the request by high officials, especially the insistence of the Empress Dowager herself, Guo finally accepted the commission and started out in late 1876.⁵² After completing the apology mission, Guo was stationed in Britain and France acting as the Qing ambassador before returning to Shanghai in 1879. During this period, he was able to gain firsthand knowledge of the West that facilitated his deep reflection on the Chinese history and civilization.⁵³ Recording in his diary an 1878 conversation with his entourage, Guo discussed the question of China's decline and the Western ascension in length:

Prior to the Three Dynasties, China (Zhongguo) being the embodiment of *dao* had kept the barbarians in check. From Qin and Han onward, both sides had been conquering each other through sheer force. When China was strong it annexed the barbarians, when the barbarians became strong they invaded China. In turn, they acted in contradiction to *dao* (*wudao* 無道). For thirty years since the West had established commercial relations with China, they seem to have challenged China by using *dao* against our own deviation from *dao*, which is why we are constantly in danger... Sages of China had sacrificed their lives in service of all under Heaven while the West had made such an enterprise a public affair for officials and commoners alike. One's sagely virtue cannot be permanent... yet the proliferation of ministers and commoners is endless and cultural prosperity will increase over time. I suspect that even the sages' devotion to the public in the Three Dynasties would fall short of (Western accomplishments). During the

⁵¹ Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 55–134; Wong, *Zouxiang shijie*, 6–146.

⁵² Guo Songtao, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 3 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1982), 49–50. See also Wong, *Zouxiang shijie*, 166–71.

⁵³ Wong, *Zouxiang shijie*, 172–211; Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 142–8; Kuo Ting-Yee, *Guo Songtao xiansheng nianpu* (Taipei: The Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1971), 555–838.

times of Qin and Han, (the political system) tried to exhaust all under Heaven in service of a single man... and the *dao* of governance in the Three Dynasties diminished ever since. Sages govern the people with virtue, yet the waning and waxing of virtue results in a constant shift between order and chaos... The West governs the people with laws and laws are intended to discipline both oneself and others. Hence, when spreading its laws and imposing them on other countries, the West often pushed for their recognition with high hopes. The more refined Western laws become, the more serious a threat the West will pose to China, until it loses its independence completely.⁵⁴

At first glance, Guo's analysis concurred with Wang Tao's conviction that *dao* was no longer monopolized by the Qing. But it must also be pointed out that Guo's perceptions of Western civilization were predicated on his previous studies of Confucian scholarship especially the thought of Wang Fuzhi, which had been revived and popularized by Hunanese scholars since the mid-nineteenth century. Praising that Wang's works were instructive for the understanding of "reasons behind *dao*'s ebbs and flows as well as factors contributing to order and chaos in state politics," Guo found it necessary for the enshrinement of the great scholar so that more could be benefited from his wisdom in attaining the great meanings of Confucianism.⁵⁵ Following Wang's materialist cosmology based on *qi* (氣) monism, Guo unhesitatingly opposed the dogmatic fixation on established norms without the careful observation of changing circumstances. This presentist logic, combined with his frustrated career in the officialdom, led Guo to believe that the decline of Chinese power was the result of long-standing negligence of practical statecraft by officials, which not only deviated from the teachings of the Three Dynasties but invited rising

⁵⁴ Guo Songtao, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, ed. Zhong Shuhe and Yang Jian (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1984), 626–7.

⁵⁵ Guo Songtao, "Chuanshan cibeiji," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 15 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2012), 649–50. See also idem, "Qingyi Wang Fuzhi congsi wenmiao shu," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 4, 798–9.

Sino-foreign conflicts.⁵⁶ In comparison, the ascent of British power, though only beginning around the time of the late Ming, had been sustained by its parliamentary system that properly managed state affairs through subjecting policymaking to public interrogation and by the establishment of local mayors who constantly heeded the will of the people. Together they ensured the reciprocal relationship between the monarch and the people despite the oscillation of power over time, which enabled political stability and talents prospering for generations. The evolution of Chinese political systems since Qin and Han, however, had gone in an opposite direction (which resulted in China's current weakness).⁵⁷ Guo thus used the Western model to launch his attack on the Qing bureaucracy which he believed was compromising the foundation of the state.

Guo's disdain of officialdom had been a central theme in his reflection on dynastic decline. Before his appointment as a Hanlin scholar, Guo had attributed the institutional breakdown of the Qing state to the accumulating misconduct of officials. Gaining personal experience of working in the dysfunctional system, Guo repeatedly lamented over the abuse of power by high officials and their inability to promote talents for the state, which should be accountable for failures in domestic governance and foreign diplomacy.⁵⁸ Writing in 1873, Guo again summarized the cause of waning imperial power since the Daoguang reign as the emperors' over-leniency toward state officials. For Guo, sagely rulers would discipline the bureaucracy

⁵⁶ For the influence of Wang Fuzhi on Guo Songtao and the late Qing academia, see Stephen R. Platt, *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8–63; Chen Yan, “Guo Songtao yangwu sixiang zhongde Chuanshan zhexue yingxiang,” *Chuanshan xuekan*, no. 02 (2020): 30–6; Zhang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 168–71. For a study of Wang's philosophy on its own terms, see Chen Lai, *Quanshi yu chongjian: Wang Chuanshan de zhexue jingshen*, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2013). Small wonder that Wang was one of the precursors in the anti-metaphysical movement that saw the crystallization of Zhang Xuecheng's presentism.

⁵⁷ Guo, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, 407.

⁵⁸ Guo Songtao, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 1 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1980), 65, 150–1, 480–2, 530–2, 550–1.

with stringency while governing the people with magnanimity, which was exactly what the great emperors had done during the High Qing. Yet the Daoguang Emperor gradually relinquished the monopolization of Heaven's mainstay (*qiangang*), leading to unchecked growth of power wielded by only a few incompetent officeholders. Obstinate relying on the mentality of system maintenance out of selfish calculations, they had deprived talents of the opportunity to serve the state in times of unprecedented challenges.⁵⁹ The solution, Guo envisaged, lay in the encouragement of broadened political participation so that policymakers could better heed public opinion. Taking the example of Eastern Han politics, Guo argued that when deliberating over state affairs back then, both senior ministers and junior officials could have a voice without the fear of being reprimanded. The emperor was also willing to follow the consensus of public debate among officials, which resulted in the eventual pacification of the Xiongnu tribes. As long as the Son of Heaven could open up pathways of public participation in politics for all under Heaven, people “would naturally show their loyalty in service (of the state).”⁶⁰ It was therefore reasonable to infer that the political system of the West, which had made governance “a public affair for ministers and commoners alike,” coincided with Guo's earlier political aspirations that sought to empower qualified talents for dynastic restoration. Under the patronage of the emperor himself, Guo imagined, these talents would strive to unrelentingly rectify the conduct of officials (*lizhi*) with state authority and revitalize the civilizing force of politics (*zhengjiao* 政教), which constituted the foundation of wealth and power.⁶¹ Small wonder that while Guo appreciated the political participation of the parliamentary gentry (*yishen* 議紳) in Britain, he remained suspicious to the untamed “popular force” of the West, that is excessive clamor in the

⁵⁹ Guo Songtao, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 2 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1981), 801–2.

⁶⁰ Guo, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 1, 552.

⁶¹ Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 202–6, 218–28, 233–7; Zhou Jiangang, “Guo Songtao jiyu Wan Qing shibian de ‘fuqiang lun’ he ‘minzhu guan,’” *Qiusuo*, no. 04 (2015): 12–4.

management of public affairs. After learning about civil protests and political assassinations in Western states on multiple occasions, Guo concluded that a dangerously overpowered people would undermine state authority and even menace the basis of civilization, which was a big disadvantage of Western politics.⁶² Without the proper guidance of an elite few to rectify the human mind and thus achieve good governance, Guo would find it unthinkable for the state to prosper. Thus similar to Wang Tao, Guo maintained that the political empowerment of those outside high office was only desirable insofar as it would be conducive to strengthening the state, which dovetailed with the statist line of thinking.

Guo's reservation about Western democracy aside, he found the international law system more viable to be applied in Qing diplomatic practice and was keen to see China's incorporation into the system as part of its institutional reform. When studying the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), Guo commented that the making of peace and happiness for all under Heaven could not be dependent on moral cultivation alone. While moral rectitude could be achieved by having reference to one's own character and wishes in dealing with others (*shu* 恕), in a world where each state had its own sovereign and people, the maintenance of proper international relations had to rely on common principles as the measuring-square (*xieju* 絜矩) to regulate state behavior.⁶³ Such a search for objective standards in governance possibly prompted Guo's lengthy study on Confucian rituals, which reinforced his belief that dynastic restoration must start by reaffirming the ritual propriety of the Three Dynasties.⁶⁴ Through personal exchanges

⁶² Guo, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 3, 506, 534–5, 605, 738–9, 771–2. See also Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, 146–7; Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 214–8.

⁶³ Guo Songtao, “*Daxue zhangju zhiyi*,” in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 2 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2012), 749. For the original text Guo commented on, see James Legge trans., *The Chinese Classics: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 373.

⁶⁴ Guo Songtao, “*Liji zhiyi*,” in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 2. See also Platt, *Provincial Patriots*, 53–4; Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, 126–7.

with W. A. P. Martin on international law before departure and conversations with his foreign entourage on the way to Britain, Guo increasingly appreciated the international law system as the ideal model in foreign diplomacy. Two days before arriving in London, Guo wrote in his diary that the creation of international law by Western powers was based on trust and integrity and upheld mutual friendship, which adhered to principles of ritual propriety and thus far surpassed inter-state relations even in the Spring and Autumn period. By acquiring the gist of their way of dealing with foreign relations, China could well attain wealth and power through reciprocity in such a system.⁶⁵ In an 1877 memorial to the Qing court, Guo reiterated this point and warned against the superficial and arrogant (*xujiao* 虛驕) perceptions of foreign nations by Chinese literati since the Southern Song, which had been harming the interests of China for too long. In contrast, Japan was willing to be incorporated into the international system after opening up and therefore able to ensure its rise to power.⁶⁶ Upon accepting the invitation on behalf of China to the sixth meeting of the Association for the Reform and Codification of the Law of Nations in 1878, Guo further described it as an occasion for Western scholars and officials to deliberate over the means of according the human mind with Heaven's principle, an enterprise that had sustained the prosperity of the West. After auditing some of the discussions, Guo extolled the meeting as representing justice in its topics and solemnity in the manner of debates, which was absent in Chinese history yet comparable to ideal foreign relations in the Three Dynasties.⁶⁷ International law thus for Guo became the contemporary embodiment of the spirit of ritual in the Three Dynasties. In line with his ritual studies, Guo saw the international law system as the ideal

⁶⁵ Guo, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, 91.

⁶⁶ Guo Songtao, "Guoshu bingwu chongdang gongshi wenju qing gaizheng banfa shu," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 4, 807.

⁶⁷ Guo, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, 506, 719. For Guo's participation in the meeting, see Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations*, 206–7.

institutionalization of common principles and thus the sine qua non for the Chinese state to not only restore domestic governance with mutual assistance with foreign countries but assume a bigger role in the international arena.⁶⁸ Repeatedly expressing his grave concern that China had lost *dao* since the founding of the Qin and Han dynasties, Guo deemed it imperative for China to regain the endorsement of Heaven's mind (*tianxin*) through institutional reform modelled after the West, which had eclipsed Chinese civilization and gainsaid the myth of China's unique cultural supremacy.⁶⁹ This culturalist conception of Sino-Western distinctions, like the transformation of New Text culturalism by literati activists in the early nineteenth century into the statist search for a strong China, led Guo to also view state power as indicative of the superiority of a civilization that possessed *dao*. He therefore lauded British colonialism as a civilizing force that brought order and prosperity to the "under-civilized" world.⁷⁰ Hence, Guo's embrace of international law was intertwined with his prior aspiration of revitalizing state capacity in governance, which regarded the construction of a strong state as indispensable to safeguarding the Chinese civilization.

At the same time, Guo was not blind to the power politics among Western nations and the mounting pressure they brought to non-Western countries following their global expansion. International law thus for Guo also became a strategy of self-defense for the less powerful states in protecting their interests by using Western rules that represented justice and fairness against

⁶⁸ Fan Guangxin, "Cong Sandai zhili dao wanguo gongfa: Shixi Guo Songtao jieshou guojifa de xinlu lichen," *Tianfu xinlun*, no. 04 (2016): 86–96.

⁶⁹ Guo, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 3, 439, 814–5; Guo Songtao, "Fu Yao Yanjia," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 13 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2012), 369. See also discussions in Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 252–8.

⁷⁰ Guo, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, 51, 445, 474, 482. Guo's understanding of Western ascension, though contradicting the belief in China's cultural supremacy back home which resulted in the destruction of initial prints of his famous report *Shixi jicheng* (使西紀程) to the Zongli Yamen, nevertheless shared with staunch literati the common aspiration of civilizing the world under political authority. See Gao Bo, "Wan Qing lixue shiye xia de Yingguo zhimin zhixu," *Shehui kexue zhanxian*, no. 04 (2017): 90–8. For the original text of Guo's report, see Guo, *Lundun yu Bali riji*, 27–98. For the domestic uproar against Guo's report, see Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, 141–4; Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 148–52.

their own predatory acts.⁷¹ This pragmatic understanding of international law was more clearly expressed by Zeng Jize (曾紀澤, 1839-1890), son of Zeng Guofan and ambassador to Britain and France superseding Guo Songtao's role. When replying to the request by a member of the Association for the Reform and Codification of the Law of Nations which asked China to be more actively involved in the international law community, Zeng explained:

The Chinese Zongli Yamen has selectively translated the essentials of the book *Law of the Nations* and will rely on international law to establish its position when handling affairs with the West. Yet it must be a gradual process and currently we cannot expect our way (of managing foreign relations) to accord with international law in every case... The gist of international law is nothing more than two words: common sense (*qing* 情) and principle. And if we judge by our fair minds, our reasoning will not contradict international law. As for China's accommodation of the surrounding lesser states and tributaries, our successive sagely emperors' profound grace and benevolence have far exceeded what is recorded in international law.⁷²

Raised under the influence of his father's pursuit of moral rectitude and statecraft applications of Confucian learning, Zeng Jize ventured through a hodgepodge of mixed traditions in Confucianism at an early age and frequently engaged with experts in Western learning when coming to assist his father in Nanjing after the city's recovery by Qing troops from the Taipings. Rebutting the hostile attitude toward Western learning by obdurate literati, he claimed that though the teachings of past sages were able to illuminate *dao* in principle, they could not exhaust the investigation of actual things and affairs "in all the past and future." It was therefore a legitimate and ineluctable task for contemporary scholars to study Western affairs in

⁷¹ Fan, "Cong Sandai zhili dao wanguo gongfa," 93–6.

⁷² Zeng Jize, "Riji," in *Zeng Jize ji*, annot. Yu Yueheng (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2008), 344.

“expanding what we already know to fill in what we do not.”⁷³ Such a conviction, though aimed at promoting the acceptance of Western learning by Confucian scholars, also helped to consolidate Confucian orthodoxy by positioning Western learning in the realm of actual things and affairs. In line with his father who prioritized the bulwark of the tradition of *dao* by upright literati in face of dynastic decline, Zeng Jize found the advocacy of Western learning only feasible as long as it proved to be conducive to the statecraft agenda of restoring Chinese imperial power.⁷⁴ International law was thus merely an expedient in foreign diplomacy, instead of a norm that would eventually reshape China’s long-established relationships with its neighboring states. It is then unsurprising that three months prior to the above-quoted conversation, Zeng told the Japanese ambassador to Britain that Asian states ought to adopt the international law system in maintaining regional peace and stability. For Zeng, the West had used international law to procure the right of autonomy (*zili* 自立) for even the vassal states, which was the most effective way to forestall warfare and protect the people. As the vicissitudes of state power were unpredictable, it was best for the strong and the weak to abide by a common set of rules so that everyone would benefit from such a system.⁷⁵ Wary of the rising Japanese power, Zeng attempted to contain the threat by putting Sino-Japanese relation within the confines of international law, while asserting Chinese suzerainty over its tributaries in the face of Western expansion by downplaying the universal applicability of international law in East Asia.⁷⁶ In a letter to the Shandong governor Chen Shijie (陳士杰, 1824-1893), Zeng further explained that

⁷³ Zeng Jize, “Wenfa juyu xu,” in *Zeng Jize yiji* (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1983), 135–6. For Zeng’s early education, see Lee En-han, *Zeng Jize de waijiao* (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1982), 1–60; Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West*, 157–61.

⁷⁴ For Zeng Guofan’s take on Confucian orthodoxy and Western learning, see Zhang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*, 116–40.

⁷⁵ Zeng, “Riji,” 333.

⁷⁶ The related context was that both Korea and Annam (modern-day Vietnam) were under the threat of Japan and France respectively. See Lee, *Zeng Jize*, 258–62; Mi, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 9, 3045–50.

once China was able to achieve self-strengthening, it could treat Western nations the way that the Han and Tang empires had treated the northern nomadic tribes. But under current circumstances, China ought to cunningly manage foreign relations with the West like in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods to maximize its own interests among the great powers.⁷⁷

Such diplomatic maneuverings were unmistakably based on practical calculations of the realpolitik. Yet much like the call for an activist state in border defense generated by foreign intrusion, the appropriation of Western diplomatic practice also instigated an intellectual transformation that required the Qing to assume a more activist role in defending its sovereignty on the world stage. Whether international law was the embodiment of ideal governance sanctioned by ritual propriety like in the Three Dynasties, or a strategic instrument defending China from foreign intrusion, it was the duty of the state to actively assert its power in the international community to shield the self-strengthening program at home from foreign intervention. Ma Jianzhong (馬建忠, 1845-1900), an oversea student and translator for the Chinese legation to France under Li Hongzhang's patronage, thus saw diplomatic success as the result of power politics predicated on sheer strength. As part of the educational reform in the self-strengthening movement, the dispatch of Chinese students to Europe was initiated in the 1870s with the aim to further the study of advanced students in the school of Fuzhou Navy Yard (Fuzhou chuanzheng xuetaang 福州船政學堂) for the recruitment of officials specialized in Western knowledge. Through his hard work, Ma had not only achieved academic excellence in the study of law and international relations but served as an informant for Li on matters of politics and economy in Western states.⁷⁸ Tracing the diplomatic history of Western nations from

⁷⁷ Zeng Jize, "Bali fu Chen Junchen zhongcheng," in *Zeng Jize ji*, 184–5.

⁷⁸ Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 266–71; Xue Yuqin, *Jindai sixiang xianquzhe de beiju juese: Ma Jianzhong yanjiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 32–9. For a general survey of Sino-French relations in this

ancient Rome to the present, Ma argued that beneath the seemingly just system maintained by international law was a balance of power after protracted warfare, in which the powerful states had been appropriating the law for their own gains. Claiming to be well acquainted with the book of *Guiguzi* (鬼谷子), Ma found the collection of texts that represent the School of Diplomacy (*Zonghengjia* 縱橫家) during the Warring States period illuminating for contemporary foreign relations. Just like how smaller states had exploited struggles among great powers back then, China today should also actively seek international allies while carrying out self-strengthening. It was then necessary to refine the selection of diplomatic personnel in promoting exceptional talents who would be able to forge solid alliance between China and great powers so that the state could benefit from the international balance of power.⁷⁹ The rhetoric of analogizing Western international relations with those between the Eastern Zhou feudal states had been a recurring trope deployed by the literati in understanding the changing world since the 1860s, which helped to alter the Sinocentric view in Qing foreign relations by situating the Qing empire among the family of nations.⁸⁰ Using his expertise in Western diplomacy, Ma further appropriated the analogy to advocate state activism in asserting Chinese power on the world stage. In doing so, he sought to justify the political empowerment of diplomatic talents following the institutionalization of legations in late Qing, which for him would be indispensable to the construction of a strong China by preserving state sovereignty through crafty diplomacy.⁸¹ Statist thinking was thus appropriated by Ma for the utilization of modern diplomacy to assist the self-

period, see Xianyu Hao and Tian Yongxiu, *Jindai Zhong-Fa guanxi shigao* (Chengdu: Xinan jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2003), 86–145.

⁷⁹ Ma Jianzhong, “Bali fu youren shu,” in *Shike zhai jiyuan*, annot. Zhang Qizhi and Liu Houhu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 35–43.

⁸⁰ Wang, *Sixiang shilun*, 20–2; Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations*. For a classical study on Sinocentrism in late imperial China, see John King Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁸¹ Xue, *Ma Jianzhong*, 138–75.

strengthening enterprise. Rising diplomatic ministers within the Qing officialdom accordingly regarded an activist state in foreign relations as closely tied with the restoration of state capacity in domestic governance. Through the joint effort of their diplomatic maneuverings based on international law and the self-strengthening programs led by qualified literati at home, these ministers believed they could actively contribute to strengthening state power in both the domestic and international arenas.

Conclusion

In a recent article, Yue Du investigates how the Chinese term *guo* underwent significant changes from denoting a dynastic state ruled by a royal house to a trans-dynastic state defined along cultural, ethnic and territorial lines that would become modern China (*Zhongguo*). For Du, such a conceptual transformation was facilitated by the spread of Western knowledge especially international law and the modernization of Qing diplomatic practice from the 1860s to the 1900s, which anticipated the reinvention of China as a modern nation.⁸² Du's observation is certainly true for radical reformers of 1898 who, as Huang Zhangjian has noted, made a distinction between the ruling regime of the Qing empire and the Chinese state (*guo*) they strove to preserve.⁸³ Yet this transformation is not a natural process and we cannot expect those in the pre-1895 era to have the same hindsight of the Sino-Japanese War as we do. Rather, their intellectual endeavors should be analyzed against prior intellectual development instead of rendered as incomplete projects of modernization fraught with the teleology of the nation-state. From my analysis, it is arguably the case that when Wang Tao analogized talents to the vital force of the state, he adopted the same rationale behind Wei Yuan's metaphor of all under Heaven as one's

⁸² Yue Du, "From Dynastic State to Imperial Nation: International Law, Diplomacy, and the Conceptual Decentralization of China, 1860s–1900s," *Late Imperial China* 42, no. 1 (2021): 177–220.

⁸³ Huang Zhangjian, *Wuxu bianfa shi yanjiu* (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1970), 1–54.

body in justification of literati empowerment.⁸⁴ Wang's praise for constitutional monarchy as comparable to the governance of the Three Dynasties can also be seen as aligning with the aspiration of achieving sagely rule through broadened political participation of qualified literati, which had been an integral part of statist thinking. Similarly, Guo Songtao's doubt about undisciplined "popular force," together with his accolade of parliamentary gentry in Western politics, might very well indicate his anti-bureaucratic contempt with incompetent officeholders and the urge to revitalize state power using Western methods that would empower non-officeholding talents, which for him inherited the political ideal of the Three Dynasties. Such an aspiration gained increasing currency among opinion piece writers as well. Wagner observes that a trope of argument identifying the close cooperation between those in high office and those below as the basis of Western power, which was further said to have corresponded with the gist of governance in the Three Dynasties, became popularized over time in articles of the influential *Shenbao*.⁸⁵ This phenomenon has to be understood in light of statist thinking appropriated by a wider range of reform-minded literati in self-strengthening. Deeply aware of the Western challenge, they nevertheless sought to legitimize reform and their political empowerment in line with the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation. The Western model was accordingly regarded as an alternative in realizing sagely rule and only desirable insofar as it could construct a strong state.

Admittedly, by advocating reform in emulation of the West, treaty port intellectuals and diplomatic ministers started to develop alternate conceptions of the institutional setup of their state apart from the established practice of Qing state apparatus. Discussions of a parliamentary

⁸⁴ See ch. 3, n. 78.

⁸⁵ Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Free Flow of Communication Between High and Low: The *Shenbao* as Platform for Yangwu Discussions on Political Reform, 1872-1895," *T'oung Pao* 104, no. 1-2 (January 2018): 116-88.

system and modern newspaper as a platform for political participation pointed to burgeoning reappraisals of the state against the autocratic, top-down mode of governance. The increasing usage of *Zhongguo* in juxtaposition with the West also opened up new possibilities for a geographical and political reconceptualization of the Qing which conflated the empire with cultural-historical China and denied the centrality of its place in the world.⁸⁶ Still, such dynamics should not be measured against the nationalist reinvention of China as a preordained end. Similar attempts to reform autocratic rulership had already been aspired in the early nineteenth century by grounding literati empowerment in the construction of a strong state. When Wang Tao regarded Western technology as the crucial *fawu* among *qi* (器) for China to strengthen its power in preparation for *dao*'s unification, he arguably envisioned the adoption of Western political institutions to serve the same end. Like Li Hongzhang and Feng Guifen, Wang found it necessary that institutional reform of the state be sanctioned by the ideological commitment to serving the state as the embodiment of *dao*. Such a state, in line with the materialist cosmology that *dao* must be manifested through *qi* (器), needed to actively demonstrate its power on the world stage, as seen in the aspirations among diplomatic ministers who undoubtedly had different expectations of the state in foreign relations as opposed to in domestic governance. Though in reality the empowerment of extra-bureaucratic venues and men outside high office might provoke conflicting interests with state bureaucracy, in the political discourse these conflicts were overshadowed through the idealization of a powerful state as the embodiment of *dao* by self-strengthening advocates. Like early nineteenth century literati activists, they continued to justify their cause through the symbiotic notion of state-literati relation, buttressed by the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器). Wei Yuan's convictions that actual conditions (*shi* 勢)

⁸⁶ Du, "From Dynastic State to Imperial Nation," 182–94; Zhao, "Reinventing China," 15–8.

change irreversibly while *dao* remains unchanging would arguably be appealing to these ardent reformers.⁸⁷ Through the interpretations of Wang Tao, opinion piece writers and even Guo Songtao, China and the West were further placed in one and the same cosmic vision where the eventual unification of *dao* was inevitable regardless of Sino-foreign distinctions, which required a powerful state led by qualified literati to ensure the survival of China. Theoretically, such an aspiration would see an expansion of state patronage over socioeconomic activities, a potential gradually actualized when the quest for wealth came to be regarded as the foundation of power. The next chapter will focus on this transformation and reveal how it was shaped by statist thinking.

⁸⁷ See ch. 2, n. 81.

Chapter Seven: Statist thinking at Play: Merchant Empowerment and Economic Reform

This chapter investigates how the changing discourse on commerce and merchants in self-strengthening was predicated on previous intellectual transformation by looking at the ways statist thinking had shaped proposals of economic reform toward the end of the nineteenth century. In doing so, it offers a better understanding of the logic behind late Qing reform than the modernist teleology. Behind the many debates over self-strengthening, there was one persistent issue of how to raise funds to cover rising expenditures of the self-strengthening programs. Two decades into the self-strengthening movement, the search for wealth to sustain funds for military modernization and educational reform gradually became a pressing matter, which led to the development of modern non-military industries aimed at generating profit in assistance of self-strengthening.¹

Scholars have generally understood such transformations through the lens of economic modernization and regarded changing views on commerce and merchants in politics as a natural response to foreign economic encroachment. Ye Shichang, in a modernist narrative, discusses how pioneering thinkers strove for the popularization of modern economic thought but inevitably failed alongside the self-strengthening movement.² Similarly, Cohen describes how Wang Tao's economic reform fostered economic nationalism and anticipated the rise of full-fledged nationalism in modern China.³ Wellington Chan argues that the development of private entrepreneurship essential to modern industry was handicapped in the late Qing due to persistent

¹ Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 122–30.

² Ye Shichang, *Jindai Zhongguo jingji sixiangshi*, vol. A (Shanghai: Shanghai University of Finance and Economics Press, 2017), 67–144.

³ Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 185–208; idem, “Wang T’ao and Incipient Chinese Nationalism,” 569–70.

bureaucratic interference. As officials merely sought to assert control over wealth in the strengthening of state power, there lacked the institutional basis to establish constructive state-merchant relationship.⁴ Halsey, without a fatalist undertone, gives a more positive assessment of Qing fiscal modernization where officials were able to transform public finance with growing commercial wealth after 1860. Still, the rationale fell within the enterprise of building a modern military-fiscal state, which for Halsey became an underlying assumption in response to European imperialism.⁵

Moving away from the modernist narrative, I argue that proposals of securing state finance with commercial wealth, already made by literati activists in the early nineteenth century to restore state capacity in governance, were taken up by self-strengthening advocates as a peaceful means to repel foreign intrusion. In line with statist thinking, they called for active state intervention of the economy. The need for close cooperations between merchants and state officials accordingly saw reappraisals of the merchants' role in politics and the role of the state vis-à-vis commerce. By examining the writings of Wang Tao, Xue Fucheng (薛福成, 1838-1894), Ma Jianzhong and the renowned merchant-reformer Zheng Guanying, it can be seen that in line with literati empowerment, proposals for the empowerment of merchants followed the same statist line of thinking by legitimizing their broadened political participation through the construction of a strong state. Deeming wealth acquired through commercial profit as a foundation of state power, they again targeted treacherous officeholders impeding the state to regain the control of profit (*liquan* 利權, also translated as economic sovereignty) from foreigners. Such an anti-bureaucratic sentiment culminated in the notion of commercial warfare where Zheng Guanying

⁴ Wellington K. K. Chan, "Government, Merchants and Industry to 1911," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, 416–62.

⁵ Halsey, *Quest for Power*, 81–112.

resorted to a war-time style management of the economy to necessitate institutional reform that would streamline state administration in collaboration with the merchant class. Much like the symbiosis of the literati and the state, the political empowerment of merchants was believed to be able to consolidate state patronage over economic activities. Hence, statist thinking arguably morphed into an intellectual cornerstone for reform at the closing of the pre-1895 era.

Commerce and the state: Early conceptual transformations

This section looks at how the writings of Wang Tao and disputes over the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company (Lunchuan zhaoshang ju 輪船招商局) were shaped by statist thinking, which initiated changing views of commerce and merchants in self-strengthening. Before the mid-nineteenth century, the Qing fiscal system based on the Confucian ideal of low and equitable taxation had minimized the role of the state in regulating the domestic economy. The permanent freeze of the land tax quota in 1712 and the merging of labor service into land tax in 1729 further handicapped the ability of the central government to secure new sources of revenues. With limited control of fiscal resources, the state became increasingly incapable of tackling challenges arising from dynastic decline and Western intrusion in the early nineteenth century.⁶ Consequently, challenges to the established notion that upheld agricultural production at the expense of commerce in the economy had already begun at the dawn of nineteenth century China. Bao Shichen, for instance, claimed that commercial profit was a legitimate form of wealth which would ultimately benefit state finance. While not denying agriculture as the root of wealth, Bao actively sought ways to utilize merchant enterprise and market forces in strengthening the fiscal power of the state to tackle dynastic decline.⁷ Wei Yuan also saw wealth and power as

⁶ For general introductions to Qing fiscal history, see Richard von Glahn, "Modalities of the Fiscal State in Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese History* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 22–7; idem, *The Economic History of China*, 348–99.

⁷ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 177–95; Ye, *Jingji sixiangshi*, vol. A, 25–33.

natural derivatives of the Kingly Way (*wangdao*) which could never be attained by empty talks over Confucian ideals without catering to the practical needs of the state.⁸ Such a statecraft orientation further led Wei in his study of the West to recognize Britain's rise as being originated in the state's active protection of oversea commerce through military means.⁹

Following the mid-century transition, the Qing fiscal institutions eventually underwent profound transformations that opened up new sources of revenue from indirect taxation (such as *likin* and customs) and foreign debt. Meanwhile, the fiscal capacity of provincial governors was greatly enhanced as they were mainly in charge of collecting new taxes. Lacking an incentive for fiscal re-centralization, the system continued to operate in a decentralized mode until the Sino-Japanese War. The power of the central government was therefore curtailed in public finance.¹⁰ In the face of such circumstances, Wang Tao picked up Wei's broad-brush depiction of Western economic expansion in his 1864 letter to Li Hongzhang. In line with Wei, Wang viewed official patronage as the key to Western commercial success on a global scale. Moreover, the negligence of regulation over economic activities had resulted in the loss of profit for both Chinese merchants and the state amid Western competition, which exacerbated China's weakness and the destitution of its people. Apart from strengthening military power, Wang argued, recapturing *liquan* constituted an equally important part in the management of foreign affairs during the age of dynastic restoration. It was then necessary to introduce Western machinery to textile industry and agriculture so that Chinese merchants could have more goods to trade with foreigners. The use of steamships in transportation should also be encouraged since Chinese merchants could

⁸ Wei, "Mogu," 36.

⁹ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 37," 1077–8. See also Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 665–71.

¹⁰ Ni Yuping, *Cong guojia caizheng dao caizheng guojia: Qingchao Xian-Tong nianjian de caizheng yu shehui* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2017); Wenkai He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State: England, Japan and China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 131–79; Shi Zhihong and Xu Yi, *Wan Qing caizheng, 1851-1894* (Shanghai: Shanghai University of Finance and Economics Press, 2008).

travel farther in this way and respond to official requisition if needed (*youshi guanyong, wushi shanggu* 有事官用，無事商僱). Stressing that financial resources were the backbone of state power and the basis of any successful enterprise, Wang urged Li to take active measures on the part of the state in assistance of Chinese merchants' competition with Westerners. Once under state patronage, Wang was confident that the Chinese were bound to regain control of profit which would substantially contribute to building a strong state.¹¹ Driven by the practical need of alleviating fiscal problems of the Qing, Wang at the same time associated Western power with active state intervention in commercial activities, which Chinese officials had long been looking down upon. In order to accumulate wealth for China's restoration, the state ought to assert a bigger role in regulating the economy so that commercial profit could be harnessed for self-strengthening. Therefore, possibly under Wang's influence, Li Hongzhang in an 1865 memorial on establishing the Jiangnan Arsenal implicitly informed the court of the necessity for a wider adoption of Western machinery in China. Reiterating the fundamental distinctions of Chinese and Western political institutions, Li nevertheless pointed out the instrumental value of machinery in revitalizing Chinese power to arrest foreign intrusion. Western machinery, argued Li, was equally beneficial to textile, printing or agricultural production as they were to the military industry. With growing Sino-Western communications, Chinese merchants and wealthy farmers would eventually use these machines for their own gains in a matter of decades. It then required the state to champion and oversee the importation of Western machinery so that those eager to adopt such machinery in generating profit would be brought in line with state regulation.¹² Concurring with his logic behind educational reform, Li viewed the success of the

¹¹ Wang, "Daishang Sufu Li Gongbao shu," 82, 84–5. See also Zhang, *Nianpu*, 74–6.

¹² Li Hongzhang, "Zhiban waiguo tiechang jiqi zhe," in *Li Hongzhang quanji*, vol 2 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008), 200–2. See also discussions in Lei Yi, *Li Hongzhang yu Wan Qing sishi nian* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2008), 191–7.

self-strengthening program as possible only through the active patronage of the state in acquiring Western knowledge and technology. China's industrialization, which constituted an integral part of self-strengthening, should thus depend at least on the joint effort of state regulation and merchant enterprise, if not on total control by the state.

Li might have been chary of pushing the court to take further steps in promoting modern industries apart from his cautious suggestions in the memorial, yet changing circumstances continued to prompt changing ideas on the role of commerce vis-à-vis wealth and power. Lamenting that those in power could not assume effective control of profit despite China's vast territory and rich resources, Wang Tao blamed the ignorant and obstinate literati fixating on agriculture as the root of wealth for disregarding commercial profit and thus hampering the construction of a strong state. In line with Wei Yuan's accusation of empty talk, Wang decried that these vile fellows never cared about the practical issue of increasing agricultural production and only strove to exploit the already impoverished peasants. Since wealth and power were the foundation of good governance, concerns for seeking means of generating extra profit ought to precede scholastic debates on the root and branches of wealth. It was thus well justified that the state adopted a more active stance on opening up channels of profit (*lisou* 利藪) such as encouraging the development of mining industries to boost the production of coal and iron for trade, the promotion of machinery in the textile industry and the modernization of transportation by building railways and introducing steamships.¹³ Circumventing the question of how to reconcile commercial profit with the Confucian ideal of physiocracy,¹⁴ Wang nevertheless sided with the statist logic of legitimizing his reform proposals through the aspiration of building a

¹³ Wang Tao, "Xingli," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 45–7.

¹⁴ For a survey of physiocratic ideas in Chinese history, see Li Ta-chia, "Cong yishang dao zhongshang: Sixiang yu zhengce de kaocha," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*, 82 (December 2013): 4–16.

strong state, while condemning the despicable degree-holders who were incapable of grasping the gist of statecraft. With profit now being deemed as constituting the fundamentals of state governance, Wang found it increasingly imperative for the emergence of an activist state in China's economic modernization. Therefore, in his 1874 letter to the Guangzhou magistrate Feng Zili (馮子立,?-?), Wang again explicated the urgency of placing commerce under state patronage to recapture *liquan* amid Sino-Western economic competition. For Wang, the contemporary mode of foreign trade dominated by the West had been starkly different from that in the pre-Ming era, since Western nations had effectively safeguarded the oversea expansion of private companies through political patronage and protection from the military. In this way, Western merchants could build up greater enterprises globally and drain the profit of those from other parts of the world. Citing the example of Britain's ascent, Wang argued that the ingenuity of hardworking Chinese merchants was in no way inferior to Westerners and in recent years Chinese had been incrementally turning the table by seizing Western profit through economic competition. If the state could play a more active role in promoting commerce and offering necessary protection, Chinese merchants would in turn endeavor to serve the state when needed. Hence, the wealth of merchants would ultimately transform into wealth of the state, which was the reason commerce constituted the building blocks of Western power.¹⁵ Following a presentist understanding of Western commercial expansion in his day which necessitated active state patronage of merchant entrepreneurship against long-standing negligence of commercial affairs (*shangwu* 商務) in state politics, Wang called for a statist reconceptualization of commerce to utilize merchant enterprise as a powerful aid to self-strengthening. Witnessing the rapid

¹⁵ Wang Tao, "Daishang Guangzhou Feng Taishou shu," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 299–300. See also Zhang, *Nianpu*, 110–1.

development of Sino-foreign commerce in Hong Kong, Wang was confident that through peaceful competition Chinese merchants could manage to retake more and more profit currently ceded to Westerners. At the same time, it concerned him that foreign merchants might become increasingly inimical to Chinese merchants due to their commercial success.¹⁶ The state, claimed Wang, should thus exert itself when force was due in economic competition with the West instead of leaving Chinese merchants on their own, so that Qing imperial might could be strengthened by actively engaging in global commerce.¹⁷ Convinced of the necessity for economic reform to revitalize China in face of foreign intrusion, Wang Tao continued the argument of pioneering statecraft reformers in the early nineteenth century that justified the promotion of commerce in building up state power. His statist conception of commercial profit as a crucial form of wealth underlying dynastic restoration further led him to advocate the emergence of an activist state in patronizing commercial activities and protecting merchant enterprise against foreign economic encroachment.¹⁸ Wang's reappraisal of commerce was thus closely tied to his statist aspiration of constructing a strong China.

When calling for active state patronage of merchant enterprise, Wang Tao referred to the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company in Shanghai as a prime example to make his point. For Wang, the administrative mode of the company that combined official protection and merchant management allowed effective coordination between merchants and state officials (*xiangwei biaoli* 相爲表裏) in competition with foreign firms.¹⁹ Born out of the design by Li Hongzhang,

¹⁶ Wang Tao, "Xiren jianji huashang," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 91–3. For late Qing commercial development, see Albert Feuerwerker, "Economic Trends in the Late Ch'ing Empire, 1870–1911," in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 11, Late Ch'ing 1800–1911, Part 2*, 40–58.

¹⁷ Wang Tao, "Ying zhong tongshang," in *Taoyuan wenlu waibian*, 111–2.

¹⁸ Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 244–53. See also Ren Xiaoling and Wu Sumin, "Wang Tao de zhongshang zhuyi sixiang jiqi jindai yingxiang," *Neimenggu nongye daxue xuebao*, no. 03 (2008): 280–1.

¹⁹ Wang, "Daishang Guangzhou Feng Taishou shu," 302–3.

the China Merchants' Company was established primarily as a response to proposals of halting steamship construction due to excessive expenses. In his memorial of June 20, 1872, Li explicated in length the necessity of building steamships in defense of China from foreign intrusion. After deploying argumentative techniques in rebuttal of his opponents, Li used the occasion to propagate his vision of a wider adoption of Western machinery so that China's natural resources like coal and iron could be utilized to secure more sources of profit. Apart from warships, the shipyards could also build merchant vessels for Chinese merchants to break the monopoly of foreign carriers in China's coastal freight service. The pivot, in Li's view, was to promote modern non-military industries with merchant operation under official supervision (*guandu shangban* 官督商辦) directed by upright, capable and trustworthy officials cognizant of the merchant mind, so that Chinese merchants would be willing to invest in government-sponsored projects and *liquan* would return to the state accordingly.²⁰ Such a vision led Li in the end of 1872 to propose the organization of a shipping company solely owned by Chinese to tap the investment of Chinese merchants in foreign firms and seize a share of foreign profit in freight service along China's coastline.²¹ Approved by the court and placed under Li's personal patronage, the China Merchants' Company in its early years was able to enjoy relative autonomy from bureaucratic interference while receiving official support like loans and the carriage of tribute grain to ensure profitable operation. Managed by merchants and former compradors, the company's business soon took off and became a formidable competitor with foreign carriers within a decade.²²

²⁰ Li Hongzhang, "Chouyi zhizao lunchuan weike caiche zhe," in *Li Hongzhang quanji*, vol 5 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008), 106–10. For a partial translation, see Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 108–10. See also discussions in Lei, *Li Hongzhang*, 203–10.

²¹ Li Hongzhang, "Shiban zhaoshang lunchuan zhe," in *Li Hongzhang quanji*, vol 5, 257–8.

²² For the establishment of the China Merchants' Company and its early operation, see Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 131–3; Chi-kong Lai, "Li Hung-chang and Modern Enterprise: The China Merchants' Company, 1872-1885," in *Li*

Despite its initial success, the company was repeatedly targeted by officials against its mode of administration for alleged corruption. As early as in 1877, a censor Dong Junhan (董儁翰, ?-?) had accused the merchant directors of blatant cronyism and advised more official supervision necessary for the “healthy” operation of the company.²³ After Li Hongzhang proposed to turn the company’s repayment of government loans into funds for the purchase of ironclads in 1880, Wang Xianqian (王先謙, 1842-1917), then libationer in the Imperial Academy (*Guozijian jijiu* 國子監祭酒), memorialized the court that the merchant directors had long been embezzling company assets which belied the company’s original purpose of “seizing profit from foreign merchants.” For Wang, Li Hongzhang’s grand design for China Merchants’ Company to benefit the state by retaking *liquan* was sabotaged by the mode of merchant operation under official supervision, since over time the merchants would abuse the pursuit of profit for private ends without effective control from the officialdom. To implement the principle of “official supervision,” it was imperative to select able officials in rectifying corrupt behaviors in the company and contriving long-term plans (*changjiu zhiji* 長久之計) for the sake of merchants and the state. Wang suggested the newly-appointed Governor-general of Liangjiang Liu Kunyi (劉坤一, 1830-1902) be charged with the task of reviewing the company’s rules and regulations to ensure the proper management of government funds. In addition, the company ought to report its capital flow on a monthly basis for official supervision so that future embezzlement could be avoided.²⁴ It has been alleged that Liu Kunyi was personally against Li’s plan of the ironclad purchase and attempted to stop Li by subjecting China Merchants’ Company to more

Hung-chang and China's Early Modernization, 216–47; Albert Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization: Sheng Hsuan-huai (1844-1916) and Mandarin Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1958), 97–9.

²³ *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 6, ed. Zhongguo shixue hui (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1961), 19–20.

²⁴ *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 6, 37–40.

bureaucratic control through reorganization.²⁵ Nevertheless, Wang's arguments were to an extent indicative of the deeply entrenched mistrust of merchants' commitment to the state by the literati class.²⁶ Goaded by selfish calculations, merchants were profit-driven in nature whose short-sightedness would hamper the self-strengthening enterprise if not directed by state officials. This was precisely the reason Li Hongzhang was hoodwinked by the treacherous merchant directors and unaware of their corruption. Though it might be Wang's insinuation to implicitly criticize Li's style of patronage over the company, the fear was unmistakable that malpractice would inevitably arise if merchant management was left unanchored (*manwu qianzhi* 漫無鈐制).²⁷ Liu Kunyi, upon reporting his investigation of the company, also supported the idea of inserting more government control by turning official loans into stocks, thus making the state the largest shareholder.²⁸ In an 1881 memorial, Liu further argued that the success of China Merchants' Company was made possible only through the imperial grace of tax exemption and monopoly over freight service. As benevolent parents would think for the livelihood of their children, it was the children's unshirkable responsibility to heed the needs of parents. Avowing that foreign shipping companies were much more heavily taxed in their own countries for the fair share of profit between merchants and the state, Liu found it both legitimate and necessary to make official loans into stocks so that the state could benefit from the company's commercial success. Through the collaboration between merchants and officials, aspersions from outsiders would eventually disappear and the company would sustain its booming business.²⁹ In line with the

²⁵ Chi-kong Lai, "Lunchuan zhaoshang ju guoyou wenti, 1878-1881," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*, 17_A (June 1988): 28–36.

²⁶ For Wang's intellectual orientation and academic career, see Mei Ji, "Lun Wang Xianqian de xueshu chengjiu ji xueshu sixiang," *Chuanshan xuebao*, no. 01 (1988): 83–9.

²⁷ *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 6, 39.

²⁸ Liu Kunyi, "Chayi zhaoshang juyuan bing zhuoding banfa zhe," in *Liu Kunyi yiji*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 600–7.

²⁹ Liu Kunyi, "Qingjiang zhaoshangju benxi zuowei guangu pian," in *Liu Kunyi yiji*, vol. 2, 624–5.

logic of Wang Tao's design for official requisition of steamships when needed, Liu regarded merchant enterprise as an integral part of the grand mission to revitalize state power. Merchants should therefore be naturally subjected to official regulation if necessary, so that their business could be directed to benefit the state by perspicacious officials, whose foresight would ensure long-lasting commercial prosperity.

Under Li Hongzhang's inexorable protection, proposals to bureaucratize the business operation of China Merchants' Company between 1879 and 1881 were turned down in the end. Yet after the 1883 Shanghai financial crisis, mounting political and financial pressures forced Li to reorganize the company by appointing his protégé Sheng Xuanhuai (盛宣懷, 1844-1916) as director-general (*duban* 督辦), a move which invited increasing government control and official interference of company business.³⁰ In an 1886 memorial on the reorganization of the company, the Board of Revenue maintained that bureaucratic control was vital for implementing effective official supervision over the company. Governance in the Three Dynasties, declared the memorial, had always upheld agriculture as the root of wealth and downplayed commerce. The rising concern of commercial affairs in state politics was thus merely an expedient response to the opening up of treaty ports. The design of China Merchants' Company by Li Hongzhang, targeted at retaking China's profit from foreign merchants, was initially an opportunity to acquire wealth and power for the state in tackling foreign impacts on the Chinese economy. Now the opportunity was being squandered by company directors who peculated *liquan* from the state above and deceived honest merchants below for private pursuits. Attributing financial deficits of the company to corrupt behavior of these directors, the Board urged the southern and northern

³⁰ Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 137–40; Lai, “Li Hung-chang and Modern Enterprise,” 235–7. For Sheng's career in the company, see Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization*, 59–82. For the 1883 financial crisis, see Li Yingquan, “Lun 1882-1883 nian Zhongguo jinrong fengchao,” *Anhui shixue*, no. 06 (2005): 20–8.

commissioners of trade to be put in charge of personnel selection and list all information on the company's expenditure, operation, ownership and location of ships and wharves in standard forms (*zaoce* 造册) for official inspection.³¹ Much like Wei Yuan's attack on treacherous officeholders nibbling away state revenue, the Board of Revenue also lambasted despicable fellows embezzling from the middle (*zhongbao*) which had seriously compromised company business and moreover the self-strengthening enterprise. Nevertheless, while Wei had used the attack to propagate his reform agendas aimed at streamlining the bloated bureaucracy, the Board advocated an expansion of bureaucratic power in the commercial activities of state-sponsored enterprises. Still, they both sought justification in the name of strengthening the state, which in turn elicited questions of promoting the right kind of men fit for the noble cause. Written in the mid-1880s when the influence of "pure discussion" (*qingyi* 清議) might still linger in the political atmosphere, the Board's memorial (and more possibly Wang Xianqian's), which assumed a moralist undertone in defense of Confucian orthodoxy for personnel selection, could very well have been the product of such an environment.³² However, situated in a broader context, the call for employing upright and capable men in constructing a strong state had been a recurring theme in the development of statist thinking since the early nineteenth century. In this case, challenges to Li Hongzhang's style of managing modern non-military enterprises, which saw the empowerment of the merchant class in self-strengthening, could be seen as linked to the

³¹ Nie Baozhang ed., *Zhongguo jindai hangyunshi ziliao*, series 1, vol. B (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1983), 825–8.

³² The rise and fall of *qingyi* politics in the first decade of the Guangxu reign is understood by some as representing an inherent political feature of imperial China, see Lloyd E. Eastman, *Throne and Mandarins*; idem, "Ch'ing-i and Chinese Policy Formation during the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (August 1, 1965): 595–611. More recent studies have however pointed out that such a phenomenon, at least in the case of late Qing, was born out of contingent historical conditions tracing back to the power reshuffling of the 1861 coup, and exacerbated alongside heated struggles between Empress Dowager and Prince Gong. See Lin Wen-jen, *Nanbei zhizheng yu Wan Qing zhengju, 1861-1884: Yi junjichu Han dachen wei hexin de tantao* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 2005); Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. A, 282–97. I have therefore left out discussions on the issue of *qingyi* as it concerns more political history than intellectual history.

statist concern of literati re-empowerment in politics. Whereas the ideological conformity of merchants to the state was questioned, it was up to the righteous officials to lead the way so that commercial activities could be aligned with the grand mission of self-strengthening. Therefore, from the intellectual perspective, statist thinking played a part in the subjugation of China Merchants' Company to bureaucratic interference, which denied the leading role of merchants in China's early industrialization. Yet self-strengthening advocates continued to call for merchant empowerment in securing *liquan* for strengthening state power, which will be discussed next.

Commerce weaponized: Statist thinking and commercial warfare

The operational mode of the China Merchants' Company under Li Hongzhang's patronage might have failed as an experiment, but changing views on commerce vis-à-vis the state continued to be developed by self-strengthening advocates. This section deals with such conceptual transformations that crystallized in the notion of commercial warfare. In 1878, a censor Li Fan (李璠,?-?) memorialized that after decades of observing Western intrusion, he had discovered the core of foreign affairs as essentially commercial affairs, which was deemed by Western nations as constituting the basis of state power. The objective of using commerce to strengthen their states at the expense of others had been the driving force behind the imposition of unequal treaties on China and the establishment of treaty ports as trading posts to drain Chinese resources. Finding it unrealistic to repel Western economic encroachment through military means, Li advised the court to mobilize merchants for turning Western weapons of invasion (i.e., commerce) against their own (*yishang dishang* 以商敵商). People in the coastal region, argued Li, should be encouraged to found companies and join the competition with foreign merchants so that *liquan* could be gradually recaptured. When business with China became increasingly unprofitable, Westerners would leave automatically and foreign intrusion

would cease for good. To secure popular support for this grand strategy, Li suggested that local magistrates propagate the agenda in areas under their jurisdiction and provide necessary assistance to “righteous figures among wealthy merchants” (*fushang yimin* 富商義民) in their business so that more would come to realize the gravity of close cooperation between officials and merchants in fighting against foreign intrusion. Concurring with Zeng Guofan’s assertion that the West had grounded governance in commerce and warfare (*shangzhan*), Li urged the Qing state to reappraise the role of commerce in preparing China for Western expansion.³³ Comparing Western political institutions with Shang Yang’s promulgation of agriculture and warfare (*gengzhan* 耕戰) in expanding state power over society, Zeng’s original argument was intended to oppose extravagant bureaucratic control in defense of limited government in Confucian ideals.³⁴ Though not contradicting Zeng in principle, Li Fan saw economic competition as a handy expedient to arrest Western aggression in the unprecedented situation troubling the Chinese state. The merchant class was thus endowed with the noble task of bulwarking China against foreign humiliation (*waiwu* 外侮), which constituted the centerpiece of dynastic restoration. Nevertheless, their empowerment was only justified in the name of strengthening the state and should therefore be naturally placed under official patronage, since “foreign nations had attained wealth and power from growing influence of merchants

³³ *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 1, 165–8.

³⁴ Zeng explicitly differentiated *shang* (commerce) and *zhan* (warfare) as two terms (*erzi* 二字) in juxtaposition with *geng* (agriculture) and *zhan*, in his letter to Mao Hongbin (毛鴻賓, 1806-1868). See Zeng Guofan, “Fu Mao Jiyun zhongcheng,” in *Zeng Wenzheng gong (Guofan) quanji*, eds. Li Hanzhang and Li Hongzhang (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1974), 14551–2. For a discussion and debate, see Liao Zuyi, “Zeng Guofan shi shangzhan lun de shizu ma,” *Zhejiang shehui kexue*, no. 05 (2003): 169–72; Qiu Zhihong, “Jindai Zhongguo shangzhan sichao ‘xinlun’ zhi zai shangque,” *Zhejiang shehui kexue*, no. 03 (2005): 180–6. For analyses of Shang Yang’s theory, see Hu Tieqiu, “Shang Yang goujian nongzhan zhiguo de linian jiqi yingxiang——Yi *Shangjun shu* wei zhongxin taolun,” *Shehui kexue*, no. 01 (2016): 135–52; Yuri Pines, “The *Book of Lord Shang* on the Origins of the State,” in *Reading Texts on Sovereignty: Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought*, eds. Antonis Balasopoulos and Stella Achilleos (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 9–16.

coordinated by officials, while China became weak and impoverished due to waning influence of merchants separated from officials.” Claiming that Western military power was sustained by economic expansion, Li further linked commercial success with the goal of self-strengthening. Only when official support and merchant enterprise united as one could Chinese power be restored to the extent of “subduing the enemy without military confrontation.”³⁵

Li Fan’s advocacy of using commerce as a self-defense instrument came out at a time when Russian encroachment in northern Xinjiang and Japanese aggression in Ryukyu and Korea sparked a new wave of Sino-foreign hostilities which alarmed many of the necessity to push further for the self-strengthening agenda.³⁶ Such circumstances were precisely what had prompted Xue Fucheng, then serving as an advisor of Li Hongzhang, to compose an essay titled *Chouyang chuyi* (籌洋芻議, literally translated as *Preliminary Discussions on the Management of Foreign Affairs*) in 1879 explicating keys to arresting foreign intrusion, which he hoped could be informative for high officials in such a time of hardship.³⁷ Having spent his early career in Zeng Guofan’s private secretariat since 1865, Xue came under Li’s patronage in 1875 and was directly involved in Li’s management of foreign relations (such as dealing with the Margary Affair).³⁸ Unsurprisingly, Xue deemed it imperative to ease mounting pressures of foreign powers through diplomatic maneuverings and strengthening border defense in the first sections of the essay. Continuing his argument, Xue pointed out that while agriculture and warfare

³⁵ *Yangwu yundong*, vol. 1, 167.

³⁶ For Qing foreign relations in this period, see Mi, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 9, 2967–79, 3045–50; Pan Xiangming ed., *Qingshi biannian*, vol. 11 (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2000), 139–44, 147–64; Hsu, “Late Ch’ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905,” 84–96.

³⁷ In the 1885 preface, Xue explained how the essay was produced due to the dire situation of resurging foreign threat in 1879, see Xue Fucheng, “*Chouyang chuyi xu*,” in *Xue Fucheng xuanji*, eds. Ding Fenglin and Wang Xinzhi (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1987), 526. For the background and subsequent circulation of *Chouyang chuyi*, see Ding Fenglin, *Xue Fucheng pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1998), 108–10, 141–3.

³⁸ Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 78–101.

formed the basis of Shang Yang's search for wealth and power, the West had further relied on industry and commerce (*gongshang* 工商) to expand the acquisition of profit on a global scale. Under state patronage, commercial expansion had contributed to the unprecedented rise of Western power in history:

When (global) commerce had not flourished, countries could well achieve good governance in isolation from each other by subsisting on what their native lands produced. After commerce became the pursuit of all under Heaven, one's boom would often see another's bust. If this is the case, with profit flowing out of one country but not into it, there can be no way to sustain (the economy) for long without being impoverished. Therefore, countries across the globe today strive to establish trading relationships (*tongshang* 通商) due to necessary conditions (in the present) ...

For China, since it is unrealistic to ban foreign trade, only through the proper management of commercial affairs could we cope (with the current situation).³⁹

Contrary to Li Fan's negative perception of Western commercial expansion, Xue regarded commerce as an integral part of state power in his day, which provided the necessary means for Western ascension and should therefore be taken seriously for China's self-strengthening. His presentist understanding of the emergence of global commerce as an irreversible trend further led him to call for state activism in patronizing commerce to revitalize Chinese power through accumulating wealth, instead of passively defending China against foreign economic encroachment. Hence, for the three pivots of commerce (i.e., transportation, agriculture and industry), it all depended on the state to promote the establishment of Western-style companies, the production of silk and tea for export and the adoption of machinery in manufacturing. The state should also offer tax exemption for fledgling Chinese companies, coordinate commercial

³⁹ Xue Fucheng, "Chouyang chuyi," in *Xue Fucheng xuanji*, 540–1.

activities between enterprises to avoid destructive competition, and encourage Chinese firms to expand oversea business so that “foreign profit could be seized to benefit our people.”⁴⁰ Taking commerce as essentially a zero-sum game, Xue necessitated growing state regulation in the economy as indispensable to safeguarding the self-strengthening enterprise, which in turn occasioned his reappraisal of commerce that was generally seen as mere pursuits of private ends. For Xue, as long as the private pursuit of profit did not harm state finance, it would eventually transform into “the greater profit for the public.”⁴¹ Such a transformation could be possible only when commercial activities were sanctioned by the state and the people aligned with the goal of self-strengthening in their search for profit. The promotion of commerce was thus closely linked to Xue’s statist aspiration of constructing a strong China.⁴²

Apart from commerce, Xue advocated more sweeping reforms in foreign and economic policies, which were buttressed by his belief in inevitable changes in historical evolution. Like Wang Tao, Xue asserted that throughout history China had time and again undergone profound sociopolitical changes. When Western superiority in knowledge and technology could be harnessed by Chinese ingenuity, the *dao* of past sages was bound to spread further in the world (Xue was more optimistic than Wang in this sense that *dao* was still embodied in Chinese civilization).⁴³ Such an awareness of the mission to bulwark *dao* through reform points to the possibility of reinterpreting established social norms in justification of present needs for change. Guo Songtao, after returning to his native Hunan from Europe, would therefore in an 1881 lecture refute the long-standing contempt of the merchant class by historicizing the elevation of literati in the four classes of people. In Guo’s view, the policy in the early Han to suppress

⁴⁰ Ibid, 541–3.

⁴¹ Ibid, 541.

⁴² Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 123–8.

⁴³ Xue, “Chouyang chuyi,” 554–6.

commerce and merchants was born out of contingent historical conditions, namely that powerful merchants had then utterly betrayed principles of trust and righteousness (*xinyi* 信義) by monopolizing the domestic economy and exploiting the general populace. After the exaltation of literature in the Tang and especially the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Song, the literati class became increasingly self-indulgent and enjoyed exorbitant prestige over the other three classes. Observing that many of his contemporaries were being drawn into the idle pursuit of literati vainglorious, Guo urged his audience to ditch the unfounded appreciation of the literati and instead take pride in occupations that heeded the practical needs of the time.⁴⁴ Though Guo's aversion to the literati might be directly linked to his disappointment in the Qing officialdom, he raised unmistakable concerns over the excessive number of degree-holders who were disengaged from production as a key factor behind China's weakness. In comparison, the West had relied on the merchant class for the acquisition of wealth that underlay their power, and the people were consequently willing to work in modern industry rather than waste time on empty talk.⁴⁵ Guo's aspiration of strengthening the state had at this point led him to lambast literati prestige and uphold the status of merchants in society through a historicist interpretation of the four classes of people that denied any inherent hierarchy among these subjects of the imperial state, which served to address the presentist concern of accumulating wealth for the statist goal of revitalizing China. Xue Fucheng took Guo's argument one step further on his diplomatic mission to Europe in 1890, after sojourning in the British colonies of Hong Kong and Singapore:

⁴⁴ Guo Songtao, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 4 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1983), 318–22. The lecture was delivered to a small audience of eleven people (mostly Guo's fellow Hunanese) upon their visit to a shrine of Wang Fuzhi as an established gesture of courtesy (*xuanjiang zhiyi* 宣講之儀), which focused on the pivotal role of school in rectifying the human mind and consequently literati morale. For Guo's contribution to education in Hunan, see Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 168–72.

⁴⁵ Guo, *Guo Songtao riji*, vol. 4, 320. See also Guo Songtao, "Lun shi," in *Guo Songtao quanji*, vol. 14, 279–80; Wang, *Pingzhuan*, 375–81.

Merchants are at the bottom of China's four classes of people. However, the West relies on merchants as the lifeline to exploit nature for production (*kaiwu* 開物) in completing human affairs (*chengwu* 成務), which serves to promote the welfare of households and the state. Time after time, it has resulted in amazing achievements. Why is that? With (the help of) merchants, literati can put scholarship into practical use and perfect their learning; farmers can widely circulate (*tong* 通) their products and increase production; and artisans can work harder to sell their crafts. Therefore, merchants are holding the pivot (*gang* 綱) of the four classes of people... In ancient times, with sparse population and limited production, we might well govern the state in isolation without ever communicating with the outside world. Yet in today's era of increasing connections among states across the globe, even sages must strive to properly manage commercial affairs had they still been alive.⁴⁶

When summoned by the court before his departure, Xue had boldly presented Guo Songtao's diplomatic report *Shixi jicheng* to Guangxu and advised the young emperor to take notice of Western affairs.⁴⁷ Through his personal observation, Xue wrote in his diary that he became increasingly appreciative of Guo's appraisal of Western civilization.⁴⁸ Hence, upon witnessing how Hong Kong and Singapore had been transformed from remote islands into global commercial centers within decades, Xue claimed that even though the pivotal role of merchants was not elaborated in the *Six Classics*, the Western ascension had unmistakably proven the desirability of promoting commerce in strengthening state.⁴⁹ Similar to Wei Yuan's reform agendas that bypassed existing political institutions, the pressing need to secure financial support for self-strengthening led Xue to increasingly favor radical ideas against established notions of

⁴⁶ Xue Fucheng, *Xue Fucheng riji*, vol. B, ed. Cai Shaoqing (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2004), 522.

⁴⁷ Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 204–5.

⁴⁸ Xue Fucheng, *Chushi Ying Fa Yi Bi siguo riji*, annot. Zhang Xuanhao and Zhang Yingyu (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1985), 124.

⁴⁹ Xue, *Riji*, vol. B, 522.

commerce and the merchant class, which sought legitimacy in the name of constructing a strong China.⁵⁰

The relativization of merchants' inferiority among the people was more articulated in an 1889 *Shenbao* opinion piece. Claiming that the elevation of the literati class and the denigration of the merchant class were primarily derived from the Confucian distinction of moral righteousness (*yi* 義) and profit (*li* 利), the author regarded such a distinction as lacking any constant basis, as literati could also be lured into the chase for profit and merchants might very well adhere to moral righteousness. Under the current situation in which profound changes had occurred since the opening up of treaty ports, the hierarchy among the four classes of people became even more dismantled:

Today, there are merchants who have recently made their way to the gentry class and officials who venture into commercial enterprises. With officials assuming overall responsibility (for the enterprise) and merchants taking charge of practical matters, they are often able to coordinate with and rely on each other for success. How can one tell who is superior and who is inferior? Merchants therefore surpass other classes of the people in this way and became on a par with state officials, which the literati, farmers and artisans cannot hold a candle to. How unimportant the merchants once were and how significant a role they now play! Is it due to changing opinions of those in high positions? I say no. It is because of the (necessary) conditions in present times, which goes beyond what man is capable of. When the realm is in peace and unity, merchants seem to be looked down upon; yet when rivaling powers vie for dominance in a divided realm, it seems that merchants will become valued.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 350–6; Ye, *Jingji sixiangshi*, vol. A, 106–8.

⁵¹ “Shangwu lunlue shang,” *Shenbao* 27.12.1889.

Stressing the particularities of the present age that gave rise to merchants' prominence, the author immediately linked the merchants' ascent to alleviating foreign intrusion that had been troubling the Chinese state for too long. After citing examples of powerful merchants in history that had influenced state politics such as Lü Buwei (呂不韋, ?-235 BCE), the author went on to argue that with China being situated among dozens of states scattered across the globe today, it again resembled the world during the periods of Spring and Autumn and the Warring States.⁵² Merchants therefore could and should play a bigger role in contributing to the welfare of the state. Moreover, only merchants traveled around the world and were thus familiar with affairs of various states compared to the other three classes of the people. Their expertise in commercial affairs and foreign intelligence made them an irreplaceable asset in face of unexpected turns of events, which could be further harnessed to defend China against Western economic encroachment through competition with foreigners for the control of profit.⁵³ In line with Xue's analysis of modern commerce, the author also called for a wider recognition of merchants' growing importance in contemporary times. Yet such a change in their social status was necessitated by irreversible trends of the present when great powers vied for global dominance and therefore predicated on the needs of the state.⁵⁴ Just like the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器) that functioned as a two-way street by subsuming human affairs under *dao*'s authority, the empowerment of the merchant class had to be made possible by the state and for the state, which would steer private entrepreneurship toward the self-strengthening enterprise. Xue Fucheng, in mid-1892, therefore put in his diary that one of the gists for Western-style governance lay in the

⁵² For the life and work of Lü, see John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁵³ "Shangwu lunlue shang," *Shenbao* 27.12.1889.

⁵⁴ For the global expansion of imperialist powers, see Halsey, *Quest for Power*, 24–51; Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2011); D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires: A Comparative Survey from the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1965).

nurturing of their people (*yangmin* 養民).⁵⁵ One year later, Xue revisited the issue and asserted that Western wealth and power were rooted in the state's effort to nurture and educate its people, rather than in the possession of advanced weaponry and technology as ignorant fellows would have thought. By establishing effective communication between those in high office and the general populace through the parliamentary system, protecting people's livelihoods through social welfare, promoting mass education, inhibiting inhumane punishment through rule of law, and creating favorable conditions for a modern economy, the West had managed to achieve good governance with substantial investment in the public interest.⁵⁶ The logic behind Xue's elevation of the people in speaking of wealth and power becomes more conceivable when it is understood as the statist aspiration of bypassing existing political institutions in the name of strengthening the state, which legitimized the empowerment of previously marginalized men outside government. In turn, those empowered are naturally expected to be wholeheartedly devoted to the grand mission of constructing a strong state.

Xue's advocacy of empowering merchants in self-strengthening was echoed by Ma Jianzhong. When studying in France, Ma had written to Li Hongzhang in 1877 stating that the wealth of Western states was rooted in official protection of commerce and the root Western power was predicated on securing popular support.⁵⁷ In 1890, Ma further developed his ideas on how to accumulate wealth for the state by enriching its people (*fumin* 富民). Concurring with the assertion that wealth constituted the basis of power, Ma pointed out that the growth of foreign trade since the opening up of China's domestic market had seen increasing import of foreign goods and consequently an outflow of capital resulting in financial deficit of the state and the

⁵⁵ Xue, *Chushi riji*, 589–90.

⁵⁶ Xue, *Chushi riji*, 802–3.

⁵⁷ Ma Jianzhong, "Shang Li Boxiang yan chuyang gongke shu," in *Shike zhai jiyuan*, 31.

impoverishment of Chinese people. To counter such economic encroachment, China should endeavor to achieve and maintain trade surplus so that profit could be seized from foreign competitors. The state therefore needed to first expand the export of Chinese goods such as tea and silk in face of growing competition from Japan and British India by encouraging manufacturers to increase product quality, establishing big companies for centralized investment and cutting taxes on exported goods. Secondly, the state ought to reduce its reliance on imports by developing modern manufacturing industry so that profit could return to the hands of Chinese merchants. Moreover, the state should utilize its natural resources to increase wealth by promoting the mining industry for rare metals. In case of lack of funds, the state could further borrow foreign debts, either in the name of the government or a Chinese company under official patronage, to support private entrepreneurs in building up modern enterprises. In doing so, the balance of trade would be gradually tilted in China's favor.⁵⁸ Similar issues of modernizing the manufacturing sector by importing Western machinery and developing the mining industry for wealth had already been explored by the likes of Wang Tao and Xue Fucheng,⁵⁹ yet it was Ma who organized such proposals into a comprehensive strategy for China to secure the foundation of power by regaining *liquan* from foreigners through economic means. Early in 1884 when working in assistance of China Merchants' Company, Ma had claimed that "farmers and artisans could only be mobilized for self-defense while merchants could be used to form distant alliances in attacking neighboring enemies (*yuanjiao jingong* 遠交近攻)" in a letter to Sheng Xuanhuai on company business during the Sino-French war.⁶⁰ Regarding international trade as a zero-sum

⁵⁸ Ma Jianzhong, "Fumin shuo," in *Shike zhai jiyuan*, 1–10.

⁵⁹ Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 234–44; Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 454–64.

⁶⁰ "Ma Jianzhong zhi Sheng Xuanhuai han," in *Sheng Xuanhuai dang'an ziliao*, vol. 8, eds. Wang Xi and Chen Jiang (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2016), 178. For Ma's role in the China Merchants' Company, see Xue, *Ma Jianzhong*, 58–70. For the company under official supervision led by Sheng, see Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 137–44; Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization*, 150–88.

game like Xue Fucheng, Ma then found it imperative for the state to initiate close cooperation with merchants and provide active patronage for private entrepreneurship in recapturing control of profit for China. By devising a systematic plan to revitalize state power through accumulating wealth in foreign trade, Ma in effect necessitated growing state regulation in the creation of a national economy aimed at gaining trade surplus and mobilizing extra-bureaucratic forces in China's economic modernization, all in the name of strengthening the state.⁶¹ Accordingly, he did not hold back from touching upon the highly contested issue of foreign debt by openly calling for more government borrowing in support of modern enterprises.⁶² Only by transforming impoverished people into enriched people could China's wealth be properly in reserve for the grand mission of self-strengthening.⁶³ Hence, Ma's promotion of increasing Chinese export in international trade might very well be indicative of growing mercantilist voices during early phases of industrialization in the late Qing.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Ma's proposal was unmistakably informed by the statist aspiration of strengthening China which saw the transformation of wealth into power as necessary and legitimate.⁶⁵ The merchant class was in this way mobilized for the defense of China against foreign encroachment through non-military means and placed firmly under state patronage, which in turn required the state to play a bigger role in directing merchant enterprise toward the goal of weaponizing commerce for self-strengthening. An 1893 article in *Shenbao* followed the same line of argument by lamenting that for thirty years China had seen a steady increase of import and decrease of export in foreign trade, which exacerbated the outflow

⁶¹ Shi Lei, "Lun Ma Jianzhong de jingji sixiang," *Jiangsu daxue xuebao*, no. 04 (2002): 21–4; Hu Chijun, "Lun Ma Jianzhong duiwai maoyi he yinjin waizi de sixiang," *Qiushi xuekan*, no. 04 (1994): 58–61.

⁶² The borrowing of foreign debts by the Qing government was initially an expedient measure to alleviate financial deficit in suppressing internal rebellions during the Tongzhi reign, yet it became complicated by funding issues of the self-strengthening programs and entangled with political struggles among officials. See Ma Jinhua, *Waizhai yu Wan Qing zhengju* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011).

⁶³ Ma, "Fumin shuo," 9.

⁶⁴ Ye, *Jingji sixiangshi*, vol. A, 99–101; Xue, *Ma Jianzhong*, 129–32.

⁶⁵ Xue, *Ma Jianzhong*, 132–3.

of wealth. Yet instead of trade itself, it was the negligence of commercial affairs by the state that ought to be blamed. Western states, argued the author, had been willing to offer official patronage and even military protection for their merchants in international trade, which ensured continuous merchant support in strengthening state power. Through “coordination between high and low,” the state would be in its element when transforming commercial gains into state finance, therefore consolidating the basis of power. China accordingly needed to alter the long-standing contempt of the merchant class by state officials and establish bureaus specially designed for commerce that would appoint qualified personnel in supervising commercial activities. In addition, these officials should be required to inspect economic data in devising plans for trade growth and issue patents for technological innovation to secure advantage for Chinese merchants in competition with foreigners. By uniting officials and merchants into one (*lianwei yiqi* 聯為一氣), commerce was destined to be revitalized, which would eventually lead to growing wealth of the state and its military might.⁶⁶ Deemed as a sound strategy to arrest foreign intrusion by accumulating wealth for state power rather than resorting to military confrontation, commerce became increasingly weaponized in writings of self-strengthening advocates toward the end of the nineteenth century. The call for merchant empowerment and state activism in preparing China for foreign invasion in the economic sector in time gave rise to the notion of “commercial warfare,” as formulated by Zheng Guanying.

Born into a Cantonese merchant family, Zheng arrived in the fledgling city of Shanghai at the age of seventeen after failing the imperial examination and started working for the British Dent and Company until its closure in 1866. From 1867 onwards, Zheng ventured into the business of tea, salt and navigation as an individual investor, before serving as the general manager in 1873

⁶⁶ “Lun Zhongguo yi zhongshi shangwu,” *Shenbao* 31.3.1893.

for the China Navigation Company founded by the British firm Butterfield and Swire. Apart from his career as a comprador, Zheng did not hesitate to engage in public debates on social affairs, which resulted in the 1872 publication of *Vital Remedies for Saving the Time* (*Jiushi jieyao* 救時揭要) comprised of essays on contemporary issues such as Chinese migrant workers, opium trade and foreign diplomacy. During the 1870s, Zheng continued to write on issues concerning state governance while taking care of his business, an enterprise that reflected his devotion to the social responsibilities of a gentry-merchant.⁶⁷

Having witnessed resurging Sino-Western hostilities around the first year of the Guangxu reign,⁶⁸ Zheng started to draft a systematic treatise on statecraft which later became the 1880 edition of *Easy Remarks* (*Yiyan* 易言).⁶⁹ Though mainly concerned with the nuts-and-bolts of self-strengthening, the essays in *Yiyan* were indicative of Zheng's own conceptions of the Chinese state in the contemporary world, as manifested in the first essay on international law. For Zheng, the ascent of the West was propelled by long-standing rivalries among European states that had resulted in incessant warfare and conquest, which fueled Western technological advancement and their global expansion in search for wealth and power. Now that the world had been profoundly transformed into one where Chinese and foreigners coexisted (*Hua Yi lianshu*

⁶⁷ Yi Huili, *Zheng Guanying pingzhuan*, vol. A (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2011), 4–54, 214–9; Guo Wu, *Zheng Guanying: Merchant Reformer of Late Qing China and His Influence on Economics, Politics, and Society* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2010), 11–102. For the text and study of *Jiushi jieyao*, see Zheng Guanying, “Jiushi jieyao,” in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, ed. Xia Dongyuan (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1982), 3–57; Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 55–76. For studies on comprador in late Qing, see Yen-P'ing Hao, *The Comprador in Nineteenth Century China: Bridge between East and West* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970); Ma Xueqiang and Zhang Xiuli, *Churu yu Zhongxi zhijian: Jindai Shanghai maiban shehui shenghuo* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2009). For the emerging social class of gentry-merchants, see Zhang et al. eds., *Guan shen shang xue*, 209–370; Ma Min, *Guanshang zhijian: Shehui jubian zhongde jindai shenshang* (Tianjin: Renmin chubanshe, 1995).

⁶⁸ See Fu, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 8, 2903–9; Mi, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 9, 2953–6; Wright, *The Last Stand*, 251–99.

⁶⁹ The rationale behind writing *Yiyan* is expressed in Zheng's own preface, see his “Zixu,” in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, 63–4. An abbreviated edition of *Yiyan* was later published in 1881. For further analysis on the dating and editions of the book, see Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 102–92.

華夷聯屬), it was imperative and legitimate to abandon China's isolationist stance in foreign relations and actively respond to rising challenges from Western powers. Claiming that there could not be a geometrical center on the Earth since it is round, Zheng downplayed the ethnocentric sentiment of Sino-foreign distinctions and stressed the necessity of China joining the family of nations to harness the instrumental value of international law in arresting foreign intrusion. In this way, China would be able to maintain peaceful relations with the West while carrying out reform in attaining wealth and power. By becoming an active member of the international community, China could even contribute to the normative functions of international law through propagating the Chinese way of managing international relations.⁷⁰ Reconstructing the history of Europe's rise that resembled Wei Yuan's understanding of Western expansion,⁷¹ Zheng nevertheless remained positive about how such a process had brought about Western ascension. Instead of being a source of instability, the global conquest by the West was the justification for self-strengthening through the active search for wealth and power. Untroubled by moral judgments of the war-making states in Europe, Zheng seemed to adopt a less ambivalent attitude toward the Western model that had often relied on force to achieve political ambitions in constructing a strong state.⁷² He thus sided with Zeng Jize in viewing the international law as a strategic maneuvering to create favorable conditions for China's self-strengthening. Moreover, the international law system could serve as a platform to disseminate Chinese values on the world stage in competition with the West, once China had mastered the

⁷⁰ Zheng Guanying, "Yiyan (36 vols.)," in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, 65–8.

⁷¹ See ch. 3, n. 46.

⁷² An example of such ambivalence can be found in the thought of Wang Tao, see Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 91–109.

Western methods for self-strengthening. The aspiration of constructing a strong China therefore emboldened Zheng to actively embrace much-needed reform for wealth and power.⁷³

Upon completing *Yiyan*, Zheng sent a copy of the manuscript to Wang Tao for comments. Wang spoke highly of the book and offered to write an afterword for its publication.⁷⁴ Reiterating the inevitability of change in the present age, Wang nevertheless pointed out that what Zheng had hoped to reform in fact belonged to the realm of actual things and affairs, while the *dao* illuminated by Confucius was really what he strove to preserve. Since Western methods seemed to be the sine qua non for strengthening the state, China today was impelled to initiate urgent reform in preparation for the future unification of human civilizations under *dao*, an endeavor that would have been approved by past sages had they lived in the present.⁷⁵ Though it might be Wang's argumentative techniques to describe Zheng's intention as bulwarking *dao* through reforming *qi* to dodge attacks from staunch advocates of Confucian orthodoxy, Zheng was inspired by such an appraisal and began to contemplate the question of *dao* in elaborating his reform proposals for wider recognition.⁷⁶ In his most renowned work *Words of Warning in a Prosperous Age* (*Shengshi weiyán* 盛世危言) composed during the early 1890s, Zheng dedicated an entire chapter to an examination of *qi* (器) vis-à-vis *dao* at the very beginning.⁷⁷ After quoting extensively from Confucian classics and texts of *Laozi*, Zheng sought to demonstrate an

⁷³ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 120–32. See also Wang Jinghua, “Zheng Guanying waijiao sixiang shulun,” *Anhui shixue*, no. 03 (2001): 45-48+95.

⁷⁴ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 171–6.

⁷⁵ Wang Tao, “Ba,” in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, 165–8.

⁷⁶ The pressure Zheng had suffered after the first publication of *Yiyan* probably led to the publication of the 1881 abbreviated version, in which Zheng completely rewrote the chapter on international law that catered more to the Sinocentric worldview. See Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 185–92. For the rewritten text, see Zheng Guanying, “Yiyan (20 vols.),” in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, 175–7. For the relationship between Zheng and Wang, see Xiao Yonghong, “Wang Tao yu Zheng Guanying jiaowang lunlue——Jianji Wang Tao dui Zheng Guanying sixiang zhi yingxiang,” *Jiangsu shehui kexue*, no. 05 (2016): 244–55.

⁷⁷ On the dating of the first five-volume edition of *Shengshi weiyán*, see Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 382–9.

uninterrupted transmission of *dao* in Chinese history. In the following section, Zheng denigrated Western civilizations as being incognizant of *dao* due to their limited understanding of the universe from a one-sided perspective (*youyu yipian* 囿于一偏). Consequently, Westerners were only able to focus on the investigation of actual things and affairs with the help of ancient wisdom from the Chinese classics that had disseminated to the West. Yet since the times of the Qin and Han dynasties, Chinese scholars had increasingly deviated from teachings of antiquity and became trapped in empty talk instead of promoting practical learning. Just like the inseparability of *dao* and *qi*, the elusive (*xu* 虛) and the concrete (*shi* 實) also complemented each other, which necessitated learning from advanced knowledge on actual things and affairs in transmitting *dao*. Hence, the growing influence of Western learning in China should be seen as the harbinger for the return of *qi* (器) to the place that had long harbored *dao*. Harnessing the practical use of Western knowledge in achieving good governance, Chinese civilization could even be reinvigorated for the propagation of *dao* across the world.⁷⁸

Applying the logic of “Chinese origins for Western learning” (*xixue zhongyuan* 西學中源) to his arguments,⁷⁹ Zheng at the same time sided with the materialist understanding of *dao* to make room for the incorporation of Western learning into Chinese scholarship. Since Western learning

⁷⁸ Zheng Guanying, “Shengshi weiyang,” in *Zheng Guanying ji*, vol. A, 241–3.

⁷⁹ The theory of Chinese origins for Western learning was first articulated by Chinese literati in late Ming to reconcile the cultural impacts of Western knowledge brought by the Jesuits. It was then propagated during the Kangxi reign in constructing the emperor’s image as the sage-king to maintain cultural dominance of the state over literati. By the time of late Qing, such arguments resurfaced in missionary press and among the first diplomatic ministers. Meanwhile, self-strengthening advocates began to propagate the theory for wider acceptance of their reform agendas. Defenders of Confucian orthodoxy also attempted to resist growing Western impact using the theory. See Zhang Mingwu, “Xixue zhongyuan shuo lunzheng fangshi de lishi kaocha,” *Ziran bianzhengfa tongxun* 40, no. 06 (2018): 108–14; Li Zhonglin, “Xixue zhongyuan shuo lunlue——Cong Yi-Xia zhifang dao shi Yi changji,” *Shilin*, no. 02 (2018): 61-68+78+218; Wang Ermin, *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun xuji* (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 44–67; Liu Xi, “Xixue zhongyuan shuo yu Kangxi di ‘dao zhi heyi’ xiangxiang de goujian,” *Ziran Bianzhengfa tongxun* 32, no. 10 (2016): 72–7; Liu Changqing, “Xixue zhongyuan shuo yu Wan Qing zaoqi zhuwai shijie de wenhua xintai,” *Henan shifan daxue xuebao* 42, no. 06 (2015): 119–23.

solely belonged to the realm of *qi* (器), the adoption of Western methods in self-strengthening would not pose a threat to China's endowment with *dao*, which had to be manifested through statecraft endeavors. Similar claims had already been made by Xue Fucheng in the 1870s, who acknowledged the superior understanding of *qi* (器) in Western learning while stating that *dao* could be illuminated by the most quintessential forms of *qi* (器). Therefore, the mastering of Western knowledge and technology would be in deference to *dao* through perfecting *qi* (器), which was the prerequisite of uniting the four seas as one.⁸⁰ In the chapter on Western learning, Zheng further categorized Western learning as the learning of Heaven (*tianxue* 天學) represented by astronomy, the learning of Earth (*dixue* 地學) represented by geography, and the learning of man (*renxue* 人學) which included politics, education, law, industry, commerce, etc.⁸¹ As these branches of knowledge all had a common root in the Chinese civilization, the call for more thorough institutional reforms modeled after the West would never contradict *dao* preserved in the Confucian canon. Instead, the construction of a strong Chinese state (*Zhongguo*) with the aid of Western *qi* (器) was the sine qua non to again illuminate *dao* in the present age.⁸² The two-way street of the symbiotic relation between *dao* and *qi* (器) once more steered Zheng's reform agenda toward statist thinking that grounded the validity of his proposals firmly in the political aspiration of building a strong China. He would thus equate Western superiority as remnants of hegemonic stratagems (*bashu* 霸術), which must be sanctioned by the kingly way manifested in

⁸⁰ Xue Fucheng, "Dai Li Xiangbo da Peng Xiaolian shu," in *Xue Fucheng xuanji*, 103–4.

⁸¹ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyan," 272–3.

⁸² Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 389–400; Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 228–34.

the power of China.⁸³ The advocacy of reform in this way assumed an indelible statist undertone in Zheng's writings.

In the economic sector, Zheng accordingly called for active state regulation of commercial activities to recapture *liquan* for China's self-strengthening. Writing on commerce in *Yiyan*, Zheng asserted that the West had used commerce as an alternate form of military conquest (*yubing yushang* 寓兵于商), which consolidated their rise as global powers by looting wealth from other states. Chinese merchants, though starting to seize profit from foreigners through economic competition, lacked determination and capital in the long run to regain *liquan*. It thus depended on the state to patronize merchant enterprises and devise careful plans on how to manage profit that could be shared between China and the West, increase the profit of Chinese merchants and grab a share of profit controlled by Western merchants. For Zheng, the adoption of machinery in agricultural production, the introduction of modern industry and the establishment of monopoly over freight service along China's rivers were all viable options to retake *liquan* against foreign economic encroachment.⁸⁴ While concurring with the arguments made by the likes of Wang Tao and Xue Fucheng, Zheng took one step further in necessitating state activism in China's economic modernization by resorting to a militaristic understanding of commerce. The mutual assistance of military conquest and commercial expansion in the Western ascension had been illustrated in Wei Yuan's writings and repeatedly brought up by self-strengthening advocates.⁸⁵ Yet Zheng viewed commerce itself as an insidious alternative to direct military confrontation waged by Western powers. The state should therefore be mobilized to take action in preparation of recapturing *liquan* in sectors like machinery manufacturing and

⁸³ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyuan," 243.

⁸⁴ Zheng, "Yiyan (36 vols.)," 73–5.

⁸⁵ Wei, "Haiguo tuzhi, vol. 37," 1077–8, 1094–100; Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 244–53; Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 350–6.

waterborne transport to paralyze such means of Western invasion.⁸⁶ Zheng was not alone in analogizing commercial activities with military operations. In an 1890 opinion piece in *Shenbao*, the author argued that commercial affair and military strategy were essentially two sides of the same coin in contribution to building up state power. The capital owned by merchants functioned in the same way as troops commanded by officers and the chase for profit in commerce, much like the deployment of armed forces in the field, required ingenious weighing of circumstances, unwavering credibility, extraordinary perseverance and scrupulous calculation to be triumphant. It then became imperative to promote able men in dealing with commercial affairs similar to the careful selection of officers in military administration, so that the state could benefit from the combined efforts of military and commerce in self-strengthening.⁸⁷ By describing the gist of commerce in militaristic terms, the author attempted to assign a bigger role for merchants to play through equating the importance of commercial activities with that of military power in strengthening the state. In doing so, merchant empowerment in China's economic modernization was inextricably tied with the construction of a strong state, which was elucidated in Zheng Guanying's chapter on commercial warfare in *Shengshi weiyan*.

Mostly repeating his earlier proposals on promoting commerce, Zheng nevertheless sought to justify his agenda by conceptualizing commerce as a superior type of warfare compared to armed conflict (*bingzhan* 兵戰). The growing Sino-foreign trade, argued Zheng, was a meticulous conspiracy to impair Chinese power by incrementally draining its wealth instead of openly challenging its military might. It then necessitated an overall design (*tongpan chouhua* 通盤籌劃) to transform China's economy in mobilization for war against foreign economic

⁸⁶ Zheng, "Yiyan (36 vols.)," 89–94. See also Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 142–54.

⁸⁷ "Shangwu tongyu bingfa shuo," *Shenbao* 26.11.1890.

encroachment. Zheng found it feasible to establish a special ministry for commerce run by righteous officials and appoint qualified merchants in charge of commercial affairs in local administration, so that the nuts-and-bolts of economic reform like developing modern industry and reversing trade deficit could be coordinated by the central government in collaboration with merchants while keeping off undesirable bureaucratic interference. When necessary, the state should even shift funds from military expenditure to supporting modern manufacturing business as part of the strategy to reduce import and increase export. Through active state patronage, Zheng was confident that China would soon gain advantage in commercial warfare by dominating *liquan* and reassert its power on the world stage.⁸⁸ Writing in the early 1890s, Zheng could not have been blind to exacerbating global rivalries among imperialist powers and their menace to the Qing state. In the chapter on international law, Zheng feared that the normative value of international law would be more often than not compromised by power politics, which made it all the more imperative for self-strengthening in face of aggressive Western powers.⁸⁹ Compared with his more positive attitude toward the international law system in the 1870s, Zheng became increasingly troubled by China's foreign relations and felt the urgency of revitalizing state power against further intrusion.⁹⁰ Such an eagerness probably led Zheng to expand on his militaristic understanding of commerce to push for more thorough reform in hopes of mobilizing statewide resources to secure *liquan*, which constituted the basis of wealth and power. In doing so, the state was naturally expected to actively direct the collective actions of officials and merchants against foreign competitors in the economy. Zheng thus claimed it was up to the powerholders from above to alter the current situation where officials tended to repress

⁸⁸ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyan," 586–91.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 387–9.

⁹⁰ Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 148–54.

rather than protect merchant enterprises by centralizing the administration of commercial affairs through the ministry of commerce and by patronizing merchant professionalism against excessive bureaucratic control.⁹¹ Only through state intervention of the economy could commercial activities and official protection coordinate with each other in China's self-strengthening.

Zheng's suspicion of bureaucratic interference in business management had been a recurring point in his writings on commercial affairs. Around the founding of China Merchants' Company, Zheng had cast doubt on the bureaucratic control of its operation and argued for more state support of private entrepreneurship in the shipping industry to compete with foreign firms.⁹² When coming to work for state-sponsored enterprises such as the Shanghai Cotton Cloth Mill (and later the China Merchants' Company upon Li Hongzhang's invitation), Zheng remained adamant about the superiority of merchant management against bureaucratic interference, and protested futilely in face of pressures from the officialdom.⁹³ By advocating the idea of commercial warfare, Zheng again sought merchant empowerment through imposing a wartime-style management on the economy. To better prepare the state for war, it would undoubtedly rely on the expertise of merchants rather than officials in business administration. In turn, merchants ought to be fully committed to the self-strengthening enterprise patronized by the state. Hence, Zheng found it necessary to establish business schools under the ministry of commerce in educating the short-sighted and philistine majority of Chinese merchants, so that their private entrepreneurship could be aligned with the goal of strengthening the state. Chambers of

⁹¹ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyan," 615–6.

⁹² Zheng, "Jiushi jieyao," 52–6. See also Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 95–101.

⁹³ For Zheng's involvement in state-sponsored enterprises till 1895, see Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 202–313, 408–26; Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 41–54. For the Shanghai Cotton Cloth Mill, see Xia, *Yangwu yundong*, 250–3; Feuerwerker, *China's Early Industrialization*, 208–14.

commerce modeled after the West should also be set up and hold regular meetings on business development, which were to be recorded and submitted to the ministry.⁹⁴ Coming closer to Li Fan's conception of commerce as a weapon against foreign intrusion, Zheng nevertheless endowed commercial activities with a more active role in strengthening state power like Xue Fucheng, which eventually led to his call for the statewide transformation of domestic economy similar to Ma Jianzhong's design through the notion of commercial warfare. Being a professional comprador, Zheng was more conversant with Western culture than most in the officialdom and deeply aware of the necessity to carry out institutional reform using Western methods in attaining wealth and power.⁹⁵ Yet considering himself a proper member of the literati class, Zheng also cultivated close ties with the officialdom by purchasing official titles and fulfilling social responsibilities of gentry-elites such as philanthropy and famine relief.⁹⁶ His statist aspiration of building a strong Chinese state in bulwarking *dao* in addition rendered his economic reform program an ardent call for state activism in economic regulation instead of one bolstering economic liberalism.⁹⁷ Much like the rationale behind domestic reform by Wei Yuan and Bao Shichen, Zheng weaved his anti-bureaucratic sentiment into calls for centralized governance through streamlining the bureaucracy in the name of strengthening the state. By interpreting *shangzhan* as a single term that propagated a militaristic understanding of commerce, Zheng further legitimized merchant empowerment through the rhetoric of mobilization for war aimed at seizing foreign wealth and revitalizing state power. Statist thinking thus formed an intellectual cornerstone in Zheng Guanying's proposal for economic reform. The changing relations between merchants and the state also saw statist thinking at work in justifying

⁹⁴ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyuan," 616–7.

⁹⁵ Hao, *The Comprador in Nineteenth Century China*, 201–6.

⁹⁶ Yi, *Pingzhuang*, vol. A, 214–9, 225–32; Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 54–66.

⁹⁷ This is very much in line with Bao Shichen's agenda of salt reform, see ch. 3, n. 31.

the growing prominence of the merchant class through the aspiration of constructing a strong China.

Conclusion

Emerging from the mid-century transition, the late Qing fiscal system continued to operate in a decentralized mode which, though not seeing the rise of political regionalism, constrained the ability of the state in directing the self-strengthening program from the political center.⁹⁸ Such realities invited growing calls among self-strengthening advocates for active state intervention in the economy to seize the control of profit (*liquan*) deemed as the basis of state power, which led to increasing reappraisals of state-merchant relations in favor of empowering the merchant class as a vital support for self-strengthening. My analysis shows that statist thinking continued to function as an undertone in these reappraisals where merchant empowerment, like literati empowerment, remained only desirable as long as it could be conducive to the strengthening of state power. To institutionalize the political participation of merchants, who were virtually excluded from imperial politics before, entailed further reform of established practice in the Qing state apparatus that would challenge vested interests in the bureaucracy. Unsurprisingly, it sparked backlash among officials as seen in disputes over the China Merchants' Company. Yet the same logic used to question the moral rectitude of merchants and their loyalty to the state was appropriated by self-strengthening advocates in their attacks on treacherous officeholders as well, in the sense that only the political empowerment of a qualified few could ensure the consolidation rather than limitation of state power. The anti-bureaucratic sentiment not unlike that of literati activists in the early nineteenth century gradually saw commerce weaponized as a

⁹⁸ He, *Paths toward the Modern Fiscal State*, 153–72; Shi and Xu, *Wan Qing caizheng*, 288–90; Ho Hon-wai, “Qingji zhongyang yu gesheng caizheng guanxi de fansi,” *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishiyuyansuo jikan* 72, no. 3 (September 2001): 597–698.

sound strategy to arrest foreign intrusion, which eventually engendered the militaristic understanding of commerce elucidated by Zheng Guanying's notion of commercial warfare. Having seen his merchant career take off in the economic center of Shanghai, Zheng was enthusiastic about the prospect of economic reform which would ensure the rise of mercantile elites in cooperation with political elites, a process similar to the ascent of modern military-fiscal states in Europe.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Zheng's materialist understanding of *dao* and his conviction of China as the embodiment of *dao* aligned his aspiration for merchant empowerment firmly with the statist line of thinking to the extent of total transformation of the economy mobilized for war, which envisaged a wartime-style regulation by an activist state in collaboration with qualified merchants to recapture *liquan* in strengthening state power. In doing so, the construction of a powerful state became the sole source of legitimacy for merchant empowerment against bureaucratic interference, which operated on the same logic behind literati empowerment against accusations of factionalism. Both constituted an integral part of statist thinking evolving across the nineteenth century.

The statist undertone in late Qing economic reform of the nineteenth century arguably sustained the persistent bureaucratic involvement in China's early industrialization. Wellington Chan notes that compared to Japan, Qing officials were reluctant to relinquish control over state-sponsored enterprises to merchant management, which hampered further industrial development. The attempt to coordinate policies for industrialization from the central government was also compromised by gentry and officials in local administration.¹⁰⁰ Yet rather than due to the inherent "backwardness" of the Qing political system, such realities would be better understood

⁹⁹ Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and the European States*, 96–126. See also Tilly and Blockmans, eds., *Cities and the Rise of States*; Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *War and State Making: The Shaping of the Global Powers* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Chan, "Government, Merchants and Industry to 1911," 460–2.

in light of fiscal decentralization in the late Qing vis-à-vis statist thinking. Eager to strengthen the central power of the state in overseeing industrial development, self-strengthening advocates endeavored to harness extra-bureaucratic forces in economic reform to bypass existing administration as literati activists did in the early nineteenth century. To justify their agendas, they continued to adopt statist thinking by regarding merchant empowerment as a means to expand instead of circumscribe state intervention in the economy. The anti-bureaucratic sentiment once more enhanced the statist stance in reform, as seen in Zheng's advocacy for a centralized ministry of commerce in economic regulation statewide. The point was not to oppose the power of state institutions per se, but to ensure such power was in the right hands (i.e., men of their kind).

In regard to upholding state intervention at the expense of free market, self-strengthening advocates could be seen as anticipating the emergence of economic nationalism that necessitated the creation of a national economy active regulated by the state.¹⁰¹ It should however be noted that proposals for economic reform at the national level, as Rowe observes, had already been made in the early nineteenth century where the issuing of a national currency, the value of which would be determined by the state, was thought to be able to strengthen state capacity in curtailing the outflow of silver.¹⁰² As this chapter has shown, the evolving discourse on commerce and merchants vis-à-vis the state continued to ground the political empowerment of merchants in the logic of statist thinking. These reform-minded literati were less interested in the creation of a Chinese nation than in the mobilization of extra-bureaucratic forces to fulfil the aspiration of building a strong state. If the core belief of economic nationalism was to steer economic

¹⁰¹ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. A, 133–42; Ding, *Pingzhuan*, 123–37; Zhang, *Pingzhuan*, 244–53; Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*, 185–208; idem, “Wang T’ao and Incipient Chinese Nationalism,” 569–70.

¹⁰² Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 170–6.

activities toward nationalist goals,¹⁰³ the construction of a national identity that either propagated individual rights (i.e. civic nationalism) or a common lineage based on ethnicity (i.e. ethnic nationalism) was anything but the overriding concern among self-strengthening advocates.¹⁰⁴ The state (*guo* or *Zhongguo*) for them was far from being a national entity but one staffed with a qualified few whose unwavering commitment to strengthening state power would ensure China was still the embodiment of *dao* amid foreign intrusion. Accordingly, the economic opening up of late Qing China, as Zanasi argues, resulted in increasing support for statist solutions to its economic problems, instead of growing reliance on market liberalism.¹⁰⁵ Late Qing reform toward the end of the nineteenth century therefore saw the tenacious statist thinking at play right on the eve of radicalized intellectual transformations in the post-1895 era.

¹⁰³ Eric Helleiner, “The Diversity of Economic Nationalism,” *New Political Economy* 26, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 229–38.

¹⁰⁴ For civic nationalism, see Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford Political Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For ethnic nationalism, see Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ Zanasi, *Economic Thought in Modern China*, 109–57.

Conclusion

In 1896, roughly a year after the Sino-Japanese War was concluded by the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Zheng Guanying published a revised and expanded fourteen-volume edition of his *Shengshi weiyang*.¹ Adding a whole new chapter to the section of commercial warfare, Zheng proclaimed that merchants were those who should be encouraged supply wealth to the state to strengthen its power, based on the collective effort from the other three classes of people coordinated by the state in assistance of merchant enterprises. For Zheng, the current, ignorant powerholders knew nothing other than exploiting merchants to appease their superiors, while Westerners had devised a systematic strategy that placed merchants under state patronage to seize profit from other states. Moreover, they had cultivated talents specialized in technology, manufacturing, modern agriculture and commercial affairs to sustain such deeds. It thus became imperative to establish new schools and reform the examination system to promote competent officials who would heed the needs of merchants in winning the commercial warfare.²

Continuing his advocacy of merchant empowerment, Zheng now found it all the more imperative that the state not only utilize private entrepreneurship but actively carry out institutional reform for merchants to play a bigger role in the self-strengthening enterprise. Regarding commercial affairs as the vital force (*yuanqi*) of the state (a metaphor Wang Tao had used to describe talents), Zheng lamented in an expanded section on commerce that Chinese officials had been blocked from actual intelligence on commercial affairs since the Qing political system had rendered the officialdom too dignified (*guoyu zunyan* 過于尊嚴) to cater to the petty

¹ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. C, 479–81. For studies of the Sino-Japanese War, see Mi, *Jishi benmo*, vol. 9, 3149–62; Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. A, 326–34; Liu and Smith, “The Military Challenge,” 269–73. For Zheng’s life during the war, see Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. B, 436–70.

² Zheng, “Shengshi weiyang,” 595–7.

merchants, which had alienated the merchant class from the state. If a ministry of commerce could be founded in the central government alongside subordinate bureaus in each province, the state would be better off with an able minister in charge at the center whose professional knowledge could ensure effective state patronage of merchant enterprise and a timely intelligence-gathering of commercial affairs. Meanwhile, provincial bureaus should invite experienced merchants to run the office and report directly to the ministry. In this way, merchants shielded from treacherous officeholders would naturally shoulder the responsibility of repelling foreign economic encroachment for the state.³ Though Zheng had brought up the proposal of setting up a new ministry for commerce before,⁴ he was emboldened at this point to voice the necessity of such a measure by targeting the entire bureaucracy. Similar to Guo Songtao's criticism of the literati class, Zheng lambasted the literati for indulging themselves in idle literary pursuits rather than practical statecraft, which led to the denigration of merchants and consequently China's falling prey to foreign competitors.⁵ Following Xue Fucheng in emphasizing the pivotal role of merchants among the people, Zheng further cited the example of Meiji Japan to call for more merchant management in state-sponsored enterprises, which was the sine qua non to fend off bureaucratic interference while asserting state patronage over economic activities.⁶ In the aftermath of the Qing's humiliating defeat, Zheng became far less reserved in demanding merchant empowerment in politics. By advocating the establishment of a centralized ministry of commerce, Zheng in effect pushed for the formation of merchant associations that would act in the interest of merchants and increase their voice in politics.⁷ Yet Zheng's anti-

³ Ibid, 604–6. See also Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 190–3.

⁴ See ch. 7.

⁵ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyan," 609.

⁶ Ibid, 607–11. For a comparative study in the role of the state during economic modernization between China and Japan, see Zhu Yingui, *Guojia ganyu jingji yu Zhong Ri jindaihua* (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1994).

⁷ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. C, 488–98.

bureaucratic sentiment was accompanied by his conviction of the need of active state regulation of the economy in the form of collaboration with qualified merchants so that wealth could be put to good use in strengthening state power. Similar to Wei Yuan's agenda of domestic reform, Zheng's aspiration for merchant empowerment after 1895 was predicated on statist thinking that legitimized reform through constructing a powerful state.

Such a statist line of thinking arguably shaped Zheng's attitude toward the establishment of a parliamentary system in China. In the 1870s, Zheng had already sided with the growing voice for broadened political participation through effective communication between powerholders above and the people below, a point that was reiterated in the five-volume edition of *Shengshi weiyan*.⁸ Nevertheless, in the fourteen-volume *Shengshi weiyan*, Zheng cautioned against a sudden shift of China's political institutions toward a parliamentary system. For Zheng, constitutional monarchy was the political system capable of achieving a proper balance of power, as power was excessively monopolized above in a monarchy and overly concentrated below in a democracy. Yet such a system was sustained in the West by public education systems and the modern press so that the monarch and the people could be well informed and participate in state politics responsibly. Implicitly, Zheng questioned the feasibility of a parliament without such social foundations to support the system.⁹ Concurring with his earlier observations of Western politics,¹⁰ Zheng remained suspicious of the unfettered growth of popular power that might become counter-productive to consolidating state power, a concern shared among the likes of Wang Tao and Guo Songtao. Compared with his fervor in advocating merchant empowerment, Zheng was far more reserved on setting up a parliamentary system in China, which would be

⁸ Zheng, "Yiyan (36 vols.)," 103; idem, "Shengshi weiyan," 311–4. See also Wu, *Zheng Guanying*, 177; Eastman, "Political Reformism."

⁹ Zheng, "Shengshi weiyan," 316–8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

premature given the lack of talents and the pressing need of strengthening state power.¹¹ The issue of parliament was also discussed by Kang Youwei in his 1895 memorials to the Guangxu Emperor. For Kang, the parliamentary system ensured effective governance by stemming treacherous powerholders (*quanjian* 權奸) embezzling from the middle (*zhongbao*), which would be in reverence to the political ideals approved by Confucian teachings.¹² Seeking to empower those outside government against ignorant and incompetent officeholders, Kang imagined the parliament to be a handy tool for the state in consolidating its central authority by using extra-bureaucratic forces to discipline the officialdom. Accordingly, those newly empowered were expected to devote their every effort to strengthening the state. Such a state would unite the monarch and those below as one and harness their collective power in arresting foreign intrusion. In line with the rationale behind literati empowerment, Kang believed the collaboration between the state and a qualified few could restore Chinese power on a par with the West.¹³

The anti-bureaucratic undertone in Kang's writings points to the impact of statist thinking on radical reformers in the late 1890s. Similar to Wang Tao's conception of the people in politics, Kang doubted the ability of commoners to participate in politics as autonomous agents free from state supervision. Rather, popular power needed to be aligned with the statist goal of constructing a strong China. Though such a state started to disembody from the Qing empire and transform into a trans-dynastic entity in Kang's mind, he was still willing to instigate reform within the framework of the Qing monarchy when he found it a viable option to construct a powerful state

¹¹ Yi, *Pingzhuan*, vol. C, 481–4.

¹² Kang Youwei, "Shang Qingdi disi shu," in *Kang Youwei quanji*, vol. 2, eds. Jiang Yihua and Zhang Ronghua (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2007), 81–2.

¹³ Kang Youwei, "Qingding lixian kai guohui zhe," "Qing junmin hezhi Man Han bufen zhe," in *Kang Youwei quanji*, vol. 4, 424, 425–6.

through broadened political participation of the literati.¹⁴ In the case of the parliamentary system, Kang's reform agenda was thus not fundamentally alien to the aspirations of literati activists in earlier generations.¹⁵ Moreover, Kang's reinvention of Confucian universalism based on New Text hermeneutics can also be interpreted in light of statist thinking. By placing the notion of the Three Epochs (*sanshi*) in *Gongyang* classicism on an evolutionary scale to propagate his faith in unilinear progress, Kang legitimized timely reform of human institutions with a utopian vision for future civilization ordained by cosmic movement.¹⁶ Yet the necessity of reform had been repeatedly elucidated by literati activists across the nineteenth century following the materialist understanding of *dao*, which helped to consolidate the aspiration for a powerful state as the embodiment of *dao* in achieving sagely rule. To materialize the grand vision, existing political institutions would become increasingly subjected to reappraisals in their entirety, in the name of constructing such an idealized state. Kang would thus boldly reconceptualize kingship by shifting his preference in the 1880s for an activist ruler with supreme power toward treating the emperor as a mere institution functioning as the symbol of central authority in the state apparatus around the 1898 Reform.¹⁷ Portraying Confucius as the uncrowned king, Kang could also be said to have pushed the statist aspiration of literati empowerment to an extreme where political power had to work closely with or even be directed by true disciples of sagely teachings against the

¹⁴ Huang Zhangjian. *Wuxu bianfa*, 1–54, 101–307. See also Chen Xinyu, “Wuxu shiqi Kang Youwei fazheng sixiang de shanbian—Cong *Bianfa ziqiang yifang Taixi she yiyuan zhe de zhuzuoquan zhengyi qieru*,” *Faxue jia*, no. 04 (2016): 86-101+178; Zarrow, *After Empire*, 41–5; Ma Honglin, *Kang Youwei pingzhuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1998), 293–9.

¹⁵ Mao Haijian, “Wuxu shiqi Kang Youwei Liang Qichao de yihui sixiang,” *Journal of East China Normal University* 52, no. 02 (2020): 113-126+196.

¹⁶ This is a well-explored theme in scholarship. See for example Zarrow, *After Empire*, 46–53; Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 753–829; Young-tsu Wong, “Philosophical Hermeneutics and Political Reform: A Study of Kang Youwei's Use of *Gongyang* Confucianism,” in *Classics and Interpretations: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*, ed. Ching-i Tu (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 383–407; Ma, *Pingzhuan*, 127–88; Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 25–65; Kung-chuan Hsiao, *A Modern China and a New World: K'ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858–1927* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975), 41–189.

¹⁷ Zarrow, *After Empire*, 32–41.

autocratic power of the monarch.¹⁸ The exact extent to which Kang's intellectual orientations were related to statist thinking deserves a separate investigation. It should nevertheless be noted that in terms of regarding the state as serving a higher purpose that transcended the mundane realm, radical reformers like Kang continued to be inspired by statist thinking toward the end of the nineteenth century, which set the stage for the emergence of full-fledged statism in the twentieth century such as Liang Qichao's (梁啟超, 1873-1929) nationalist reinvention of China and his construction of civic identity in a modern Chinese state.¹⁹

Our investigation has so far come to the point where a common theme shared by the underlying agenda of Evidential Scholarship aimed at realizing sagely rule, the justification of statecraft reformism informed by New Text classicism, and the discourse centered around the self-strengthening movement in search for wealth and power can all be illustrated in the logic of statist thinking. Through ingenious appropriations of sagely teachings, Qing literati managed to reinvent the sociopolitical realities they faced (e.g., state activism during the High Qing) and the dominant trend of contemporary scholarship (i.e., Evidential Scholarship) in justification of their resurging political activism. The materialist understanding of cosmic realities and the presentist interpretation of Confucian classics became the first steps for scholars to insert their own agendas for literati re-ascendance into the construction of an all-encompassing political order epitomized by the power of the state. By upholding a cosmic order in which a strong state embodying *dao* constituted the ultimate point of reference for the mundane realm, literati activists were further able to align statecraft endeavors with Confucian teachings and resolve tensions arising from their political empowerment against powerholders in the current regime.

¹⁸ On the latter point, see Wang, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang*, 782–93.

¹⁹ Zarrow, *After Empire*, 56–88, 104–18; Hao Chang, *Liang Chi-Chao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907*, Harvard East Asian Series 64 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 149–219, 238–71.

The global expansion of the West provided an additional opportunity for these activists to utilize the presentist logic that necessitated timely reform in propagating their aspiration of building a powerful state through the collaborative effort of political authority and qualified literati. By formulating a symbiotic relationship between the state and the literati in line with the symbiosis of *dao* and *qi* (器), protagonists in the development of statist thinking repeatedly targeted officials deemed incapable of wholeheartedly serving the state, which in turn rendered the political empowerment of previously marginalized groups only desirable insofar as they would be fully committed to the strengthening of state power. Moreover, the state as the embodiment of *dao* ought to play an authoritative role in directing human affairs, rather than merely representing interests of the public. Accordingly, changing conceptions of the state as an institutional entity in the mundane realm, which entailed reform of its organizational structure and administrative practice in emulation of the West, did not alter the transcendental vision of the state as the embodiment of cosmic authority in the pre-1895 era. The search for wealth and power in self-strengthening was therefore not a passive response to Western impact or a pragmatic move to resuscitate the Qing using Western methods. Instead, the persistent drive to materialize cosmic authority in actual sociopolitical orders articulated in statist thinking was an intellectual cornerstone underlying the self-strengthening enterprise. Even when the Qing imperial model could no longer live up to the aspiration for a strong China after 1895, the transcendental dimension in statist thinking arguably fueled the flourishing of radical reform agendas.

As the common theme connecting successive intellectual trends across the nineteenth century, the search for realizing *dao* through *qi* (器) manifested in statist thinking had arguably shaped the late Qing discourse on the state. Through the lens of statist thinking, the “unspoken assumptions” in the intellectual endeavors of Qing literati can be elucidated despite the

variations in their terminologies and specific agendas. Such an elucidation points to the necessity of thinking outside “propositional logic” in acquiring the right horizon of inquiry, which would be more catered to the actual lifeworld of historical figures. It further points to the necessity of acknowledging the intellectual autonomy of the literati in appropriating sociopolitical realities for their intellectual endeavors, which was anything but a passive one-dimensional process in response to changing circumstances in the experiential world. Rather, the transcendental visions articulated in Qing cosmology, of which literati identity was an integral part, had acted as an intellectual bedrock for statist thinking to develop. Intellectual transformations behind the modern Chinese state accordingly took place in both the transcendental and mundane realms. Admittedly, the distinct visions individual thinkers had for the institutional setups of the state rendered their intellectual endeavors irreducible to a homogenous strand of thought. What Wei Yuan (or even Wang Tao and Xue Fucheng) had in mind when calling for harnessing extra-bureaucratic forces in reform was by no means identical with Zheng Guanying’s understanding of merchant empowerment in politics. The protracted debates over talents and state activism are also indicative of different agendas competing for influence among a wider audience. Yet it is precisely due to the aspiration for gaining wider recognition that they all resorted to statist thinking on the pressing matter of revitalizing an enfeebled China, which regarded the legitimacy of an all-encompassing political order sustained by a powerful state as self-evident. Through the idealization of such a state, Qing literati were able to consolidate their identity and legitimize their rise in politics in a cosmic vision where the literati as propagators of *dao* should naturally play a bigger role in the state as the embodiment of *dao*. Consequently, the statist undertone in late Qing political thought was consolidated. It also becomes explicable as to why self-strengthening within the political framework of the Qing empire was so swiftly and completely

discarded among radical reformers in the post-1895 period. Since the old institution had been disenchanted, an alternate embodiment of *dao* needed to be established in no time. The tenacity of statist thinking and the nature of intellectual continuity in modern China can thus be better interpreted when the two dimensions of intellectual transformation are taken into consideration.

The formation and transformation of statist thinking shed new lights on our understanding of modern Chinese history by challenging the modernist narrative that equates China's modernization with Westernization. By appropriating and integrating foreign ideas into their preexisting agendas, Qing literati across the nineteenth century were able to uphold the idealized image of a powerful state in line with the materialist cosmology of Confucianism, while advocating institutional reform to modernize the Qing state apparatus in emulation of the Western model. Their intellectual endeavors were thus irreducible to the gradual disenchantment of Confucian universalism and the subsequent retreat of Confucianism into traditionalist sentiments among those haunted by the past, as Levenson has suggested.²⁰ Rather, the transcendental vision buttressed by the materialist understanding of *dao* acted as the starting point and a persistent drive for the literati to tackle Western impact while reinventing their political aspirations in response to changing realities. Through the investigation of evolving statist thinking, it is clear that the state idealized as the embodiment of *dao* was time and again utilized by Qing literati to safeguard their intellectual and political agendas across the nineteenth century. Despite unmistakable transformations in the institutional setup of such a state, its idealization entangled with cosmic visions and literati identity remained largely intact in this period. Hence, the literati continued to regard a powerful state as indispensable to their identity and the grand mission of transmitting *dao*. The preoccupation among late Qing reformers with

²⁰ Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, Volume One, xxvii–xxxiii, 156–63.

state power accordingly speaks to a larger historical context and cannot be simply explained through the mentality of “national humiliation” assumed by Schwartz. His observation of the prioritization of social-political values over individual values in late Qing reformist writings can also be understood through the literati’s self-ascribed identity as propagators of *dao*, which necessitated overarching state power as articulated in statist thinking.²¹

The study of statist thinking further repudiates Zarrow’s view that the emergence of statism among radical reformers and revolutionaries in the late Qing was a stormy process only initiated by the disintegration of old imperial ideology.²² From my investigation, it is evident that before the imperial ideology and its cosmological foundations were discarded, literati activists had already come to regard a strong state embodied with cosmic authority as self-legitimizing and representing the ultimate point of reference for their statecraft agendas. When the old imperial model proved to be incapable of realizing such an aspiration, the same statist logic continued to shape radicalized intellectual transformations informed by Western political ideas, exemplified by the nationalist reinvention of Chinese identity and the attempt to indoctrinate modern citizenship into the Chinese people.²³ In terms of advocating the empowerment of the politically marginalized groups in China for strengthening the state, radical reformers arguably pushed the call for literati empowerment to its logical extreme to include the entire Chinese people as equal members of a unified nation who did not necessarily need an imperial state.²⁴ The Western models of constitutionalism and republicanism in this way became viable options due to their instrumental value of fulfilling the long-standing statist ideal of constructing a strong China. By

²¹ Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, 243–7.

²² Zarrow, *After Empire*, esp. 272–96.

²³ *Ibid*, 104–18, 147–80.

²⁴ The case of merchant empowerment discussed in chapter seven can be seen as an intermediate phase in such a development.

the same token, citizens empowered with equal rights in a national polity were expected to be wholeheartedly committed to building a strong Chinese state as the guardian of the Chinese nation, just like the political empowerment of qualified literati was justified by their unreserved devotion to serving the state. Literati prestige and their political activism were thus transferred to the people who were portrayed as being more capable of materializing the grand vision of statism. As Shen Sung–Chiao notes, the significance of the citizen concept (*guomin* 國民) among late Qing intellectuals lay “predominantly in its instrumental utility in consolidating the power of the state and securing the survival of the national community.”²⁵ Moreover, the conception of a powerful state mediating cosmic forces and human activities retained its currency among Chinese intellectuals even after the breakdown of the old cosmology. Such a conception renders statist thinking an essentially modern enterprise in the sense that the construction of a strong state was deemed an integral part of the human endeavor to address the overriding concern of bridging chasms between transcendental visions and mundane sociopolitical orders, which underlies the cultural and political re-orientation in modernity.²⁶ Modern state-building in China can accordingly be said to have preceded the process of nation-building, as statist thinking was arguably among the intellectual precursors that brought about the formation of national identity in twentieth century China.²⁷

²⁵ Shen Sung-chiao, “Discourse on *guomin* (‘the Citizen’) in Late Qing China, 1895–1911,” trans. Hsiao Wen Chien, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 15.

²⁶ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 493–518.

²⁷ For the import of nationalism to China, see Wang and Huang, eds., *Xinbian jindai shi*, vol. B, 961–1002; Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, fully rev. and expand. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 61–78; Hong-yuan Chu and Peter G. Zarrow. “Modern Chinese Nationalism: The Formative Stage,” in *Exploring Nationalisms of China: Themes and Conflicts*, eds. C. X. George Wei and Xiaoyuan Liu (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1–26.

Nevertheless, intellectual continuity in modern China should not be interpreted as the result of the resilience of deep-seated Neo-Confucian traditions according to Metzger's essentialist view. As my analysis shows, Qing literati constantly reinvented the intellectual legacy of Confucianism in response to novel situations, which served as a lasting source of legitimacy for their political activism. In particular, the materialist understanding of *dao* continuously generated new possibilities for the literati to reconfigure the mundane order in reverence to their transcendental visions. Moral cultivation, Confucian scholarship and statecraft were accordingly all manifestations of *dao* in the experiential world, which had to be aligned with the construction of a powerful state in the late Qing context. The very elusiveness of *dao* and the conviction that *dao* must be illuminated through *qi* (器) in effect granted much leeway for the literati in their reform agendas to reappraise the state as an institutional entity while upholding its idealization as the embodiment of *dao*. The cosmic vision among Qing literati thus concerned more than the cultivation of the moral self to resolve tensions between the ideal and the status quo. Far from being a subject unworthy of analysis, the materialist cosmology is arguably the starting point to study late Qing political thinking on its own terms.²⁸ Likewise, the emergence of the modern Chinese state was not predicated on fixed agendas as identified by Kuhn either. Admittedly, the constitutional question of how broadened political participation would enhance rather than limit state power had been approached by Wei Yuan as one of the central issues in his intellectual endeavor.²⁹ Yet Wei's thought did not arise *ex nihilo*. Apart from the gloomy sociopolitical realities discussed by Kuhn,³⁰ the statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship and a symbiotic state-literati relation crystallized therefrom naturally regarded the political empowerment of a

²⁸ Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*, 196–210.

²⁹ Kuhn, *Origins*, 1–2, 27–53.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 2–24.

wider range of members from the lettered class as only legitimate insofar as their political energy could be translated into the consolidation of state power. Moreover, the backlash against pedantic philological studies, the growing call for literati re-ascendance in politics since the late Jiaqing reign, and the specter of factionalism all played a part in the creation of an intellectual atmosphere that painstakingly reconciled literati empowerment with the state in a tumultuous age. Statist thinking emerging out of this specific milieu, which aimed to legitimize literati political participation by aligning their political activism with the goal of strengthening the state so as to exonerate them from accusations of factionalism, was utilized by Wei in his reinterpretation of New Text classicism to necessitate institutional reform. By uniting scholarship and statecraft under the aegis of *dao*, Wei further elaborated Gong Zizhen's idealization of a strong state actively asserting its rule in collaboration with morally righteous literati. The aspiration of constructing such a state consequently emboldened Wei to launch his offensive against corrupt officeholders who ought to be held responsible for dynastic decline. This anti-bureaucratic sentiment intended to earn recognition from the central authority of the state arguably acted as the rationale behind Wei's agenda of promoting established literati outside office to revitalize the state and later Feng Guifen's proposal of using nonofficial elites to restore local governance against predatory clerks in the lower bureaucracy.³¹

On the other hand, the same logic was deployed by Qing officials in defending their rightful place in high office, as seen in their response to Feng's reform proposal on public election during the 1898 Reform. If the state endowed with *dao* was supposed to actively direct human affairs in deference to *dao*, its constituents (state officials included) would inherently "embody a purer

³¹ Ibid, 41–6, 64–6. For a systematic comparison between Wei's and Feng's statecraft thinking, see Li, *Wei Yuan yu Feng Guifen*.

view of the public interest than those below them.”³² It then simply becomes counter-intuitive and even pernicious to invite extra-bureaucratic forces into the management of public affairs. Instead, the crude and capricious nature of the general populace needed to be placed under constant regulation by state officials so that the pursuit of private interests would not lead to irreversible social decay. What Kuhn sees as “the inner core of Chinese authoritarianism,” namely the belief that political competition would inevitably result in factional struggle and eventually the damage of a public interest distinct from the mere sum of private interests,³³ is therefore not a given in Chinese political thought but predicated on contingent situations closely related to evolving statist thinking. By unveiling the transcendental vision of the state in statist thinking, the tenacity of the authoritarian undertone in Chinese political thought can be further seen as being shaped by specific historical conditions to which the literati strove to adapt. In line with the materialist cosmology, the state had to actively demonstrate its ability to embody *dao* alongside constantly changing *qi* (器). Shen Sung-chiao has emphasized how the imminent threat of China’s extinction by imperialist invasion consolidated the statist character in modern Chinese citizenship.³⁴ By the same token, had there not been growing Western impact and the need for dynastic restoration, whether statist thinking would have become an underlying assumption wielded by opposing camps in self-strengthening to legitimize their respective agendas remains an open question. And had there not been a disastrous turn of events (the Sino-Japanese War, the 1898 Reform and even the Boxer Uprising) that exacerbated the sense of unprecedented crisis among the literati, how statist thinking morphed into matured statism and became popularized in modern China might have been a different story. The essentialist conception of intellectual

³² Kuhn, *Origins*, 63.

³³ *Ibid*, 70–9.

³⁴ Shen Sung-chiao, “Discourse on *guomin*,” 17–8.

transformation in modern China can therefore be overcome by analyzing the complex interactions between transcendental visions and political thinking under contingent circumstances in history.

In spite of the above discussion, it is anything but my intention to offer a master narrative of the historical evolution of political thought in late Qing China. Further research is indeed necessary to better reconstruct the historical evolution that saw the spread of statist thinking and the subsequent resurgence of statecraft reformism at the turn of the nineteenth century, which could be conducive to heeding the increasing scholarly interest in the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition from the perspective of intellectual history.³⁵ Future studies would also help to depict a fuller picture of transformations in late Qing political thought vis-à-vis the state if they delve deeper into historical dynamics of the Chinese academia especially during the second half of the nineteenth century. The development of New Text classicism has been well-explored in this respect.³⁶ Yet just like the statist re-orientation of Confucian scholarship was not single-handedly accomplished by the resurgence of New Text studies, intellectual trends in the late Qing concern far more than the transformation of *Gongyang* school classicism and deserve due attentions to their political implications.³⁷ Nor does this dissertation regard the sacralization of the state as a feature unique to Chinese political thinking. Recent studies suggest that even during political modernization in the West “[v]eneration and sacralization became a characteristic of all forms of modern politics,” as “ambitious political agents offered narratives which gave their adherents a feeling of belonging and a sense of meaning,” thus rendering politics increasingly similar to “belief

³⁵ Rowe, “Significance of the Qianlong-Jiaqing Transition.”

³⁶ See for example Huang, *Fazhan shi*, 568–730; Chen, *Gongyang xue*, 265–346.

³⁷ Some recent works on late Qing Confucianism have partly addressed this issue, see Zhang, *Zhongguo ruxue shi*; Shi, *Wan Qing lixue*.

systems which claimed to explain the purpose of human existence.”³⁸ How statism along with its cosmological underpinnings in modern China is connected to this global phenomenon requires interdisciplinary efforts for cross-cultural analysis.³⁹ By investigating the roots of Chinese statism, it is my aim to debunk the tendency of essentializing the modern Chinese state as the natural heir of its imperial predecessors. As long as the statist undertone in Chinese political thought and the literati’s (later modern intellectuals’) ideological commitment to the state are seen as a mystified given of tradition in the nationalist narrative, our understanding of China’s modern transformation will always be restricted by the self-imposed boundaries of such a narrative. Without uncovering the cosmological assumptions underlying the political discourse in late imperial China, we would be further perplexed by the tenacity of certain modes of thinking. If the emergence of statism in modern China can be recognized not only as a product deeply embedded in the intellectual transformation of the late Qing, but also as the outcome of the literati’s intellectual and political agendas predicated on historical contingencies rather than a predetermined end, this dissertation will certainly have fulfilled its preliminary role.

³⁸ Joost Augusteijn, Patrick Dassen, and Maartje Janse eds, *Political Religion Beyond Totalitarianism: The Sacralization of Politics in the Age of Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1–2. See also Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³⁹ Eisenstadt’s model of “civilizational analysis” could be an informative starting point. See Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations*, 1–56.

Glossary

<i>bianfa</i>	變法 reform
<i>dao</i>	道
<i>Daoxue</i>	道學 Learning of <i>dao</i>
<i>datong</i>	大同 great unity
Daqing guo	大清國 the Great Qing
<i>daren</i>	大人 great figures
<i>da yitong</i>	大一統 Grand Unity
<i>de</i>	德 virtue
<i>dianzhang zhidu</i>	典章制度 codes and institutions
<i>fa</i>	法 law
<i>fawu</i>	法物 divine instruments
<i>fengqi</i>	風氣 flourishing fashion
<i>fengsu</i>	風俗 social customs
<i>gong</i>	公 public
<i>guan</i>	官 bureaucracy, official, state administration
<i>guo</i>	國 state
<i>guojia</i>	國家 state
<i>guoji</i>	國計 state finance
<i>jing</i>	敬 reverence 靜 tranquility
<i>jingshu</i>	經術 techniques of classical studies
<i>jingxue</i>	經學 classical studies
<i>jinwen jingxue</i>	今文經學 New Text classicism
<i>jiushi</i>	救時 save the time

<i>jun</i>	君 monarch, ruler
<i>junmin gongzhu</i>	君民共主 constitutional monarchy
<i>junzi</i>	君子 the attained man
<i>kaozheng xue</i>	考證學 Evidential Scholarship
<i>kongtan</i>	空談 empty talk
<i>li</i>	理 principle
	利 benefit, profit
<i>liquan</i>	利權 control of profit
<i>lixue</i>	理學 Cheng-Zhu school Neo-Confucianism
<i>lizhi</i>	吏治 integrity of state officials
<i>lougui</i>	陋規 corrupt practices
<i>minfeng</i>	民風 the people's customs
<i>minsheng</i>	民生 the people's livelihood
<i>neisheng waiwang</i>	內聖外王 inner sagehood and outer kingliness
<i>pengdang</i>	朋黨 faction
<i>qi</i>	器 actual things and affairs
	氣 vital force
<i>qiangang</i>	乾綱 Heaven's mainstay
<i>qiji yinqiao</i>	奇技淫巧 strange techniques and wicked crafts
<i>qing</i>	情 common sense, sentiment
<i>qiyun</i>	氣運 the movement of the vital force
<i>ren</i>	仁 humanness
<i>rencai</i>	人才 talent
<i>rendao</i>	人道 <i>dao</i> of man
<i>sanshi</i>	三世 the Three Epochs
<i>shangzhan</i>	商戰 commercial warfare

<i>shi</i>	士 literati 勢 condition 事 affairs
<i>shi dafu</i>	士大夫 literati
<i>shigong</i>	事功 practical output of statecraft
<i>shiru</i>	師儒 Master-Confucianist
<i>shiqi</i>	士氣 literati morale
<i>shishi</i>	時勢 the timely condition 事勢 the condition of human affairs
<i>shixue</i>	實學 practical learning
<i>si</i>	私 private
<i>simin</i>	四民 the four classes of people
<i>suwang</i>	素王 uncrowned king
<i>tiandao</i>	天道 Heaven's <i>dao</i>
<i>tianxin</i>	天心 Heaven's mind
<i>wangdao</i>	王道 the Kingly Way
<i>weiyang dayi</i>	微言大義 great meanings in subtle words
<i>wuwei</i>	無為 non-action
<i>wuxing</i>	五行 the Five Elements
<i>xifa</i>	西法 Western methods
<i>xian</i>	賢 worthies
<i>xiejiao</i>	邪教 heterodox teachings
<i>xing</i>	性 human nature
<i>yang</i>	陽
<i>yi</i>	意 moral intention 義 righteousness

	夷 barbarian
<i>yili</i>	義理 meanings and principles
<i>yili weishi</i>	以吏為師 regard state officials as teachers
<i>yin</i>	陰
<i>yuanqi</i>	元氣 vital force
<i>yun</i>	運 fate
<i>zhengxue</i>	正學 orthodox learning
<i>zhi</i>	治 governance
<i>zhongbao</i>	中飽 embezzle from the middle
Zhongguo	中國 China
<i>zhongwai yijia</i>	中外一家 transform Chinese and foreign civilizations into one
<i>zixue</i>	子學 Master's learning

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