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The Problem of “Civil Society” in Late Imperial China

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The question underlying this and a growing number of other scholarly convocations these days—“Did China ever possess a civil society?”—is, on the very surface of it, one that I confess is deeply troubling to me. I want to know from the outset why we feel impelled and empowered to ask this question. Are we justified in expecting China (or any other non-Western historical society) to have had, or to have required, anything like the complex of attitudes, values, and institutions that we amalgamate and reify under the term *civil society*? In simply asking this question are we in fact not presuming a “normal” path of sociopolitical development, transcending the specificities of local culture? Is what we hope to find simply a projection of our own, culturally specific path of development—or, worse, of what we merely idealize our own path to have been? Is our very inquiry tautological, formed around a noncontrovertible proposition? That is to say, can we even conceive of a set of developments in China substantially differing from the history of early modern Europe of which we might equally approve?

I fear the enormous potential for travesty involved in such an inquiry. Consider for example the spectacle of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s highly influential 1963 book *The Civic Culture*, in which the authors, certainly two of the most respected social scientists of the postwar era, trot around the globe toting up on a scorecard the pattern variables present in a range of national cultures, ranking them numerically against an idealized (read: American) standard of values and institutions appropriate for democracy (Almond and Verba, 1963).

Needless to say, China does not stack up very well in such a loaded calculus.

At the other end of the spectrum we find Wm. Theodore de Bary, a scholar far less seduced by the charms of positivist social science and infinitely more knowledgeable of China than Almond and Verba, arguing, as a passionate liberal-democrat and equally passionate sinophile, that late imperial China did indeed have a "liberal tradition" equivalent if not quite identical to that of the early modern West (de Bary, 1983).¹ However much better informed the de Bary approach is than that of Almond and Verba, it may be (and indeed has been) taken to task as a similarly injudicious application of the comparative approach.

I speak from some experience in this regard. My own persistent attempt to describe late imperial Chinese society in terms of the European historiographic construction "early modern" has not met with universal approval. More to the point here, my earlier essay on "The Public Sphere in Modern China" (Rowe, 1990) has recently been criticized by Judith Farquhar and James Hevia in the following words:

It appears . . . that a China-centered history has returned us to the "discovery" of a single trajectory of modernization, posited, miraculously, as empirically present in history, and coincidentally, based on histories of the same Europe that was so important for the scholars of "China's response to the West" [Farquhar and Hevia, 1992].²

Despite their rather scattershot approach (their critique appears to categorically dismiss as hegemonic all American social history of China produced since 1964), Farquhar and Hevia offer a useful cautionary point. Examining the Chinese past using categories of analysis generated from the Western experience runs the undeniable risk of accepting an orientalist logic—even if our conclusions end up stressing (as mine do) the commonalities of Chinese and Western social change, rather than Western dynamism versus Chinese stagnation, or Western initiative and Chinese response.

Beyond the intellectual problems inherent in such an enterprise lie troubling moral and policy issues as well. I worry that in the very act of framing our question in these terms we force ourselves into an ethical Scylla and Charybdis. If we conclude that China ought rightly to have evolved a civil society, we are guilty of ethnocentrism: our

own local path of cultural development is set up as a universal model to which other societies must conform. I confess I do not find very justifiable the attempt to force American liberal-democratic institutions down the throat of regimes like that of Beijing that clearly do not want them. But if on the other hand we exempt China from demands to be more "like us" politically, on grounds of historical cultural differences, we are justly suspected of orientalism: other, less "civilized" societies cannot be expected to live up to the standards we set for ourselves. This latter train of logic is, of course, what lay behind the Bush administration's deplorably acquiescent stand toward the Tiananmen massacre of 1989.

Might then we better abandon altogether the quest to find in China developments analogous to those in our own cultural past? Perhaps so. It seems arguable, however, that despite its hazards, the use of extraneously generated categories to analyze a given culture may be not merely convenient but also unusually revealing, in that such a process can raise (what Susanne Rudolph has called) "questions that the indigenous accounts would like to let sleep" (Rudolph, 1987: 736). I would hope that, proceeding sensibly and sensitively, some middle ground might acceptably be staked out.

THE UTILITY OF "CIVIL SOCIETY" AS AN ANALYTIC DEVICE

With this in mind I would go on to suggest that what I find most problematic of all is the concept of civil society itself. Even in the European context, it might be argued, the notion was so inchoate as to discourage useful application. Granted, as a term it was highly prominent in the European tradition of political philosophy from at least Hobbes onward, but, as John Keane has recently shown, subject to decidedly contrasting usages (Keane, 1988). In its earliest incarnations, up through and including Locke, it referred in effect to the very condition of being governed, "civil" or "political society" being contrasted with the ungoverned "state of nature." Only gradually did the notion emerge of a civil society autonomous and counterposed to the state, but even then, as for example in Hegel, it was as often as not invoked to serve largely statist agendas. Throughout the history of this

debate, it seems to me, the precise referent or content of this civil society escaped definition. This task awaited the reconstructive efforts of Jürgen Habermas (1989) and other late twentieth-century historical writers. It might well be argued that the civil society they reconstruct is little more than a congeries of loosely contemporaneous phenomena in the early modern European past. But at least in Europe the notion itself had a history.

It had no similar history in China. Mary Rankin (1986), David Strand (1990), and myself (Rowe, 1989) have suggested the existence in the Qing and Republican eras of something related (related but *not* identical), which we call the "public sphere." It should be remembered that we are emboldened to do so not merely on the basis of our study of events and institutions, but more precisely because the Chinese political lexicon did contain a term, *gong*, with meanings very similar to those of its Western counterpart *public*, with similar ambiguities, and subjected to similar contestations within the community of discourse. As Rankin and I argue, this ancient and highly value-charged term became unprecedentedly energized in the late Qing, coming to refer, first, to a variety of emerging "public utilities" and "public services" outside direct state control (what might be called a "managerial" public sphere), and later further appropriated to legitimate a "critical" public sphere of extrabureaucratic political debate.

Unlike the public sphere, there was no discursive counterpart in imperial China for civil society, nothing to serve as an articulated subject of debate the way that theoretical construct, nebulous as it was, did in Europe. Even in the late Qing/early Republican tide of linguistic borrowing of the vocabulary of Western social and political thought, no neologism equivalent to civil society seems to have been introduced. The lacuna was so pronounced that scholars today in Taiwan and Hong Kong, newly alerted to the Western concern about civil society in the European past and the prospects for its emergence in post-Marxist societies, find themselves groping to invent a suitable translation. *Gongmin shehui*, *minjian shehui*, *shimin shehui*, and *wenming shehui* all find their advocates in a heated and highly ideological debate (Shi Yuankang, 1991; Wang Shaoguang, 1991).³

I must believe that this discursive silence tells us something in and of itself about the possibility of locating any civil society in late

imperial China. If civil society was not a material entity, nor an established political institution (like the throne or the bureaucracy), nor even an item of contemporary discourse, it can only be a heuristic device constructed after the fact by later scholars for their own analytic purposes. And it is precisely the utility of this analytic construct that I find so questionable.

SOME SOCIOECONOMIC FEATURES OF LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

What I propose to do in the remainder of this article, then, is to break down this amorphous concept into more manageable components, looking in turn at a number of institutions and notions that have been suggested by others as constituent elements in the formation of civil society, and asking in each case whether they can be said to have been present in indigenous form in Qing China. In doing so, I will strive as much as possible to avoid the universalist normative assumptions that usually attend such efforts, although obviously *no* comparative project can avoid such hazards altogether. First, some socioeconomic factors are described.

CAPITALISM

In a classic study, the late Canadian scholar C. B. Macpherson argued that the emergence of a rhetoric of civil society in English political thought from Hobbes to Locke was essentially designed to provide an ideological underpinning for the new techniques of capitalist accumulation characteristic of that era (Macpherson, 1962). Habermas, too, sees the emergence of civil society (an entity to which he accords more objective reality than does Macpherson) as predicated upon the rise of banks, stock exchanges, and large capitalist-style enterprises.

Did Qing China meet this precondition? That is a very big question. Much ink has been spilled over whether and how markedly “sprouts of capitalism” had emerged in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in China, and the more basic question of what “capitalism” itself entails is by no means agreed upon. For myself, I have come to be relatively

satisfied that the "second commercial revolution" of the late Ming-early Qing did involve significant new developments in specialized production for distant markets; a trend toward larger-scale business enterprises; a clearer orientation toward profitmaking and the accounting systems necessary to measure this; new forms of capital mobilization such as complex and flexible partnerships, issues of stock, and overdraft bank credit facilities; more sophisticated use of contractual guarantees; and a greater employment of wage labor. As a very highly commercialized society with a large, self-conscious urban-commercial class, the Qing thus shared some of the salient socioeconomic characteristics of early modern Europe, and did so more strikingly than had China at any previous time.

*AN INSTITUTIONALIZED PUBLIC PURSE, PUBLIC UTILITIES,
AND PUBLIC MANAGEMENT*

In the case of the first of these, a separately conceived and accounted state budget independent of the funds of the patrimonial ruling house, China undeniably had a longer and more uninterrupted tradition than did Western Europe. At least part of the effect of the mid-Qing fiscal reforms studied by Madeleine Zelin was to ratify this independence, in terms more explicit than ever before (Zelin, 1984). Imperial China likewise had a venerable tradition of public utilities and public management, although again the provisions for "public" budgeting for local infrastructural projects, introduced in the fiscal reforms of the 1720s, certainly represented a further movement in this direction.

So too did the wave of foundings of more-or-less extragovernmental public institutions such as *shancang*, *pujitang*, *yuyingtang*, *qingjietang*, and the multifunctional local self-nurturance organizations known as *shantang*, which first appeared in the late Ming and proliferated ever more densely across China's urban landscape through the late nineteenth century. Mary Rankin has clearly delineated the process by which in the final half-century of imperial rule such institutions became increasingly powerful within local society and increasingly self-conscious of their extrabureaucratic character, eventually emerging as loci of criticism of government policy.

CIVIL LAW AND LEGALLY GUARANTEED "HARD" PROPERTY RIGHTS

A workshop in the summer of 1991 at UCLA debated the question of whether or not Qing China had a distinctive tradition of what we would identify as "civil law." The conclusion I came away with was that, to a very large extent, it did. Yet it seems equally clear that the Qing did not acknowledge this to be a conceptually distinct category from other judicial matters, distinguishing civil from criminal matters only by routinely impugning their relative importance. Laws of property, in other words, were never self-consciously grounded in legal theory.

Similarly, if the movement toward "hard" property rights and fee simple ownership in Europe is taken as signifying a more developed "private sphere," more fully liberated from feudal or absolutist state infringement, the Qing record was rather different. Highly diffused systems of property rights such as surface versus subsurface ownership, permanent leasehold arrangements, and so on, were the norm in much of rural China. At least one participant in the civil law workshop at UCLA (Macauley, 1991) found evidence that in some times and places the state itself sought to standardize customary laws of ownership by imposing principles of hard property rights in deciding civil cases, but considerable counterevidence likewise exists and the issue is far from settled.

LITERACY, PUBLISHING, AND THE PRINT CULTURE

Habermas predicated his original argument for the emergence of a public sphere/civil society in Europe closely upon the development of new literary genres such as the novel and journals of popular taste such as *The Spectator*, as well as the "commoditization of news and information" represented by the new commercial press. More recently, historians of early modern Europe (especially France) such as Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Darnton, and Roger Chartier, have explored with considerable subtlety the manner in which literacy and the expanding publishing industry remolded popular consciousness in a wide variety of ways—far transcending the simple equation "political press = politicized public opinion" (see, for example, Davis, 1975;

Chartier, 1989; Chartier, 1991). Although the much needed history of the late Ming/early Qing publishing industry and its growing consumer market has yet to be written, there is mounting evidence of similar developments in early modern China. I would suggest that of special importance here would be precisely those texts that, on the surface, appear *least* likely candidates for galvanizing popular politicization: pulp romances, erotica, popularized editions of moralistic tracts, simplified manuals of ritual performance, and so on (see, for example, Brokaw, 1991; Carlitz, 1991; and several of the contributions in Johnson, Nathan, and Rawski, 1985).

One of the unexplained divergences between the European and the Chinese cases is the comparatively long lag in China between this late Ming explosion of popular print media and the first emergence of commercial journalism in the 1870s. Yet, as Rankin and I have each tried to show, when this did finally appear, it began in a number of ways to exert indirect politicizing influences on urban elite activists decades before, in the early twentieth century, the press became explicitly polemical.

URBANIZATION AND SITES FOR COLLECTIVE DISCUSSION OF "PUBLIC AFFAIRS"

This is not the place to rehearse the issues of early modern urbanization and the emergence or expansion of a specifically urban/bourgeois (*shimin*) culture; although others may not agree, I personally am fully convinced that such phenomena did characterize the late imperial era. I am likewise satisfied that the urban teahouse and wine-shop, in all of their varieties, were at least available to serve the same catalytic function in the fostering of popular critical debate of public issues that is routinely attributed to the early modern European cafe and coffee house. In the absence of a detailed study of these institutions in the Ming and Qing, I can only point to the suggestiveness of early twentieth-century literary depictions of these institutions, as for example in Lao She's *Teahouse*, and Lu Xun's "In the Wineshop."

AUTONOMOUS ORGANIZATIONS

The freedom of association is a key right identified with our ideologized view of the Anglo-American civil society tradition. As

cultural historians of early modern Europe have become increasingly aware, however, newly emergent voluntary organizations relatively free from state control (such as the Freemasons) played significant roles in altering popular mentalities that went far beyond acting as self-conscious interest groups to influence public policy; they did this, for instance, by the very act of establishing criteria for membership, internal patterns of authority, and group decision-making processes that ran counter to orthodox sociopolitical hierarchies. As Chartier has argued, this created arenas of “democratic sociability” within a larger society that was decidedly undemocratic (Chartier, 1991: 163-164).

My own studies of commercial guilds and philanthropic associations in nineteenth-century Hankou have at least hinted at a corresponding importance of autonomous organizations in late imperial China. Recently, this line of argument has drawn severe criticism from no less an authority on Qing society than Frederic Wakeman. Wakeman, of course, does not dispute the ubiquitous presence of such institutions; he contests simply the autonomy from the state that he sees me attributing to them. Organizational autonomy, however, is not an all-or-nothing issue; as analysts of the current Chinese political scene have discovered, it is best understood as a continuum (Bonnin and Chevrier, 1991: esp. 579-582). Institutions such as those I describe could rarely operate in a manner directly counter to the will of the bureaucratic administration. If they operated in a sphere of activity deemed by the state inconsequential, they might escape its notice, or the state might suffer their existence by neglect. If they took on a more significant role (such as management of a trade or philanthropic enterprise of major local importance), they were well-advised to apply for explicit state sanction, their existence being put “on the record” (*zai an*). In any case, I would continue to argue that their role in fostering a participatory mentality was itself a development of increasing sociocultural significance from the late Ming onward. Of course, when such groups began to acquire means of coercive force (i.e., armed militia), as many did in the final decades of the Qing, their potential autonomy became rapidly more transparent.

The basic point to be made here is, I think, that the late imperial state in general had neither the capacity nor the will to command directly the processes of Chinese society on a routine basis (although it could achieve quite stunning results in specific cases of concentrated

effort). Instead, it relied for the mundane tasks of governance on a variety of extrabureaucratic associations. As a result, such associations were significantly empowered, and their narrower interests advanced. The balance between autonomy and state control was thus never clearly defined, but was in practice the result of a process of continual negotiation.⁴

There was nevertheless, in my view, an observable broad temporal shift in this balance. Although both state and societal (i.e., local elite) initiatives were always present in some degree in the formation and operation of such public service organizations, societal initiative was more pronounced in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries than it was in the heyday of the Qing state in the eighteenth century. At the same time, I would see a relatively uninterrupted process of expansion of the sum of such initiatives overall, as the public sector (both bureaucratic and extrabureaucratic) came to perform an ever greater range of tasks for the benefit of the population. Then, in the last several decades of imperial rule (and dramatically under the late Qing *xinzheng* reforms), the state rather suddenly began to assert far greater *claims* of responsibility for a broad range of social welfare activities, but, at least until the Republican era, without the material capacity to back them up. The result, in the short term, was an even more increased scope for elite or communal appropriation of local political authority.

In a separate but related category would fall literati groups such as poetry societies, which regularly brought together in a teahouse or other venue leading local notables to discuss—ostensibly—aesthetic or scholarly matters of common concern. The Xuannan Poetry Club and the Gu Yanwu Shrine Association of early nineteenth-century Beijing, studied by James Polachek (1992), clearly demonstrate the potential that such organizations held to become instruments of policy criticism.⁵

CULTURE AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

I move now from institutional elements identified with the rise of a civil society in the early modern West, to elements of a more intellectual-cultural nature. Among these might be included the elements described below.

SOCIAL CONTRACT

Although declarations abound in the long imperial Chinese record that the principal duty of the state is to serve the broader public interest, a notion sometimes identified as *minben* (the people as the foundation) political thought, I know of not a single reference that might so much as hint at a notion of state as social contract, existing at the pleasure of the governed. Prior to the introduction of Western political theory, the emperor ruled by express design of the cosmic first principle, Heaven.⁶

NATURAL RIGHTS

This notion, which I take to be central if not absolutely essential to the Western liberal-democratic tradition, can be found in Qing discourse only by stretching its definition so far as to deprive the notion of meaning. Until its importation from the West, the rhetoric of “rights” of *any* kind is nearly totally lacking, even in such likely contexts as adjudication of property disputes or discussion of fiscal liabilities.⁷ It seems to me that some of the Qing usages I have seen of the concepts of human nature (*renqing*, in one of its many late imperial guises), and of Wang Yangming’s moral mind (*liangxin*) come somewhat close to an express recognition of the innate dignity of the human condition, not to be casually infringed upon by others or by the state. But equating this with the Western notion of self-evident inalienable rights would be going rather too far.

A THEORY OF PROPRIETORSHIP

Macpherson has brilliantly explicated the theory of property and of “possessive individualism” that underlay the early modern English notion of civil society, especially in the pivotal formulations of Locke. In this theory, it was precisely the individual’s role as proprietor, most basically of his or her own body but by extension of land and capital, that bestowed upon him or her personal dignity and entitlement to the rights and benefits of membership in the body politic. As a somewhat suspect logical corollary, Macpherson suggests, Locke and his followers sought to exclude from the politically empowered “people” those

members of the laboring population who owned insignificant real property and had forfeited even proprietorship over their own bodies through the act of hiring out their labor for wages (Macpherson, 1962: chap. 5).

It is hard to find in late imperial China a comparably articulated theory of proprietorship or of property that might serve as the basis for conceptualization of a civil society. It may not be wholly absent. I have noticed in my work on the mid-Qing project of expansion into the non-Han southwest, for example, an ideologizing of the Chinese family and property systems that suggests a view of the landholding patriarchal household as prerequisite to responsible membership in the polity, although hardly to rights such as that of political representation. Recently, Lin Man-houng has offered a reading of Gong Zizhen's *Nongzong lun* (1823) and other contemporary works, which has them advancing views of property very close to those of Locke (Lin, 1991). I find this line of argument intriguing but not fully convincing. More work needs to be done, but for the moment I must see the ideology of proprietorship as a uniquely Western means of grounding the political order.

INDIVIDUALISM

The broader question of the extent to which individualist ideas came to the fore in the late imperial era is yet more complex. Certainly, it can be conceded that no self-conscious ideology of "rugged individualism" comparable to that of the West emerged indigenously in China, nor, as suggested above, did any vocabulary of individual rights. Similarly, although some art historians have detected late imperial movement in this direction (Vinograd, 1991), it seems apparent that personal "originality" was never as broadly esteemed in China as in the postmedieval West. Yet as early as the late Ming there are a number of signs of a shift in consciousness that begin to accord prominence to the individual vis-à-vis the social group or network to which he/she is customarily subordinated in the Confucian scheme of values. As de Bary pointed out in a pathbreaking article more than twenty years ago, the later Wang Yangming tradition came to lay unprecedented emphasis upon individual self-fulfillment, and to stress social relationships of reciprocal equality rather than hierarchical

subordination (de Bary, 1970). More recently, Joseph McDermott (1991) has drawn attention to the particular prominence assigned to the bond of coequal friendship in late Ming-early Qing writers influenced by Matteo Ricci's widely read 1595 tract *Jiaoyu lun* (On friendship).

Paralleling this, there was throughout both the high intellectual tradition and more pervasive popular discourse a broad-based early modern revaluation of notions such as "human appetites" (*renyu*), "self-interest" (*si*), and "profit" (*li*) (Mizoguchi Yūzō, 1980; Yu Yingshi, 1987). In the economic sphere, this led by the mid-Qing to a sort of logic approaching that of Adam Smith's "invisible hand"—the notion that the sum of individual acquisitiveness is no less than the material betterment of the entire commonweal. In the cultural sphere, the variety of new developments that might fall under the rubric of a Chinese "romanticism," centering on an intense fascination with the varieties of *qing* (human emotional response), and including but not limited to a new sexual frankness, ideals of romantic love and of the companionate marriage, same-sex camaraderie of both the male and female variety, and even (in the construction of Chen Zilong) heroic dynastic loyalism (Chang, 1991), can be seen as aspects of the same revaluation of the individual.

So too can the various profeminist stirrings of the early and mid-Qing: literati diatribes against foot-binding, child marriage, and mercenary manipulation of the lives of widows by their natal or deceased husband's family. It may not be going too far, I would suggest, to see in these developments the figure of the daughter-wife emerging as emblematic of the individual more generally, whose interests contra those of the patriarchal household are increasingly granted moral legitimacy.

CIVILITY

European historians have increasingly taken note of the essential contribution of the rise of a cultural ideal of "civility" to the formation of any purported civil society. Civility had many manifestations. In one, it referred to the growing cultural preference (at least, a perceived preference) for reasoned and conciliatory rather than violent and forcible resolutions of social conflict. In another, epitomized by

Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, it denoted the courtly skills of costume, etiquette, and articulation that demonstrated the inherent superiority of the aristocracy. In yet another, as represented by Erasmus's enormously influential *De civilitate morum puerilium libellus* (1530), civility meant those habits of speech, grooming, and deportment that must be cultivated in the child, but that were prized precisely because they were held to reveal the innate virtue and intelligence of the human species. Civility thus might incorporate a respect for social rank, but more basically implied a recognition of the common humanity of the participants in civilized society. What the ideal of civility above all provided was a common code of manners and social forms appropriate for specifically *public* behavior, and that enabled—indeed placed extreme value upon—“honest” expressions of personal opinion in collective discussion (Chartier, 1987; Revel, 1989).⁸

Although work on this topic has barely begun, it seems to me not too farfetched to see something parallel going on in early modern China. No Chinese idiom captures precisely the same broad range of connotations as civility does in Western European languages, but several highly value-laden notions, such as *wen* (“culture” or “refinement,” as opposed both to rusticity and to more militaristic virtues) and *hua* (the civilizing or socializing process) at least partially overlap. Most directly comparable, of course, is *li* (ritual or etiquette). Among its enormous range of applications, *li* at times clearly referred to the code of artificially structured (although in theory both “natural” and “humanistic”) manners, which both enabled the social presentation of the true self, and facilitated social intercourse in the public sphere.

Of particular interest here is the fact that, as a number of recent studies have shown, *li* became an object of newly intensified fascination in the early and mid-Qing (see Chow, 1988; Brook, 1989; and several of the studies in Kwang-Ching Liu, 1990). One aspect of this vogue was the growth of a consumer market for commercially published books of etiquette, informing ever broader segments of an eager population how to behave and speak in public. A related trend, I would argue, was the above-mentioned revival of interest in the Confucian bond of friendship, which offered something of an imperative for males (and, in a less conventional reading, for females as well) to form

relationships outside the domestic sphere for the discussion of values, behavior, and, at least in some cases, social policy.

PUBLIC OPINION

The question of the notion of “public opinion” in Qing China is so complex, and so central to my own ongoing research, that I can only offer a very brief hint of it here. What is clear is that such an idea was ubiquitous in Qing political discourse, in a wide variety of idioms: *gonglun*, *gongping*, *gongyi*, *yulun*, *minlun*, *minqing*, *minxin*, and many others. But how are we to interpret such usages? And what are the intended operational limits of the notions to which they refer?

Clearly, extrabureaucratic local leadership is seen as properly chosen only in accordance with *gonglun*, and bureaucratic policies themselves ought to be fashioned so as to accord with *gonglun*. In a few cases I have seen, early eighteenth-century administrators suggest that *gonglun* is really the *test* of official policy, that there is at least a sense in which ratification by the *gonglun* is necessary for their legitimacy. But at least two caveats apply. First, all such public opinion is strictly local; as Rankin’s work shows, it was only in the post-Taiping era, with the emergence of the commercial press, that *gonglun* began to be seen as transcending issues of immediate local interest. Second, *gonglun* is often seen as the embodiment of abstract reason, or impartial moral knowledge (*liangxin*). This sounds curiously like Habermas’s reading of the early modern European notion that universal truths will necessarily emerge through reasoned public discussion, but it has severe limitations as an intellectual grounding for a democratic process. In one formulation I have encountered in a late imperial source, it is claimed that if but one man in a population sees things correctly, it is his voice alone, rather than that of the multitude, that genuinely represents public opinion (Lu Kun, 1736: 2/64).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up this rather sprawling discussion, I would reiterate my discomfort with the more general quest to locate in late imperial China

any phenomenon identified with the civil society of the Western discursive tradition. The concept is at once too value laden and too under-defined to be of effective use, and consequently the outcome of any search to discover (or invent) it in China can amount to little more than passing a blanket value judgment on the Chinese past, based on expectations generated, justifiably or not, from our own local experience.

As is evident from the above, I believe that opting instead to employ more modest middle-level generalizations, while hardly freeing us altogether from the hazards of ethnocentrism and orientalism, is one potentially fruitful way of framing our investigation of the Chinese past. Of course, from a methodological point of view, an equally valid mode of inquiry would be to employ categories of comparative analysis generated by the Chinese experience, and measure the Western experience in their terms. Did the monarchical West, for example, ever develop the ideal of the remonstrating official (*yanguan*), or the principle of governmental responsibility for guaranteeing popular livelihoods (*minsheng*), as early or as fully as did imperial China? I have not tried anything like that here, but the results of such an attempt might be revealing.

Because of the doubts I have expressed, I would strongly resist any temptation to sum up what the comparisons advanced above might mean regarding imperial China's "potential" for democracy; indeed, that resistance is this article's major point. In some cases, the Chinese and Western experiences on these scores appear surprisingly similar; in others, it is the differences that are more striking. I would suggest, however, that the evidence of this article does not, for me at least, justify any general sense of Western cultural-political superiority.

NOTES

1. See also the thoughtful and critical review of this work by Paul Cohen (1985). De Bary has restated his position somewhat more cautiously in *The Trouble with Confucianism* (1991).

2. I am grateful to Professors Farquhar and Hevia for their continuing discussion with me of these complex methodological issues.

3. I am grateful to Kwang-Ching Liu for drawing my attention to these articles.

4. Obviously, both the material and ideological constraints on direct state control had changed considerably by the time of the heyday of the Shanghai police, which Wakeman has studied in detail and which I suspect colors his view of earlier periods.

5. Wakeman again cautions us regarding the political limitations of such groups (Wakeman, 1972).

6. De Bary notes the significant absence in the Chinese tradition of political thought of any analog to the Hebraic concept of a "covenant" between the divine first principle and the people as a whole; instead, the Chinese Heaven empowers simply the ruler as its agent and the elite "noble man" as the guardian of the public interest (de Bary, 1991: 22-23).

7. According to a recent study, the term for popular rights (*minquan*) first appeared in Chinese only in 1878 (Xiong Yuezhi, 1986: 11). Here, as elsewhere in this section, I am influenced by an unpublished article by Joan E. Judge, "Public Opinion and the New Politics of Contestation," which studies the appropriation of inherited categories of political thought in the early twentieth-century Shanghai journal, *Shibao*.

8. The classical historical investigation of civility is of course Norbert Elias's multivolume study, *The Civilizing Process* (1978; German original 1939).

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