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Chinese Social Relations & Political Transformations in Historical & Comparative Perspectives:

A preliminary sketch of new orientations in social science research*

王国斌(R. Bin Wong)^①

1. Social Relations and Political Change: The Orientation of the Social Sciences

Many of the basic social science norms for what is desirable and what is possible are derived from the historical experiences of Western Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. European economic history supplies the basic analytical categories and relationships, from which principles have been distilled for market economy in general and strategies for economic development in those places yet to experience industrialization. Similarly, our understanding about the changed spatial organization of society from small villages to large cities is very much grounded in the experiences of rural-to-urban migration and the social transformations

attending those changes in European societies; these assessments in turn shape the ways in which we imagine how societies lacking urban transformations first experienced in Europe might become urbanized in the future. In this study I attempt to discuss the ways in which social science norms about state-society relations have been derived from European historical experiences in order to ask what happens to our social sciences when we allow other ways for state-society relations to be formulated historically. In world historical terms, China is an important case to be considered for this kind of analysis because it offers a rich record of organizing state-society relations quite separately from that occurring in Europe before the two regions began to be connected in increasingly important ways politically, economically, and socially after the mid-nineteenth century.

How do Chinese ways of relating state and society in earlier historical periods affect later social and political possibilities? Can we produce the kinds of comparisons between China and Europe that would allow us to identify the similarities and differences between them in specific ways? Could we then use our understanding of these similarities and differences to define more carefully what is desirable in future state-society relations? In order to answer this final question, we will have to reflect deeply on how we create desirable social futures both as ideals and as improvements on our current situations.

Such reflections, to be most useful, should develop empirically-based understanding of past practices both foreign and domestic. Furthermore, social practices in general, and Chinese and European in this study in particular, should be compared on equal levels of abstraction. It does little good to compare an empirical situation in one place with the ideals of another since there is always a gap between ideal and reality. This is a serious problem because one of the basic strategies in the social sciences is to abstract from European experiences to create simplifications that describe ideal situations. Once we have the theoretical norms, we easily forget how they are not met in any empirical situation, including Western ones, and choose to make the gap seem especially deep or troubling when it is observed in a non-Western case, such as that of China. One response to this entails judging European practices against Chinese norms in the same way we judge

* This article is a longer version of the remarks first presented in Chinese under the title 从历史与比较的立场来看中国的社会关系和政治变化 at the National Institute for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, Fudan University on November 26th, 2008. I am grateful to Director Deng Zhenglai for the kind invitation to speak and the comments on my remarks that he and others provided.

① 王国斌, 复旦大学社会科学高等研究院特聘讲座教授, UCLA 亚洲研究所主任。

Chinese practices according to European norms. I used this technique in *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* to ask why eighteenth-century European states lacked the kinds of social welfare practices typical of eighteenth-century Chinese, and only developed their own versions of social services and welfare policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wong 1997a: 73–104). Exposing the absences in European history from a Chinese perspective adds a dimension of symmetry to the way that questions are usually posed, namely “why didn’t China develop ‘x’?” where ‘x’ can be some large and complex cluster of practices found in Europe such as capitalism, democracy, or a scientific revolution.

Performing symmetric exercises of comparisons of what is lacking in European history can further lead to considerations of the generality of the conditions assumed to exist for certain developments based on how they occurred in European history. To continue the subject of social welfare and public expenditures, it is frequently claimed that levels of social spending are positively correlated with the extent of political participation or voice in government decision making, since the more people who have a voice in government financial decisions, the more likely they will want money spent on activities that benefit them (Lindert). Yet were this a truly general proposition, we would be hard pressed to explain social spending before the advent of democratic practices. While the proposition may do a reasonably good job when working in the context of European history, it does a poor job of explaining why China had higher levels of social spending in the eighteenth century, before democracy existed anywhere in the world, than did Europe of the same era (Wong 2007). That social spending and political voice need not be related in any simple and universal manner is one example of what looking at experiences outside European ones can contribute to the pool of phenomena the social sciences are challenged to explain.

In this study I will suggest ways to characterize late imperial and modern Chinese social and political relations at a level of generality that is consistent with the characterizations social science makes about early-modern and

modern European social and political relations, from which our more general social science ideas about state making and civil society are derived. Such an exercise makes possible a different perspective on more recent Chinese conditions, which can then be viewed, at least in part, as the outcome of earlier conditions in China. It also makes possible a more symmetrical comparison of the virtues and vices of Chinese and European situations, which encourages us to reconsider how the effort to adapt practices originating in one context is conditioned by the circumstances in the place to which the practices are taken.

In looking at social relations and political change in China (and other non-Western places), the social sciences typically start from a set of desirable but absent conditions found in European history as a means to identify what is needed for positive social and political changes. We think, for instance, in terms of civil society, individual citizens, and the kinds of organizational capacities and personal autonomies that flow from the existence of social spaces separate from political control. Cast in this manner, it is difficult not to think about what societies like today’s China lack. At the same time, it is not easy to imagine how past domestic practices can be modified to meet ideals crystallized in European ideologies and institutions. In order to think more clearly about how to envisage desirable futures in non-Western countries like China, this presentation argues that we can start with a better understanding of how the Chinese past affects both what we see and what we can imagine in China, as well as how the social sciences can broaden their collective vision to become more encompassing of human experiences.

2. Differing Dynamics of State-Society Equilibria: A Contrast of State-Society Relations in Early Modern Europe and Late Imperial China

Many of the studies on the formation of European states between the

sixteenth and nineteenth centuries stress one of two themes: (1) successful state makers were centralizing rulers who were able to mobilize increasing amounts of resources to fund their military activities and the formation of bureaucracies; (2) European states made a shift from rule by monarchs to government by the people (Tilly 1975, 1992; Bendix). The two themes are in fact intimately related, since impoverished kings wanting to build armies and bureaucracies had to negotiate with their elite to gain agreement on new taxes, and it is from these efforts that representative institutions would later emerge. Negotiations over taxes, an activity carried out in England's parliament after 1688 and between the king's officials and different lower level administrations in France, made clear the central state's dependence on agreements with their subjects to raise new taxes. European elite defended themselves against the demands of their governments either as corporate groups, i.e., the clergy, the aristocracy, and urban elites, or as individuals in both England and Holland.

Limiting the powers of the state created social spaces for the organization of activities deemed separate from the state's proper concerns. These spaces came to constitute civil society. In more recent times we have seen civil society come to be populated by organizations that promote activities according to diverse interests and beliefs that are separate from those of both governments and businesses. People judge governments and the societies they rule according to the capacities of non-governmental organizations (NGO) to pursue activities without state interference. These organizations, according to educated opinion makers, should be subject to a country's law, but free from arbitrary state interference. Much the same criteria characterize the individual citizen's relationship with a democratic government; the individual enjoys freedom within the law of the country. The individual citizen also bears responsibilities, and so do organizations. The early modern European concerns about defending individuals and social groups against expanding state power and capacities to tax promoted forms of negotiation and rule making to protect the property and privileges of the elite (Hoffman and Norberg). These practices provided material to develop

new political ideologies and institutions that supported notions of rights and freedom of individuals as citizens in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is easy to naturalize these European political developments as necessary features of historical change. They have become so basic to how we evaluate the modern world and to how we measure the successes and failures of different societies that it seems irrelevant, if not impossible, to wonder if these European patterns of social and political change can be anything but our general guidelines for explaining changes elsewhere. However, if other regions in the world, including China, do not generate similar changes, why did these ideas and institutions crystallize when and where they did? Would not understanding the particular problems these changes addressed help us better understand what is more general about their desirability?

Here is one way to think of a more general frame to evaluate what happened in Europe that encourages comparisons with other places that were different, including China. Making institutions engage in negotiations between a government and its elite is very costly. This is especially true when the rulers and the elite have limited experience with creating such practices. Both the government and the elite have to be willing to bear such costs for new institutions to be formed. It therefore seems reasonable to ask what kinds of benefits each side expects from elaborating these mechanisms of communication and negotiation. Early modern European rulers found themselves unable to undertake the new activities they wanted to pursue, with the revenues available to them. To make new demands of a sizeable nature, they had to seek agreement from their elite, and if negotiating with the elite was the cost for pursuing desired agendas they chose to do so. Since the rulers were competing with each other to consolidate their rule domestically and compete for territory and wealth with other would-be centralizing rulers, the decisions to elaborate new ways of assuring greater capacities to secure resources may well have seemed unavoidable to rulers. For their parts, the elite had to find some means to defend themselves against the growing demands of the rulers. If they could not evade state

demands or defeat officials with violence, the costs of developing ways to negotiate with rulers could be seen as a way to minimize the damage rulers could otherwise cause them. The elite organized themselves more effectively to negotiate with the rulers who were expanding their bureaucratic and military capacities. The building of strong states in Europe was thus accompanied by strong political mobilization by elite groups. Successful European states were supported by effective civil societies. The relationship between the government and the ruled was of a competitive, and at times even conflicting, nature, but this created successful cases of balance of strength between them.

Viewing the early modern European situation in the above manner allows us to see quite easily some basic contrasts with late imperial China. Where European rulers were chronically short of revenue and therefore pushed to innovate new ways to mobilize resources, Chinese rulers had a well-established repertoire of strategies to raise taxes (Zhou). Furthermore, the stated Chinese preference for light taxes was episodically met. Chinese rulers could move revenues among parts of the empire according to fluctuating needs rather than have provinces, many as large as European states in terms of size, each raise additional revenues to meet all of their own needs. These conditions indicate that the Chinese state was not constantly seeking to increase revenues as were European states; thus, Chinese elite had far less incentive to invest in the costly efforts to create mechanisms through which to negotiate with the state over taxes. This does not mean they needed simply to accept the taxes imposed upon them. Both the elite and the common people could evade taxes as individuals and in some cases organize protests against taxes deemed unfairly levied. But these actions were episodically expensive, and they do not mean the elite had a lasting incentive that the European elite had to develop formal institutions to negotiate with rulers. For their part, Chinese rulers had no reason to imagine they could benefit from giving their elite a more formal political voice when they were able to create a stable social order by working with them in informal and complementary ways.

On the expenditure side, eighteenth-century Chinese officials helped organize and finance activities intended to promote economic production and meet social welfare demands, including water control projects and grain supply storage. A small but higher (compared with the case of Europe) percentage of taxes were spent on activities of direct material benefit to people in China, despite the absence of well-developed institutions for people to bargain with officials^①. The political ideology of the state recognized the importance of stabilizing social order through attention to people's livelihood. The maintenance of an agrarian empire in the late imperial period depended more on maintaining social order than on competing with rival states. The Qing state conducted many military campaigns, some successful and others not, but the main instruments of rule were civilian and bureaucratic.

Despite having the world's largest and earliest bureaucracy staffed largely by individuals selected for service based on their qualifications and subject to an expanding body of administrative laws, there were real limitations to the reach of the state. In order to reach beyond the county seat, officials relied on the agenda of maintaining social order that the Confucian elite shared with them. Relative to European relations between the state officials and the elite, the Chinese official-elite relations were of a far less competitive nature. The shared interest officials and the elite had in reproducing a stable social order across a vast agrarian landscape was unhindered by the kinds of expanding demands made by European rulers on their elite that brought in train the development of more formal mechanisms for negotiating and agreeing to the freedom and duties of their elite. Within the collaboration between Chinese officials and the elite, the mix of official and elite efforts to build institutions of local social order varied. In wealthier areas, the elite could be expected to shoulder more of the organizational and

① The argument for this interpretation is developed in a book manuscript by Jean-Laurent Rosenthal and R. Bin Wong provisionally entitled *Political Economy and Growth in China and Europe since Tamerlane*.

financial burdens to build granaries and schools; officials appear to have played a proportionally greater role in poorer and more peripheral regions (Wong 1997b). This paralleled the greater role officials often played in the economies of peripheral regions, whether in terms of organizing and regulating trade across the northwestern borders or in terms of establishing agricultural colonies in both the northwest and southwest. Temporally, the degree of central government initiative to establish institutions of local order waxed and waned, in large measure conforming to the conventional view of a strong eighteenth-century government and an increasingly weak state in the nineteenth century. But even without central government exhortations and demands, lower-level governments could continue to make efforts to promote social order within their respective jurisdictions. Since the institutions of social order were constructed locally, much of the basic political logic for rule could be promoted in the absence of a strong central government (Wong 1997a; 116 - 122).

Eighteenth-century China enjoyed a state-society equilibrium in which both the state and the society were strong. However, the nature of the balance was significantly different from what we can see in Europe. In Europe the state-society equilibrium was established through making clear and formal the legal authority of the state and the liberties and freedom of the social elite. The equilibrium was maintained through competition and negotiation that utilized legal principles for defining formal divisions between state authority and elite privileges. In China, the equilibrium between the state and the society, especially the elite, was based not on legal definitions of formal state authority and elite privileges but on officials sharing with the elite an agenda for social order that included formal state efforts and informal elite efforts. The relationship between the state and the elite depended little on legal principles and practices. The most developed part of the Qing law was administrative; the central government exerted control over a vertically integrated bureaucracy subject to efforts in reform and improvement. Officials took seriously the challenges of bureaucratic rule well before Europeans could conceive such difficulties, let alone face them.

At the same time, Chinese society was extremely vibrant and strong. An expanding commercial economy provided adequate subsistence to the world's largest population and the means by which large pockets of wealth and culture emerged in cities and towns. In the nineteenth century, the central government was far less able to oversee empire-wide domestic order through the eighteenth-century cluster of institutions as it faced increasingly serious domestic challenges. The elite and local officials continued to make efforts to secure local order; in the aftermath of the mid nineteenth-century rebellions, the elite in wealthier parts of the empire asserted themselves by taking on ever greater roles in local affairs, leading to an ambiguous expansion of para-governmental activity that can be seen alternatively as the elite taking over government functions, including those of taxation, or as the bureaucracy reaching out to create new quasi-bureaucratic positions (Wong 1997a; 122 - 126).

The devolution of domestic control to lower levels of political and social authority in the second half of the nineteenth century did not mean that the imperial government was seriously challenged as the legitimate center of authority. The central government did not compete with lower levels of authority in ways that encouraged regions or areas to separate themselves from the larger empire. When strong, the central government created public goods and provided social goods, the merits of which most people appeared to have agreed upon. Equally importantly, people could find ways to pursue their own interests without finding it necessary or even desirable to control the state apparatus. These conditions differed from what was typical in the period of state building in Europe over the early modern and modern eras.

The persistence of a central state as a politically desirable goal in China did not mean that the loss of the eighteenth-century equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society was not significant for understanding the changes that would unfold in subsequent centuries. China lost its equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society in the nineteenth century as European states and their people began to intensify their efforts to improve their positions of strength with respect to each other. Growing numbers and

types of people sought to make claims on European states which themselves sought greater autonomy and control over their citizens.

3. China's Lost Equilibrium: Dangerous Imbalances

The complementary relationship of officials and the elite was stable as long as mutual benefits were achieved with modest social and political cost to both parties. This equilibrium was first threatened and then upset in the late Qing dynasty as the elite began to make broader and more insistent calls for institutional political change. At the same time, other more complementary relationships between officials and the elite similar to those of earlier periods persisted. For instance, in the early twentieth-century opium suppression campaign, officials mobilized the elite to help them discover and close down opium dens (Wong 2000: 190–199). But the uncertain future of twentieth-century official-elite relations is indicated more accurately by the Chambers of Commerce, which were seen by officials as aids to their efforts in managing the expanding forms of commercial activity and the increasing numbers of commercial disputes, but seen by members of the Chambers as vehicles for them to promote their own interests, especially to limit the new exactions that the government attempted to impose upon them. Here then we have the kind of situation that in early modern Europe motivated the principles and practices of negotiation between the state and the elite that would become basic to broader relations between state and society by the nineteenth century. In twentieth-century China, however, the legacy of a different and previously quite successful way of organizing state-society relations made the development of an alternative more difficult to achieve. The cost and benefit of shifting from more informal mechanisms of contact to more formal ones were difficult to conceptualize because the officials and the elite were accustomed to one template for relations and perceived the other more formal mechanisms as irrelevant. They could not conceive choices among more formal and more informal methods of organizing state-

society relations.

Official assumptions that the elite should organize to serve state interests made sense to the elite when they largely shared the same interests with the officials. But as elite concerns brought them into competition or conflict with the officials, they needed to find ways to engage officials in negotiations or find ways of evading official demands. The growing tension and competition between new associations and officials was further exacerbated by the limited capacities of early twentieth-century Chinese governments, which in so many ways were less effective than the eighteenth-century Qing state.

Urban society especially was constructed by people forming new kinds of associations and expanding and changing older ones to create a vibrant and problematic space in which government and politics could hardly be modeled on earlier political and social practices. Western countries supplied both models and the foreign residents to illustrate how foreign political and social practices could be implemented in Chinese urban context. Political and social life was organized within society itself more often than not with modest supervision or little sustained interference from officials.

The countryside became increasingly separate from urban social and political centers. Its organizational principles and the ways in which officials attempted to engage their subjects became increasingly coercive and exploitative. These changes prompted local rural communities to seek to protect themselves against outside predators, be they officials or bandits. Weak governments unable to provide peace and social order created space for social groups to take on more responsibilities and expand their importance in crafting local means for community to survive and to connect themselves to people elsewhere, whether economically through trade, socially through the circulation of ideas, culture, and the arts, or politically through the discussion of how to best engage higher levels of government in the issues they deemed important.

Could the new equilibrium between a new kind of dynamic and strong urban society and a weak state prove long-lasting? Even if this equilibrium

proved plausible, it left more rural areas and those regions that did not have economically dynamic urban centers without a complementary equilibrium between state and society. There was no state-society equilibrium in the first half of the twentieth century that could fairly match the spatial reach of the eighteenth-century strong-state-strong-society equilibrium. At the same time, as a dynamic urban society emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in China, local governments more generally became increasingly predatory, either for enrichment of rent seekers or to fund competition with others in China's more rural and backward regions (Duara). Without a stronger state that could span diverse urban and rural social scenes, it is difficult to see what kind of state-society equilibrium could prove durable. The Communists provided a strong state and a state-society equilibrium unlike those that had existed before, in China or elsewhere.

4. A New Communist Equilibrium: Social Simplification and Political Control

The strong government after 1949 transformed the kind of state-society relations that had taken shape in the first half of the century. A sharp institutional divide was placed between city and countryside and the party state's penetration and control over each proceeded along parallel tracks. Underlying both were forms of what I call "social simplification" that made it easier for the party-state to establish and maintain its rule. In the countryside the state leveled differences among households as much as possible and made party officials the local key source of authority and decision making. In the cities, social simplification meant reducing the numbers of associational forms and placing those remaining under more direct party-state supervision. Some of the assumptions behind these moves were resonant with earlier periods of Chinese state-society relations which had been characterized by both the officials and the elite playing overlapping roles in the formation of associations and organizations. The party-state

simply moved to one extreme of that continuum, an even less thinly-disguised violent change from what had been the opposite extreme of a strong society and weak state in urban China during the first half of the twentieth century.

In the countryside, socialist simplification promoted a reduction in economically generated inequalities within villages, while access to resources controlled by party-state influenced inequality among villages (Parish and Whyte). The party-state also reduced the significance of all forms of social organization not under its political control. Thus, lineages and temple communities joined economic associations and markets, their roles reduced and their *de facto* autonomy destroyed. As a result, people in rural China lived in increasingly narrow social worlds defined by relations at very local levels. The major exceptions to local ties were the vertical connections forged by the party-state.

The urban social structure, like the rural social structure, was simplified. Occupational stratification was minimized as many professional and white collar jobs were eliminated. Social networks were minimized so that the hallmark of many other urban societies, individuals who have weak ties to large numbers of people, was not present (Granovetter). In a manner parallel to the limitations of rural life within the village, the life horizons of urban residents were defined by the work units from which they received housing and access to primary education and health care. Differences in urban China depended on work units and the individual's formal and informal relations to unit leaders.

In both the city and the countryside, the absence of dense horizontal ties meant social structures were relatively simple. Those ties that spanned any distance were uniformly defined by the party-state. The state achieved a new equilibrium of a strong state and a weak society, virtually the opposite of the equilibrium that existed in the first half of the twentieth century, at least in urban areas. But even with its expanded bureaucratic reach into both urban life and rural society, the state could not achieve the kinds of control that party visionaries desired. They therefore relied upon repeated political movements — extraordinary mobilizations of people and passions to pursue

some set of political objectives. The point to be highlighted about these well known movements for present purposes is that they were only plausible because of social simplifications. A more complex society would have been far more difficult to mobilize and direct in some specific direction. The absence of associations and organizations that could mount an opposition meant that resistance had to be quiet and individual, or led by local leaders who bent central directives in what they believed to be local interests.

Social simplifications also made possible the tragic political practice of labeling people in ways that limited their own personal lives and reduced the social opportunities for their relatives. The Party state could effectively control access to opportunities and thus impose status distinctions with direct impacts because it had made society so simple. The crucial importance of the Party's defining opportunities was both formal and informal. In formal terms, it was the party state's definitions of social differences that defined hierarchies in a socialist society that celebrated egalitarianism. Informally, party connections were the networks of relations that allowed much to be done that could not be easily done through routine bureaucratic channels. A strong party-state dominated a weak and simple society.

Much of the twentieth century was characterized by one of two polar situations — first a weak state and strong society and then a strong state and weak society. The characteristics of a strong party-state extended the traits of a strong state in the eighteenth century, but post-1949 state aspirations exceeded the imagination of eighteenth-century rulers who more often than not understood that a good social order meant fewer demands on them. Thus, the eighteenth-century state welcomed a strong society as a complement to a strong state. That equilibrium proved more lasting than the more recent party-state's agenda to achieve social simplification in the name of socialism. Over the past thirty years the economic reforms have fundamentally strengthened organizational capacities within Chinese society. What remains unclear is what kind of new equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society can be developed.

5. A New Equilibrium: The Search for a Strong State and a Strong Society

The equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society that can be envisioned today in China will have to be quite different from that existing two or three centuries ago. Understanding these differences may well help us to focus more sharply on the kinds of possibilities officials and people may both wish to promote. To do so, let us return first to the contrasting logics of a strong-state-strong-society equilibrium in eighteenth century China and the building of strong states in Europe in that period.

The eighteenth-century Chinese equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society was based upon the limited capacities of each when confronted with the challenges of sustaining social order across an agrarian empire. The equilibrium was predicated upon complementarities of interests between the officials and the elite to elaborate strategies to promote social order and material welfare among the common people. The absence of competition between the rulers and the elite of the sort that characterized the rulers and the elite during the state building processes of early modern Europe means that the kinds of negotiations and agreements between European rulers and their elite were not necessary in China.

The early modern state building process had two largely unintended consequences of great significance. First, in terms of economic growth, the kinds of formal agreements and negotiations that characterized European state building were tied to types of law that also included laws governing economic contracts. Formal institutions conducive to economic growth emerged in Europe that became especially effective as they evolved in the nineteenth century in response to the opportunities created by scientific and technological changes that enabled sustained industrialization. Second, politically, the institutional logics of representation that began with the European elite negotiating with their rulers over taxes were subsequently

extended and elaborated to embrace larger numbers of people whose relationship as citizens to their governments was defined in terms of a set of rights and responsibilities. European political ideology and institutions developed along lines that gave first the elite and then the common people more explicit forms of political voice.

Chinese leaders had far earlier invested in formal bureaucracy and as a result developed a set of capacities far greater than those enjoyed by European rulers to intervene domestically in social and economic conditions. Regarding taxes specifically, Chinese had two ways other than negotiating with rulers to handle their competing interests on this issue. First, in relatively rare instances they mounted tax protests; these were costly in terms of effort but were possible ways to secure some reduction in levies (Wong 1997a: 231 – 251). Second, and more commonly, people did not always meet in full the tax obligations they should have. The resulting equilibrium in China of lower taxes and greater amounts of social and economic benefits from the government took place in the absence of institutions that encouraged negotiations between rulers and subjects. This qualifies as the conventional contrast between a despotic late imperial Chinese state and the less authoritarian states in early modern Europe. The Chinese political agenda for social order conceived norms of good governance well before the concept became popular in Western social science discourse.

Eighteenth-century Chinese officials understood norms of good governance were grounded in ideas about material welfare and social order. These inspired policies for political intervention in economic and social life on a scale that would not be imagined, let alone achieved, until much later in European history. The Chinese developed norms of good governance that committed the government to levels of social spending not achieved in Europe until the advent of democratic decision making. These norms were achieved through institutional mechanisms quite different from those constructed in the European state making process. Not all of the priorities or policies to achieve good governance in eighteenth-century China may make

sense in the twenty-first century. Moreover, there are certainly strategies available today to pursue good governance that could not be imagined two or three centuries ago. With these caveats, it behooves us to consider the ways in which at least some of the Chinese challenges and concerns faced in that earlier era persist today and continue to define desirable goals. Such an awareness can help us formulate more adequate social science explanations for how Chinese state-society relations might change in the future. Recognizing the appeal of earlier norms as elements of what might be conceived today as good governance may help political leaders fashion a new equilibrium between a strong state and a strong society.

Good governance in eighteenth-century China involved state intervention in the material welfare of local societies. In general, official efforts were greater in poorer areas where the elite were less able and willing to shoulder such responsibilities. The eighteenth-century government supported the transfer of resources and the best technologies to peripheries with the hope that such efforts would help develop economy in more backward areas. Good governance also entailed control over potential abuses by local officials, and this meant increasing amounts of bureaucratic supervision over local officials at the same time as the discretion of local officials themselves was restricted. Making bureaucratic rule work better was an underlying goal of state administration during the eighteenth century. The contemporary Chinese state continues to concern itself with promoting material welfare, now conceived in terms of harmonious economic development. The central government is especially attentive to less developed regions and the problems of rural areas in general. These political priorities exist amidst fundamentally changed technological possibilities for improving human material conditions. Political leaders are equally concerned about combating corruption and abuse of power by local officials. Here too, the ways in which central government leaders can hope to control local abuse of power have changed. The media can expose cases of local abuse of power, and people can appeal to the media to expose their suffering in ways that capture national attention.

At the same time, some of the techniques basic to a complementary Chinese relationship between a strong state and a strong society in the eighteenth century cannot work in the early twenty-first century. Thirty years of economic reform have created strong economic organizations. The statuses of these organizations have been defined increasingly in legal terms that create formal rights and responsibilities regarding economic decision making. These economic changes have led to a broader social transformation spearheaded by the changes in large cities where an expansion of urban associational life has accompanied the emergence of new wealth and greater social differentiation. But these associations have not established the same kinds of legal statuses as have most economic firms. Many associations exist in a space separate from the state but others, especially those with potential political purposes, have some implicit official sponsorship or protection, so they are in this sense conceived of along a continuum from those that are purely social and without political implications to those that are firmly within the government bureaucracy. Thus a continuum between what is within the government and what is clearly outside the government exists with less sharply delineated boundaries between state and society than we see in most European contexts, more comparable to relations between Chinese officials and social organizations in the eighteenth century.

The reform-era state has continued to pursue a continuum between formal and informal, where the possibility of the party state intervening to exert control is ever-present. This logic made sense in an eighteenth-century world of possibilities in which both the state and social organizations had limited capacities, but the likelihood of competition and conflict is much greater in contemporary conditions. Just as firms have increasingly clear legal definitions, so could a far broader array of social organizations. Making more explicit what such organizations can and cannot do reduces the uncertainty and the cost of potential conflicts among organizations or between them and officials that the absence of clear formal rules promotes. At the same time, with the society becoming organizationally stronger, defining the relation with local government becomes more important.

Meeting this challenge could include efforts by the central government to consider how a stronger society can help monitor and prevent local officials from abusing their powers. Thus, even as ways are explored to redefine the bases of a strong state and a strong society, they seek to address problems that are both concrete in a Chinese context and represent more general challenges for good governance.

This brief sketch of Chinese social relations and political change in historical and comparative perspectives leads me to suggest by way of conclusion that the ways in which we might envision good governance in twenty-first century China draw upon elements of good governance conceived and implemented the last time that China enjoyed both a strong state and a strong society in the eighteenth century. Some of the challenges in achieving good governance remain the same, even though others have certainly changed. While it is easy to identify the ways to achieve good governance that can be imported from abroad or developed on the basis of ideas and institutions that did not exist several centuries ago, it may also be worth remembering that Chinese did achieve measures of good governance across an agrarian empire in an era before the Europeans were able to consolidate their national states, let alone worry seriously about good governance. Drawing on the importance of Chinese history to appreciate the challenges and opportunities of the present also provides a more concrete context within which to argue that the particular ideological and institutional practices found in other countries need not become the general template for planning Chinese political reforms in contemporary times. Finally, an explicitly historical and comparative approach to China's social and political conditions today promises to broaden the conceptual foundations of the social sciences by incorporating patterns of change in China that must be part of any more general social sciences.

To date it has proven all too easy for the social sciences to identify China's contemporary political shortcomings principally in terms of what the society and its political system lack according to Western political ideologies and institutions. After all, the dramatic difficulties faced by people in a

system in which local political authorities can defy laws that the central government wants to see more effectively enforced contrasts sharply with governance conditions in most Western countries. Yet this convenient contrast encourages us to falsely assume one of two polar perspectives on political possibilities as our only choices. Some social critics suggest by word or action that some simple substitution of current practices by Western institutions will lead the country forward. Others lament the implausibility of the current political system to be reformed from within. At their extreme, both views hold that very little, if anything, in the present political conditions can generate desired changes on their own; they differ only in whether they believe foreign-inspired visions will provide practical policy guidance or not. Such views reproduce the impossible choices that Chinese intellectuals and social observers have faced since the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

For us to put to rest the long and tortured era of the past century, we must look beyond the limitations of China's present and the lure of another region's historical legacies in order to recognize that the future of twenty-first century China can be constructed out of the materials forged in its past and to which are added elements from a larger world of possibilities and necessities. It is not enough to recognize that the social and political transformations of China historically differ in some ways from the transformations occurring across European and American countries and that such differences at any point in history influence subsequent possibilities. In addition, we must be able to identify what might prove useful for the future, whether these practices first emerged in either China's past or foreign experiences. To do so we must further be able to distinguish what we deem desirable from what we wish to avoid or to do away with and examine carefully the ways in which the traits to be nurtured can be separated from the traits to be shunned.

Social sciences that examine carefully causal links between different practices can better enable us to make analyses of the possible and the desirable. But before the social sciences can begin to meet these challenges,

we must first be willing to forsake our imagined world of limited and polar possibilities that leads us either toward naïve optimism or perverse pessimism about the future. Let us begin to draw in ever larger numbers of scholars and to train growing numbers of students to meet the challenges of contributing to the formation of China's future social and political transformations!

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