

REVIEW ARTICLE

NEW STUDIES ON STATECRAFT IN MID- AND LATE-QING CHINA: QING INTELLECTUALS AND THEIR DEBATES ON ECONOMIC POLICIES

Mio Kishimoto

Ochanomizu University
E-mail miokish@hotmail.com

State or Merchant?: Political Economy and Political Process in 1740s China. By Helen Dunstan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. Pp. 523. ISBN 10: 0674022629; 13: 978-0674022621.

China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808–1856. By Man-houng Lin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. Pp. 450. ISBN 10: 0674022688; 13: 978-0674022683.

QING ECONOMIC POLICIES: NEW APPROACHES TO OLD ISSUES

The two books reviewed here, published successively in 2006 as titles in the Harvard East Asian monographs series, are long-awaited, solid investigations into Qing economic policies. The cases analysed in these books are different: Dunstan's book makes a detailed investigation into the controversies on grain trade and grain storage policies among high-ranking officials in the 1740s, during the so-called "High Qing" period, while Lin's book deals with the debates on currency policies among intellectuals (including non-official scholars) during the economic crisis after the 1810s, the period when China began to be turned "upside down" by the dynastic decline of the Qing. The food problem of the early Qianlong era (the mid-eighteenth century) and the currency crisis of the Daoguang era (1820s–1840s) were two major economic problems that confronted the Qing state, and they have long attracted the attention of economic historians. Dunstan's book treats the former problem, and Lin's the latter.

Despite the differences in themes, the parallels between the approaches of these two books are striking. First, though these books include some important factual discoveries in Qing economic history – for example, Dunstan's identification of financial problems in the early Qianlong era, and Lin's new estimates of the silver outflows for early

nineteenth century China – both authors put more stress on intellectual and political issues rather than economic phenomena per se. According to Dunstan,

This book is intended as a contribution to both intellectual and political history. It is partly a study of how Confucian-trained officials thought about the grain trade and the state's role in it. . . . It is not intended as a work of economic history, although it presents occasional information and suggestions that should interest economic historians. Nor is it intended as an institutional study of the ever-normal system . . .¹

About her own work, Lin declares,

This book is a group study of the mental models and ideologies behind early nineteenth century Chinese scholars' perceptions of relations between the state and the economy. . . . The present work applies the French Annales school's "total history" approach to the study of currency issue. This approach views economic, social, political, and cultural phenomena as closely interconnected. Thus, it integrates the various social sciences rather than focusing on economics alone to understand economic phenomenon.²

Second, though they are works of intellectual history rather than of economic history, their approaches are different from the ordinary type of studies on Chinese economic thought that deal with a few big names in order to evaluate their thoughts separately, according to certain criteria. As Lin says in the above quotation, her book is "a group study", i.e. a study of groups that include not only famous scholar-officials such as Lin Zexu and Gong Zizhen, but also many minor intellectuals. Dunstan's book, too, deals with dozens of officials, most of whom likely will be new to readers.

The economic thought and opinions of these intellectuals and officials differed considerably. To borrow the title of Dunstan's previous book, their opinions were "conflicting counsels to confuse the age."³ Dunstan's and Lin's strategy seems to be to use analyses of debates in order to grasp not only disagreements but also the common intellectual background of the debaters themselves. In other words, the discussions under scrutiny are regarded as useful because they reveal the underlying logical framework shared by contending debaters. With that basic approach in mind, it is no coincidence that the two books both focus on debates.

Third, in analysing and evaluating Qing economic thought, both authors are very cautious in using concepts of Western origin such as "economic liberalism" or "commercial freedom". Though both Dunstan and Lin show keen awareness of these concepts, they do not hastily relate them to notions of progress. As Lin points out, "Economic liberalism" is a

1 Dunstan 2006, pp. 8–11.

2 Lin 2006, pp. 18–25.

3 Dunstan 1996.

difficult term to define because its meaning has changed over time.”⁴ Dunstan, in her previous book, argues more explicitly about the concept of “economic liberalism”, noting that

It is necessary to distinguish between different kinds of market-oriented policy approaches. . . . The concept of ‘economic liberalism’ can be fruitfully applied to analysis of late traditional Chinese political economy. However, its applicability will not be securely established until scholars restrict its use to cases in which advocacy of non-intervention demonstrably rested on at least a rudimentary argument of the sufficiently beneficial working of a market mechanism.⁵

In the conclusion of that book, she remarks that “economic liberalism” in this strict sense emerged in the late 1730s and 1740s, but at the same time she confesses, “I do not particularly hail the emergence of a Chinese economic liberalism, in the obnoxious belief that Chinese thought is most admirable when it most closely conforms with models which are conventionally perceived as Western. . . . My basic sympathies have always been with the paternalist tradition.”⁶ How does this cautiousness or hesitancy jibe with past scholarship on Chinese economic thought?

Of course we must not oversimplify the state of affairs in this field over the past several decades. In historical studies of Qing China, there are several trends concerning “economic liberalism”. One is an influential argument that regarded the main feature of economic thought in traditional China as narrow-minded anti-liberalism hostile to market economy. Borrowing Wang Ermin’s phrase quoted by Lin Man-houng, “It is unarguable fact as well as common knowledge that for two thousand years, a tradition prevailed in China to exalt agriculture and depreciate trade and commerce. Developed under the Han, this tradition continued well into the nineteenth century.”⁷ This somewhat simplistic notion seems to have been accepted more easily by the researchers of modern Chinese history, who were inclined to emphasize the newness of historical change in modern China.

On the other hand, many historians working on the economic thought of traditional China have discovered a range of economic thinkers of the imperial period who criticized excessive intervention by the government and advocated the *laissez-faire* policies as well as opinions that were pro-merchants.⁸ This academic trend emphasizing the “liberal” factors in China’s traditional economic thought seems to have accelerated after the 1970s, when the so-called “China-centered approach” and criticism of Eurocentric assumptions began to attract the sympathy of more and more historians. In the last years of the twentieth century some scholars even argued that, “eighteenth-century China (and perhaps Japan as well) actually came closer to resembling the neoclassical ideal of a market economy

4 Lin 2006, p. 309.

5 Dunstan 1996, p. 8.

6 Dunstan 1996, p. 329.

7 Wang Ermin 1977, p. 235. Quoted in Lin 2006, p. 261.

8 We can find many examples of this type of argument in the works by Chinese and Japanese scholars during the latter half of the twentieth century. As an example, see Hou 1953.

than did western Europe,”⁹ emphasizing the “free” nature of the markets of land, labor, commodities and so on in China after the late Ming.

It should be noted that, whether or not they concede the existence of “economic liberalism” in late imperial China, the competing evaluations of Chinese economic thought shared as a self-evident postulate the notion that “economic liberalism” is more progressive than interventionism. It is this notion that Dunstan and Lin cautiously avoid.¹⁰ In other words, they are not so interested in evaluating Chinese economic thought according to the criteria based on European history; rather, what they seek is a precise understanding of the historical, cultural, and political contexts that guided the economic thinking of Chinese officials and intellectuals of the day. As Dunstan reminds us, “if we focus exclusively on the content of decisions, we risk being overinfluenced by our own, contemporary, political opinions in assessing their wisdom. . . . [W]e cannot fully understand, still less evaluate, decisions unless we attend to process, asking why and how their makers reached them.”¹¹

Although Lin Man-houng very explicitly compares the currency debates of nineteenth-century China to the modern economic debate between Hayek and Keynes, she would not, at the same time, directly apply contemporary standards to evaluate the economic thought of late imperial China. Following Douglass C. North, she tries to understand the cultural background of economic discourses of those days: “Modern western economics is based on the notion of individuals’ rational choice, yet as North has pointed out, ‘problems in political economy, economic development, economic history, for example, all require an understanding of the mental models and ideologies that have guided choices.’”¹²

Fourth, as a natural consequence of above-mentioned attitudes, changes in economic thought are analysed not as a linear progress to attain the “right” answer, but as complicated processes of trial and error in which officials and intellectuals coped with real problems. It is no wonder that both Dunstan and Lin alike pay attention to short-term and mid-term fluctuations of economic policies and thought, which accompany changes in economic situations and political circumstances. Borrowing Lin’s words, their attention is focused upon “the historical contingencies that led to the rise and fall of various strands of ideas.”¹³

To sum up, we can find in these two books some common methodological features that (in my view) suggest the emergence of a new stage in historical research on Chinese economic thought. Of course, books should be evaluated not only by the introduction of new methodologies but also by what has been achieved through their use. In the following sections, I would like to outline the contents of each book in some detail and see how the authors developed their arguments based on the approaches mentioned above.

9 Pomeranz 2000, p. 70.

10 Of course the attitudes of Dunstan and Lin to the “liberalistic” trends in Chinese economic thoughts are not completely the same. It appears that Lin is more sympathetic to these trends than Dunstan.

11 Dunstan 2006, p. 469.

12 Lin 2006, pp. 17–18.

13 Lin 2006, p. 262.

HOW DUNSTAN AND LIN APPROACH ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND ECONOMIC THOUGHT

Dunstan's book is the most detailed study of the grain policies in the early Qianlong era I have ever read. She dedicates almost five hundred pages to analyses of the Qianlong emperor's edicts, as well as memorials submitted by more than one hundred officials, mostly composed during the period from the late 1730s to the early 1750s. The density of empirical research is impressive. Some scholars (including myself) have conducted research on the grain policies of this period, but it would be impossible for anyone to claim an advantage over this book with regard to her exhaustive collection of materials and her intensive reading of them.

Dunstan's book is divided into two parts. Part 1, entitled "Private-Sector Stockpiling: State Versus Hoarder", focuses on the Qing government policies against hoarding by private merchants. In eighteenth-century China, speculative hoarding was commonly regarded as a harmful practice that required governmental intervention of some kind. The Qing government took various measures to deter this practice, including exhortation, punishment, cut-price sales at state granaries, and so forth. However, because of ambiguity about the illegality of speculative hoarding, local officials were faced with difficulties in distinguishing illegal hoarding from the innocent storing of grain. In dealing with this problem, the Qing government adopted during the 1740s polar approaches of intervention and nonintervention. From the late 1740s some officials began to make explicit criticisms of the interventionist policies, emphasizing the utility of market mechanism to resolve food problems. These anti-intervention arguments, expressed in terms of rudimentary economic theory, urged state withdrawals from involvement with the grain trade.

Part 2, entitled "Public-Sector Stockpiling: The State As Hoarder?", contains six chapters that describe in great detail the changes in the Qing policies on ever-normal granaries. Succinctly put, during the "long 1740s (1738–1753)", Qing granary policies shifted, through the processes of trial and error, from interventionism towards more market-oriented approaches. The storage targets were reduced and more flexible methods were introduced into the granary system. Here the author's emphasis is not necessarily upon this change in itself, but rather "on the interest and significance of specific initiatives, specific arguments, and specific decisions at the specific points in time when they were made or taken."¹⁴ In fact, as she recognizes, the originality of her study exists in thoughtful explanations of specific problems rather than big, overarching arguments.¹⁵

Because of space limitations, I can offer but a sample of her original explanations. In Chapter 8, she points out the relationship between the fiscal problem caused by the second Jinchuan campaign, 1747–1749, and the new policy to cut storage targets, adopted in 1748–1749. According to Dunstan, it was the fiscal difficulty of continuing the campaign that hastened the emperor and officials into the decision to cut the targets and, in doing so, divert funds meant for granary restocking to military finance. As she admits, though direct evidence to prove this relationship has not yet been found, it still is a very insightful and persuasive proposition. Other related points, for example her finding that "it was precisely

¹⁴ Dunstan 2006, p. 405.

¹⁵ "At the most general level, my findings endorse those of earlier studies." Dunstan 2006, p. 463.

in the Jinchuan war that there occurred a clear relative shift from ‘outer’ to ‘inner court’ in the locus of key deliberations on grain storage targets”,¹⁶ and her inference that “the high price of rice in Zhejiang and Jiangsu [in 1748–1749] was due to the diversion of Sichuan grain to feeding the Qing forces in the Jinchuan era”,¹⁷ are also sharp-eyed interpretations that will impress experts in the field of Qing economic history. Without a deep understanding of the materials, it would have been impossible to read “between the lines” of these reports, as she has done in this book.

Let us proceed to Lin’s book, which is divided into three parts. In Part 1, entitled “Global Links: Silver and the World”, she argues as follows: silver use in both public and large-scale transactions increased considerably in late eighteenth-century China, but at that time China had no other resource for silver other than silver coins from Latin America that flowed into the southeastern provinces via foreign trade. A lack of state monetary sovereignty made the Qing Empire heavily dependent on silver supply from abroad. The outflow of silver, which began as early as the 1810s (much earlier than past historiography assumed), was not caused solely by the import of opium into China but, more fundamentally, by the decrease of silver production in Latin America caused by the Napoleonic Wars and the Latin American independence movements. The high price of silver relative to copper coin (i.e. the silver-copper coin crisis) caused by the outflow of silver brought about distress in the lives of ordinary people and difficulty in state finance. In the midst of this crisis occurred the Taiping Rebellion, but it failed because the recovery of silver inflow after the 1850s rescued the Qing state from collapse. In sum, in this part of her book Lin explains the dynamism of the late-Qing history vis-à-vis a broad perspective of the global flow of silver.

Part 2, entitled “Cultural Resources for Economic Debates”, provides a detailed description of the monetary debates that took place in this period of currency crisis. According to Lin, the main proposals for dealing with the problem were that “the state (1) issue paper notes or mint copper coins with a face value above or equal to their intrinsic worth; (2) encourage the use of copper coins rather than silver for more purposes; (3) cast its own coins in precious metals to supplement the silver dollars and ingots held by private merchants; and (4) maintain the status quo.”¹⁸ The central point being emphasized by the author here is that the collision between the interventionists (for example Wang Liu, who advocated the issue of inconvertible paper money) and the noninterventionists (for example Wei Yuan, who pointed out that the paper notes were not passable and proposed the casting of silver coins) is comparable to another that took place in the twentieth-century West, namely the debate between Keynes and Hayek – although the nineteenth-century Chinese scholars were thinking solely within the framework of traditional statecraft discourse.

In Part 3, entitled “The Competition among Intellectual Models”, the author relates the two camps participating in these monetary debates to schools of literary style and Confucian studies. According to the author, the scholars of the “accommodationist

¹⁶ Dunstan 2006, p. 389.

¹⁷ Dunstan 2006, p. 393.

¹⁸ Lin 2006, p. 147.

(or noninterventionist)” group largely overlapped with those of the New Text school (in Confucian studies) and the Yanghu school (in prose style), while the scholars of the “interventionist” group had a close relationship with the Old Text school (in Confucian studies) and the Tongcheng school (in prose style). These groups and schools were formed not according to the differences in official position, native place, ethnicity and class, but rather according to intellectual inclination and certain views of human nature and social order. The accommodationist-New Text-Yanghu group tended to take human selfishness as a given, believe in spontaneous social order, and ask for less state intervention. The interventionist-Old Text-Tongcheng group, by contrast, tended to condemn human selfishness, fear social disorder, and seek more state intervention.¹⁹

The accommodationist stance won a temporary victory in the early nineteenth century, but from the mid-nineteenth century an interventionist shift took place. The crisis in public security at the time led to advocacy of absolute loyalty to the monarch. At the same time, the Qing state gained access to new financial resources to carry out interventionist policies. It might be that the impressions of late nineteenth-century-(Chinese and Western) observers of these phenomena contributed to the widely accepted model of China’s interventionist tradition.

SOME FACTUAL PROBLEMS CONCERNING ECONOMIC HISTORY

In the remainder of this review I will assess the main arguments presented by these books. Before doing so, however, I would like to raise some questions about factual problems in Part 1 of Lin’s project. Though the author’s main arguments (perhaps) are laid out in the latter parts of her book, the discussion in Part 1 is no less stimulating and indeed has attracted the attention of many economic historians. One of the most important of the author’s assertions is that the outflow of silver from China began as early as the 1810s. This finding is new, because H. B. Morse’s data has long persuaded many that the outflow of silver began, at the earliest, in the mid-1820s.

Let us examine closely Lin’s data on silver outflow from China. Lin calculates the outflow of silver based on the figures of trade balances of China with India, England, and the USA. Her calculation of silver outflow (“Total (L)” = “To India” + “To England (L)” + “To USA”) can be seen in Table [1]. According to this calculation, silver was flowing out of China most years during the period 1818–1826. But the figures in the column “To England (L)” are much higher than those widely accepted. Through what formula did Lin arrive at these figures? Table [2] shows the process of Lin’s calculation of the trade balance between China and England. First, Lin calculated the figures of export from China to England (2.3(A)) by deducting the figures of export from China to India (2.1(A)) from the figures of export from China to Britain (including India) (2.2(A)).²⁰ Second, she calculated

19 For a more detailed contrast between these two groups, see Table C.1 “Contrasts Between the Intellectual Groups” in Lin 2006, p. 303.

20 Concerning the calculation of figures in the columns 2.3(A) and 2.3(B), Lin explains: “Data for 1818–26 calculated by deducting the figures in Table 2.2 for both England and India from the Figures in Table 2.1 for India only.” But I am afraid it should be written as “Data for 1818–26 calculated by deducting the figures in Table 2.1 for India only from the figures in Table 2.2 for both England and India.”

Table 1. Based on Table 2.5 “Annual Silver Outflows for Early 19th-century China” in Lin, *China Upside Down*, pp. 84–85

Year	To India	To England (L)	To England (K)	To USA	Total (L)	Total (K)
1818	3,139,412	3,594,577	-4,999,503	-5,601,000	1,132,989	-7,461,091
1819	2,254,668	-2,295,535	-4,839,147	-7,414,000	-7,454,867	-9,998,479
1820	288,944	5,796,339	-3,261,177	-6,297,000	-211,717	-9,269,233
1821	5,968,572	5,563,973	-7,130,463	-2,995,000	8,537,545	-4,156,891
1822	3,125,864	7,589,085	-3,682,535	-5,125,000	5,589,949	-5,681,671
1823	5,345,756	2,023,810	-9,711,010	-6,292,000	1,077,566	-10,657,254
1824	4,849,064	5,912,399	-6,733,837	-4,096,000	6,665,463	-5,980,773
1825	5,847,172	7,996,962	-7,378,970	-6,524,500	7,319,634	-8,056,298
1826	6,728,760	3,370,853	-10,691,207	-5,725,200	4,374,413	-9,687,647

Notes:

To India: The figures calculated by deducting the figures in column 2.1(A) of Table [2] from the figures in column 2.1(B) of Table [2].

To England (L): The figures same as those in column 2.3(A–B) of Table [2] calculated by Lin (plus and minus are reversed).

To England (K): The figures same as those in column 2.3(A'–B') of Table [2] calculated by Kishimoto (plus and minus are reversed).

To USA: The figures in Table 2.4 in Lin, *China Upside Down*, p. 82, based on Otake Fumio *Kinsei shina keizaishi kenkyu*, pp. 67–70.

Total (L): The figures calculated by Lin as the sum of the figures in columns “To India”, “To England (L)” and “To USA”.

Total (K): The figures recalculated by Kishimoto as the sum of the figures in columns “To India”, “To England (K)” and “To USA”.

the figures of import from England to China (2.3(B)) by deducting the figures of import from India to China (2.1(B)) from the figures of import from Britain (including India) to China (2.2(B)). Finally, she calculated the trade balance between China and England (2.3(A–B)) by deducting the figures in column 2.3(B) from those in column 2.3(A).

Problems exist in the calculation of the figures in column 2.3(A) and column 2.3(B). As is easily noticeable, the figures in column 2.3(A) do not correspond with the difference between the figures in the columns 2.2(A) and 2.1(A); similarly, the figures in column 2.3(B) are not in correspondence with the difference between the figures in columns 2.2(B) and 2.1(B). The figures in the columns 2.3(A'), 2.3(B') and 2.3(A'–B') are the result of my recalculation. How then did Lin calculate these figures? Her figures in column 2.3(A) seem to have been calculated by deducting the figures of the following year in column 2.1(B) from the figures of that year in column 2.2(A). For example, the figure of export from China to England in 1818 (\$10,413,491) corresponds exactly with the difference between the figure of export from China to Britain in 1818 (\$16,004,411) and the figure of *import* from India in 1819 (\$5,590,920). Though the figures in column 2.3(A) are calculated regularly according to this formula, I am afraid this formula does not make sense. The figures in column 2.3(B) also show discrepant values, and seem to have been arrived at by way of irregular calculations. Based on this inspection, I must regretfully conclude that Lin's data on silver outflow are of limited reliability. Besides the above-mentioned problem, there are some other mistakes in her tables (for example, the 1842–1856 figures in the “To USA” column of Table 2.5).

Table 2. Compounded from the 1818–1826 parts of Tables 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 in Lin, *China Upside Down*

Year	2.1(A)	2.1(B)	2.2(A)	2.2(B)	2.3(A)	2.3(A')	2.3(B)	2.3(B')	2.3(A–B)	2.3(A'–B')
1818	3,233,452	6,372,864	16,004,411	14,144,320	10,413,491	12,770,959	14,008,068	7,771,456	–3,594,577	4,999,503
1819	3,336,252	5,590,920	16,262,200	13,677,721	13,046,112	12,925,948	10,750,577	8,086,801	2,295,535	4,839,147
1820	2,927,144	3,216,088	17,803,162	14,830,929	8,793,134	14,876,018	14,589,473	11,614,841	–5,796,339	3,261,177
1821	3,041,456	9,010,028	15,918,993	14,757,102	8,949,705	12,877,537	14,513,678	5,747,074	–5,563,973	7,130,463
1822	3,843,424	6,969,288	15,205,834	14,649,163	6,923,922	11,362,410	14,513,007	7,679,875	–7,589,085	3,682,535
1823	2,936,156	8,281,912	17,602,334	13,177,080	10,840,790	14,666,178	12,864,600	4,895,168	–2,023,810	9,771,010
1824	1,912,480	6,761,544	17,923,441	15,988,668	9,944,401	16,010,961	15,856,800	9,277,124	–5,912,399	6,733,837
1825	2,131,868	7,979,040	15,932,814	14,401,016	6,288,642	13,800,946	14,285,604	6,421,976	–7,996,962	7,378,970
1826	2,915,412	9,644,172	21,408,386	17,445,939	11,333,914	18,492,974	14,704,767	7,801,767	–3,370,853	10,691,207

Notes:

Table 2.1: “Trade Balance between China and India” (in silver dollars). Lin, *China Upside Down*, pp. 76–78 (Source: Messenger, *India and China*, p. 11).

2.1(A): Export from China to India.

2.1(B): The total of the import from India to China.

Table 2.2: “Trade Balance between China and Britain, Including India” (in silver dollars). *Ibid.*, p. 79. (Source: Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire*, p. 91).

2.2(A): Chinese exports to Britain.

2.2(B): Chinese imports from Britain.

Table 2.3: “Trade Balance Between China and England, Excluding India” (in silver dollars). *Ibid.*, pp. 80–81.

For explanations of the columns 2.3(A), 2.3(B), 2.3(A') and 2.3(B'), see the main text.

HOW TO NAME THE TRENDS IN ECONOMIC THOUGHT?

Let us proceed to the main arguments proffered by these two books. Readers will be impressed by the authors' effort to distinguish the main trends of economic thought and to label them appropriately. Dunstan uses the terms "interventionist" and "anti-interventionist" to name polar economic arguments in the early Qianlong era. The latter term was selected carefully for its distinction from "noninterventionist". As the author herself puts it, "What was striking about the most anti-interventionist documents discussed in this book is not the residual interventionist practice that the authors typically espouse, but rather the stridency of their denunciations and the radicalism of their proposals by the standards of mid-eighteenth century."²¹ It is in order to emphasize this radicalism that the prefix "anti" has been selected.

Lin's terminology is more complex. In Chapter 5, she uses the terms "interventionist" and "noninterventionist", while from Chapter 6 to Chapter 8 she uses the terms "interventionist" and "accommodationist". It is interesting that in her doctoral dissertation presented to Harvard University in 1989, she named these groups, respectively, "moralists" and "eclectics". One reason why she may have had some difficulty in stabilizing the terminology is that she uses them to denote not only certain policies or opinions but also groups of persons. With regard to the opinions of their members, however, these groups were by no means monolithic, so naming is difficult.

I am not arguing here whether this or that name is most appropriate. Rather, it may be more useful to ponder why naming trends in the economic thought of late imperial China is so difficult. Many scholars (including Dunstan and Lin) have experienced some degree of hesitation in using the terms "so-and-so-ism" to label a trend, for example "economic liberalism". Were Qing trends of economic thought in fact based on any principles positive and consistent enough to be called "ism"? Or were they no more than the accumulations of ad hoc remedies for immediate issues and improvisational maneuvers meant to avoid the worst situations?

Dunstan's book addresses this problem in a very careful way. Some scholars, as she describes it, have argued that Qing "noninterventionism" was not linked with the historically dynamic concepts of individual rights that contributed to Western economic liberalism, but rather was merely a matter of technical choice between more or less governmental intervention meant to maximize the common good.²² Against these notions, she argues that "although the concept of individual economic rights, undeveloped and implicit, did not play a role in China similar to that of the Enlightenment discourse of rights in Europe, it was neither alien to Confucian-trained Qing literati."²³

The evidence Dunstan provides is very interesting. I would like to quote one example: Chen Hongmou, a celebrated official in the mid-Qing period, justifying landowners' seeking a good price for their grain, argued in a directive that:

21 Dunstan 2006, pp. 94–95.

22 Dunstan refers to works by Pierre-Étienne Will and myself as examples of these arguments. See Dunstan 2006, pp. 92–94.

23 Dunstan 2006, p. 109.

As to [those] poor people who invariably obstruct the grain, they fail to consider that those who possess grain, in every case, possess it either because it comes to them from their own land, or else by virtue of their past frugality and diligence. If one has surplus grain, to sell it with an eye to price is altogether natural and normal, and it is absolutely not a question of expropriating other people.²⁴

I agree with Dunstan that Chen Hongmou had “informal recognition of the ownership rights even of obdurate landowning hoarders.” At the same time, however, I wonder if an “informal” notion of “right” can be called “right” at all. It should be noted that in this directive hoarders were described as harmless people who obtained grain through their (or their ancestors’) diligent labor and frugal lifestyle. On the contrary, whenever Chen regarded the hoarders as too greedy, he did not hesitate to rebuke them severely for the “evil of profiteering” (*tanli juqi zhi bing* 貪利居奇之病).²⁵ Chen’s criticism against both greediness of the rich and the perverseness of the poor would fit smoothly with the paternalist concern of the Qing court and its self-professed pursuit of maximum welfare of *all* the people. But if what mattered had been “rights”, Chen need not have enhanced the depiction of the hoarders with the virtues of diligence and frugality.²⁶ We need thus to recognize that Qing policies were not made in the principle-oriented discursive framework that held the notion of a “right” as an important factor. The notion of the “golden mean” (*zhong* 中), which was often referred to in emperor’s edicts as a motto of good statesmen, did not necessarily mean, as Dunstan assumes, the medium of two extremes.²⁷ Rather, it was a null concept that in effect connoted ultimate open-mindedness, free from any fixed principle. With this open-mindedness, emperors and officials were to pursue optimum results by taking into consideration all imaginable circumstances.

In this sense (i.e. being unbound by principles), the “golden mean” was another name for the empiricism that Dunstan points out as the main cause of the “zigzagging” in mid-Qing public policy.²⁸ It should be noted, however, that this notion of the “golden mean” equaling empiricism was not regarded by Qing intellectuals as a fault or limitation, but rather as the supreme principle, standing above more specific, concrete principles that inevitably reflect human selfishness or narrow-mindedness.

HOW TO GROUP SCHOLARS?

Compared to Dunstan’s, Lin’s book shows more boldness in grouping statecraft thinkers. In the beginning of Part 3, she divides eighteen officials and scholars into two “schools”

24 Dunstan 2006, p. 114. On the notion of private property rights, also see William T. Rowe’s argument. Rowe 2001, pp. 180–81, 190–91.

25 Chen 1899, *juan* 15:17b.

26 In his analysis of the rhetoric used by Qing people in civil suits Terada Hiroaki noticed that people tended to rely on the rhetoric of *yuanyi* (being unreasonably oppressed) instead of terms to show the positive principle of “rights”. See Terada 1997. Of course we can argue that even under such rhetoric there existed a notion of rights, ambiguous though it may be. But it seems to me that the concept of “rights”, too, ultimately is just a problem of rhetoric. If they did not use the term equivalent to “rights”, it may be very difficult to argue that they had a notion of rights.

27 On Dunstan’s argument on the concept of “golden mean”, see Dunstan 2006, pp. 92–93. Perhaps the translation of *zhong* as “the golden mean”, though widely accepted, might be somewhat misleading.

28 On the empiricism of the Qing court, see Dunstan 2006, p. 128.

named “the accommodationists” and “the interventionists” based upon their opinions concerning currency issues. She goes on to compare the social theories of these two schools on several subjects, namely: perceptions of human nature; concepts of the states; views of state power relative to the power of Heaven, sages and market forces; attitudes toward commerce, trade, merchants and consumption; and rationales for private property.

Each of Lin’s comparative analyses begins with a summary of the main features of a group’s socio-economic thinking, in which the author grounds her assertions with several pieces of evidence. Of course she is well aware of the existence of exceptions. But it seems to me that this pattern of presentation suggests an implicit assumption of more or less similarity among the opinions among members of the same group. In other words, she first divides thinkers into two groups according to their positions in the currency debate, names these groups, and subsequently analyses their broader social thought using those groups as a basic unit. Here I worry that the labeling-first method, even if correct in conclusion, might be logically flawed because the grouping and labeling of scholars could cause some analytical bias, binding her with a predetermined framework – a sort of Procrustean bed, if you will. An example: in her analysis of the “interventionists” thoughts about commerce, trade, and consumption, Lin summarizes, “The interventionist group tended to think that the wealth of society was fixed and that commerce merely moved wealth from one party to another,” and, “The interventionists further pointed out that the development of commerce was detrimental to agriculture.” These remarks certainly seem to be applicable to some of the “interventionists”, for example Guan Tong and Xu Zi. But how about Wang Liu, who was the most active debater of the “interventionist” camp in the currency controversy? Concerning him, Lin argues,

Wang Liu, although suggesting the issuance of paper notes through bank shops, was ultimately concerned with promoting agriculture; he argued that the paper notes would increase revenues for agricultural development. Wang’s proposals to differentiate paper notes by province and set up exchange bureaus only in the big cities, which were criticized by Bao Shichen and Xu Mei, also reflect the interventionist group’s neglect of interregional trade, particularly trade that did not pass big cities.²⁹

I wonder if these points truly can be regarded as good evidence for Wang Liu’s pro-agriculture-anti-commerce strain. First, “promoting agriculture” was quite natural for intellectuals of the time. Was there anyone, whether of the “accommodationist” or the “interventionist” persuasion, who objected to the ideas for promoting agriculture and increasing revenues for agricultural development? Second, the idea of differentiating paper notes by province was one of the few points that Wang Liu conceded to withdraw, in acceptance of Bao Shichen’s criticism.³⁰ Wouldn’t that indicate that this point was not so important for Wang? Third, was Wang’s optimism in issuing a large number of paper

²⁹ Lin, 2006, pp. 215–16.

³⁰ Wang n.d., 26a–b.

notes in order to “enrich the state and people”³¹ truly in accord with the static view of the “interventionists” that “the wealth of society was fixed”?

One of the reasons that there seems to be some stretch in the interpretation of Wang’s thought may be that, in fact, a great diversity of scholars is lumped together in the “interventionist” group. For example, both Xu Zi and Wang Liu objected to the use of silver as currency, but Wang Liu advocated the issuance of paper notes while Xu Zi insisted on the use of grain and cloth in place of silver. Both lamented the situation in which “the power to control money (*cao qianbi zhi quan* 操錢幣之權)³² was held in the hands of merchants, but Wang Liu urged its return back to the hands of the state, while Xu Zi had little to say about state monetary power.

Their positions were similar in the sense that they were opposed to the status quo and advocated some kind of “intervention”,³³ but their visions of economy were different. Xu Zi’s economic vision was close to the rather rigid type of traditional *fengjian* (封建) discourse, while Wang Liu’s could be regarded as a rather peculiar type in the tradition of state activism. For a long time in the world of statecraft discourse, these two traditions had been not in alliance but rather in opposition. Should we group the two camps together simply because they share the status of being against the status quo?

All of which leads me to the general impression that it is very difficult to group Chinese literati according to their socio-economic thinking – perhaps in part because their “school” consciousness was not as strong as in Confucian studies. Since consistency was not so respected in socio-economic arguments, it was not unusual that the writings of one statecraft thinker included contradictory points. Such does not necessarily mean that he was insincere or incapable. Rather, we should acknowledge the highly situation-dependent character of their arguments on current affairs.³⁴ Lin points out there were “changes” in the economic thoughts of Gong Zizhen and Bao Shichen in the early nineteenth century,³⁵ but it might require more careful study to distinguish whether these “changes” were really irreversible changes or simply differences caused by situation-dependent thinking.

HOW TO BRIDGE THESE TWO WORKS?

Readers of both Dunstan’s and Lin’s books might be tempted to synthesize these works into a long-term econo-politico-intellectual history of the mid- and late-Qing period. Though I am unsure about whether two authors would be happy with such an attempt, I would like to consider what connects the two studies, and pose some additional questions. Because of limited space, I shall only discuss the latter half of the eighteenth century,

31 The first article in Wang Liu, n.d. is entitled “A draft of the first proposal to enrich the state and people” (*Ni fuquo fumin diyi ce* 擬富國富民第一策).

32 It seems that Lin translates this term as “monetary sovereignty”. See Lin 2006, pp. 149–50.

33 Actually, I am not sure if Wang Liu should be regarded as a typical “interventionist” in the same way as, say, Wang Anshi. Wang Liu’s arguments were by no means comprehensive, but rather were limited to the field of currency. Lin compares Wang Liu’s arguments to those of the monetarists (pp. 194–96). But if we recall that monetarists, who believe in market mechanism, have levied the most severe critique against the Keynesians, we cannot help but think there might exist some inconsistency in her explanations.

34 I discuss the nature of situation-dependency in Kishimoto 1997, Chapters 11 and 12.

35 Lin 2006, pp. 304–05.

that is, the period situated between the two critical periods investigated by the two scholars.

A very rough outline of Lin's view on the eighteenth century is as follows: after silver began to flow into China in large quantity in the sixteenth century, copper coins continued to exceed silver as a medium of intraprovincial commercial exchange (p. 6). Recent studies of eighteenth-century China's monetary system have stressed the reinforcement of the copper coin system, particularly the use of copper coins rather than silver for some large-scale transactions, as an indicator of centralization. But this reinforcement did not extend beyond the 1770s, because from then on the minting of copper coins decreased (p. 29). Given the availability of Asian silver, it was not until about 1775 that Latin America became China's almost exclusive supplier. In 1775, Asian silver ceased to flow into China and the use of American silver coin spread to Jiangnan. With this change, China's currency system became unusually dependent on the world economy (p. 30). Once this heavy dependence on silver inflow from abroad was established, the Qing government had no control over silver supply (p. 52). Nor, after the late Qianlong period, did the government have control over privately minted copper coins and paper notes issued by private merchants, which circulated rather freely (pp. 33–39).

Recent academic trends stress that, since the Middle Ages, China increasingly valued the role of merchants and commercial freedom, a trend that came to culmination in the early nineteenth century. Thus during the transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century both continuity and discontinuity existed in the development of state-commerce ideologies (pp. 261–62). China's debate over the silver-copper coin crisis stimulated both extreme statist and the extreme market-oriented approaches (p. 308). In the early nineteenth century the Qing government lacked the financial resources for interventionist policies, and the accommodationists scored a temporary victory. But in the late nineteenth century, the crisis in public security and the increase in silver inflow induced the Qing government to adopt interventionist policies, which came to be inherited by the Chinese governments of the twentieth century. As of yet, the particular dominance of market-oriented approaches in the early nineteenth century has not reemerged in China's modern history (p. 308).

How does Dunstan view the latter half of the eighteenth century? More so than the present work, passages from her previous book present the clearest view:

The Yongzheng and early Qianlong periods were characterized by intense interventionism; as leading statesmen of the Yongzhong period retired or died off, however, and as the policy debates of the 1740s came to conservative conclusions, a banal compromise was reached. In the second half of the eighteenth century, interventional policies and institutions remained in operation. However, they were no longer being guided, elaborated, and developed by activist imperial direction. The Qianlong emperor may have been a military activist, but he was not a socio-economic one. The rejection of fiscal positivism shown in his attempted abolition of the investment funding system was consistent with his lack of creative interest in state interventions to promote the welfare of the poor by trying to improve upon the operations of the market. The doctrine that the market could be trusted served to justify Qianlong's

relative indolence. . . . That the problems of paternalism increased with the size of the Chinese population in the later eighteenth century naturally makes the issue of responsibility more complex. The fact remains, however, that thought tending to justify a lower level of state action did emerge at approximately the same time as the first signs of long-term strain began to manifest themselves.³⁶

One problem here is how to gauge the timing of when trends changed. Dunstan says that “1748 and the following years were a watershed in the political history of Qianlong’s reign.”³⁷ Lin seems to regard 1775 as a crucial turning point. Of course there is not necessarily only one right answer. History of the latter half of the Qianlong era has not yet been studied very carefully, perhaps because this period has been regarded as crisis-free and lacking significance. If we do as detailed research for this period as Dunstan and Lin did in their books for the periods before and after, a new image of mid-Qing history might emerge.

A second problem is intellectual genealogies of the “interventionists” and the “non-(anti-)interventionists”. The statecraft thinkers of the Ming–Qing transition period clearly inspired late-Qing intellectuals. How about mid-Qing scholar-officials? How did late-Qing intellectuals interpret arguments of the mid-Qing “interventionists” and “noninterventionists” published in, for example, *Huangchao jingji wenbian* (皇朝經世文編)? If the noninterventionist policies were adopted in the late Qianlong period, were these trends succeeded straightforwardly by Daoguang accommodationists, or did there occur any change in the Jiaqing era?

Third, how should we evaluate the personalities of the emperors? Dunstan emphasizes the “suggestibility and lack of firmness” as Qianlong’s character that influenced the wild swing of policies in the Qianlong era.³⁸ How about Jiaqing, Daoguang, and other emperors? Fourth, how should we consider the relationship between the food crisis in the mid-eighteenth century and the currency crisis in the early nineteenth century? Can we examine the two crises in more unified way, for example, in relation to the characteristics of market structure as a common base of the crises? Wasn’t there some sort of monetary problem behind the food crisis in the 1740s, and food problem behind the monetary crisis of the Daoguang period?

Lastly, if we, following Dunstan, regard “zigzagging” as a characteristic feature of mid-Qing public policy, how long did this feature persist? Can we regard the shift from “accommodationist” policies to the “interventionist” ones in the nineteenth century as one phase of this “zigzagging” process? From this point of view, the wild swing in economic policies in the People’s Republic of China might be understood as the continuation of this historical “zigzagging”, in which every policy was at the mercy of empiricism. This “zigzag” view of Chinese history might be criticized as too simple and ahistorical, but it also may provide some hints about certain continuities in Chinese modern history.

36 Dunstan 1996, pp. 330–31.

37 Dunstan 2006, p. 478.

38 Dunstan 2006, p. 479.

REFERENCES

- Chen 1899
Chen Hongmou 陳弘謀. *Peiyuan Tang oucun gao* 培遠堂偶存稿 [Chance Survivals from the Peiyuan Hall]. Wuchang: The Provincial Office of Hubei, 1899.
- Dunstan 1996
Dunstan Helen. *Conflicting Counsels to Confuse the Age: A Documentary Study of Political Economy in Qing China, 1644–1840*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1996.
- Dunstan 2006
Dunstan Helen. *State or Merchant?: Political Economy and Political Process in 1740s China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006.
- Hou 1953
Hou Wailu 侯外廬. *Zhongguo zaoqi qimeng sixiang shi* 中國早期啓蒙思想史 [A History of Early Enlightenment Thought in China]. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin chubanshe, 1953.
- Kishimoto 1997
Kishimoto Mio 岸本美緒. *Shindai Chūgoku no bukka to keizai hendō* 清代中国の物価と経済変動 [Prices and Economic Fluctuations in Qing China]. Tokyo: Kenbun shuppan, 1997.
- Lin 2006
Lin Man-houng. *China Upside Down: Currency, Society and Ideologies, 1808–1856*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006.
- Pomeranz 2000
Pomeranz Kenneth. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Rowe 2001
Rowe William T. *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Terada 1997
Terada Hiroaki 寺田浩明. “Kenri to En’yoku 權利と冤抑 [Rights and Oppression].” *Hōgaku* 61:5 (1997).
- Wang 1977
Wang Ermin 王爾敏. *Zhongguo jindai sixiang shilun* 中國近代思想史論 [Intellectual History of Modern China]. Taipei: Huashi Chubanshe, min guo 66, 1977.
- Wang n.d.
Wang Liu 王 瑩. *Qianbi chuyan xuke* 錢幣芻言續刻 [A Sequel Edition of “Preliminary Remarks on Copper Coinage”]. n.d.