

Historical Proem



Devolution in Chinese History: The *Fengjian* Debate Revisited

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Abstract

This paper attempts an overview of an issue in statecraft that Chinese scholars debated for more than two and a half millennia. The debate was over the respective merits of the enfeoffment system (*fengjian*) over the prefecture and county system (*junxian*) as a basic structure for administering the empire. Under the enfeoffment system, the emperor gave power to his close relatives or high officials to govern the provinces, sometimes on a hereditary basis. The *junxian* system featured centralized appointment of local prefects and magistrates, who were to hold office usually for not more than four years in a locality and who could not serve in their own home districts. Up to the mid-Tang, the argument was conducted mainly within the court and in terms of the respective advantages each system gave to the stability of the reigning dynasty. From the ninth century on, the issue was considered more widely, to take into account the quality of government each system provided at local level. In the final centuries of the dynastic era, some scholars used the *fengjian* issue to argue for enfeoffment as a means to develop local autonomy and freedom from an often corrupt and dysfunctional central government. The paper concludes that, for the late medieval period at least, more research in the political record is needed in order to arrive at a more fine-grained understanding of how and why emperors and civil officials took the positions they did.

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JEL classification: *H11, H77, N45, Z10*

1. Introduction

There are many ways in which one might analyze the issue of devolution in Chinese history. At the level of political principle, and at one extreme, advocacy of independence from the political centre was seen as a form of

treason, and classed as one of the most heinous crimes in the penal code. In the official view of history, enshrined in the series of twenty-four dynastic histories, the “master narrative” for the Chinese empire, it is rather the periods of effective central government control that form the main thread of the narrative. The periods of greatest success in this narrative include the *pax sinica* period of the middle decades of the eighteenth century and, the area of my own research, to which I shall return, the Kaiyuan Tianbao 開元天寶 (713-756 CE) period of the high medieval empire, the Tang, a thousand years before.

My interest here is not in the theme of open rebellion against centralized dynastic power, or in the episodes of “regime change” that mark the transition from one dynasty to another. It is rather in the issue of whether there was ever debate at the level of statecraft or political philosophy, in the pre-modern period, about political or administrative devolution. Here again there is a point that has to be made immediately. This is that no scholar in Chinese history could ever openly argue that a China that was politically divided could ever be preferable to one that was unified. In the high tradition, or in elite culture, the heroes in Chinese history have been those who unified the state or those who died in the attempt to do so. Or those who quelled rebellion or died in the attempt to do so. The great historians have been those who laid out the principles by which unification was lost or gained and demonstrated how these principles operated in history. The very concept of *zhengtong* 正統 and the extremely elaborate sanctions by which the dynastic state was integrated with cosmic processes presumed that the ideal of the unitary state and the universal empire had considerable moral force behind it.

And it must be recalled that there was only one model. There is a difference a chasm wide between the classical Mediterranean tradition and that of East Asia. In ancient Athens, there was free debate about the ideal form government should take. The very coinage of political philosophy today derives from one city state of a number in ancient Greece, in which perhaps 30,000 politically empowered male citizens discussed the relative merits of monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy, democracy, and so on. But the intellectuals who re-drafted the periodization of Chinese history at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) and others, were right: if in China other models had ever been advanced, it was in the pre-Qin 秦 period, the late Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu 春秋, 770-476 BCE), and Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國, 475-221 BCE) eras. The alternative models were those of primitive localized communitarianism, the ideal advocated, half mischievously, by classical Daoists (Daojia 道家), and more interestingly that of the “School of Vertical and Horizontal Alliances” (Zonghengjia 縱橫家). Neither of these models was seriously compatible with the universal empire established by the Qin.

So after the Qin unification these models ceased to have any substantive role in statecraft discourse. It is true that classical Daoism was at certain times co-opted to reinforce and dignify imperial rule, particularly for emperors who had tired of administration. Buddhism was also sometimes used to add depth and reach to imperial rule. But the “School of Vertical and Horizontal Alliances” of the pre-Qin period, premised on a plurality of states within China, scarcely played any further role in statecraft discourse.¹

But this is not to say that the ideal of a highly centralized administration dominated by strong sovereigns and run from the capital went unchallenged. There was debate on what degree of centralization worked best and what system best fulfilled ideals of statecraft. What is more, this debate ran through centuries of Chinese political experience, gaining by its very longevity that most powerful of safeguards against prohibition, the sanction of tradition. It was complex, in that successive participants argued from a range of different viewpoints. Very generally, they argued in the early period and up to the high medieval period from the point of view of the interests of the imperial dynastic house; in later periods, they also brought into the debate the interest of the polity as a whole and even of the locality, the provincial localized societies across China that collectively bore the brunt of dynastic rule or misrule.

My contention is that one of the main headings under which this long-running issue about the degree of centralization was discussed is *fengjian* 封建. I hope to give a very brief summary perspective on this long-running issue that will show that it was often, and sometimes also at periods when perhaps it might least have been expected, an issue of concern to scholars.

The term *fengjian*, of course, triggers a number of very different associations, not all of them comfortable. As a preliminary, it will be as well to clear some of them out of the way. There is a distinction to be made between the term as it was used in dynastic times in China and its use by modern commentators. In particular, it hardly needs saying that the Marxist sense of the term is quite distinct. It came into usage from Japan and denotes a stage in social history that Marxism holds to be inevitable. In looser Marxist usage, it has served to characterize any social or political system that is considered to “hold back progress”. A variant form, “bureaucratic feudalism” was introduced to apply to the later dynastic period, in order to resolve the very obvious discrepancies between the original North European feudalism of the early Middle Ages and the social order of late imperial China. Marxism has, of course made very important contributions to our understanding of Chinese history. But many would now argue that, at least in their looser usage, the terms “feudal” and “bureaucratic feudalism” have little explanatory or descriptive value for high medieval or late imperial China.

For from early times, the term *fengjian* as it was debated in China denoted something rather different from its modern usage. What makes the traditional,

rather than the Marxist, term interesting is that it supplies a concept through which the degree of centralization appropriate for the dynastic state might be subject to some degree of critique.

2. *Fengjian* in the Early and Medieval Periods

It is in the early period, from the start of the Zhou 周 dynasty until about the sixth century BCE, that the term first attains its full meaning. It refers here to a procedure of “enfeoffment” (*feng* 封). By this, the Zhou kings imparted authority to their close kin to rule over fiefs or regions within the Zhou kingdom. These aristocrats based themselves on fortress towns and controlled the area of their fiefs. They transmitted their fiefs to their sons on a hereditary basis; beneath them, in some views at least, were “serfs”, analogous to those of European feudal system. The feudatories were warriors, who fought their fellow aristocrats in chariots rather than as infantrymen, in a way grossly comparable to the mounted knights of feudal Europe. It is doubtful, however, if this system ever corresponded exactly with North European feudal system under the Frankish kings.²

It was to be important to later treatment of the *fengjian* issue that these early enfeoffments did not take place at one time only: there was a series of them, and this series spanned the revolt of King Cheng 成’s enfeoffed uncles Guan Shuxian 管叔鮮 and Cai Shudu 蔡叔度 in the early Zhou. The enfeoffment system survived that revolt.

By the late seventh century BCE, this *fengjian* exercise had been moralized. It was seen to have embodied a relationship of love and trust between immediate members of the ruling house, and was closely identified with one of the values of the inner family, fraternal love. Fraternal love (*di* 悌), indeed, became one of the cardinal relationships of the Confucian moral system. As early as 628 BCE, Fu Chen 富辰 advocated *fengjian* as a strategy of central government control that not only realized high moral values but also made for the greater stability of the central ruling house.³ With his statement to the King, the concept of *fengjian* embarked on its long history as a concept of political organization that might be debated.

By the Warring States period, however, this early Zhou “feudal” system had given way to a form of state organization that emphasized a freer peasantry, large conscript armies, and more developed tax bases. The trend away from the early Zhou system reached its climax with the Qin unification. The prefecture and county (*junxian* 郡縣) system, by which the empire was sub-divided throughout into standardized prefectural units and county sub-units, was imposed on a reunified and highly centralized China. This was the system that, throughout subsequent debate, represented effective centralization and was considered antithetical to the *fengjian* system.

The Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) consolidated its position largely as a reaction to the autocratic excesses of the Qin. Moreover the high degree of centralization achieved by the Qin could not be sustained. Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 206 BCE-195 BCE), the Han founder, operated a modified enfeoffment system. But the outcome was not straightforward. The revolt of the Princes of Wu 吳 and Chu 楚, two of the princes who had received large fiefs, in 154 BCE was to provide a major counterargument, one that was to be advanced by opponents of *fengjian*.⁴ But the fact that the dynasty suppressed the revolt and continued a form of enfeoffment was to be used by those who advocated *fengjian* as a strategy for protecting and ensuring the survival of the dynastic house. In other words, this argument for *fengjian* saw devolution as a form of insurance. If the trunk was threatened, then the branches would survive and ensure the perpetuation of the imperial line.

The revolt of 154 BCE thus caused later advocates of *fengjian* to re-examine the early Zhou enfeoffments. They were able to claim that, just as the Duke of Zhou had implemented the system even after the rebellion of King Cheng's two uncles, Guan and Cai, so that the Han had survived the reverses of the Wu and Chu revolt of 154 BC. Thus the system was again operable even after it had had setbacks.

The Han dynasty also provided another component that was to be important in later debates about enfeoffment. This concerned the main argument for devolution not from the interests of the dynastic house, but from another perspective altogether. The Han system of appointment to junior level provincial posts was later said to have been much more decentralized than that of the reunified empire under the Tang or indeed the later dynasties. Local appointments were said to have been made locally. This model was to provide the second focus in the long-running *fengjian* debate: namely that the devolution of power through *fengjian* brought benefits for local jurisdictions in a way that centralized appointments could not.

The *fengjian* system features in the reviews of the political system that were written in the Han. In the *Bai Hu Tong* 白虎通, Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE) devotes a long section to enfeoffment. Ban was the first to introduce the concepts of “the general interest” (*gong* 公) and “self-interest” (*si* 私) into the debate. He identified the enfeoffment procedure with the ideal of “selflessness”, because “[for the emperor] to enfeoff his relatives and dependents is to demonstrate that he is not selfish. Since he is selfless, why does he enfeoff? Under the universal sky there is no land that is not the king's land; the guests of all lands are all the subjects of the king.” He cited the Zhou King Cheng's enfeoffment of his uncle Kang 康 after his defeat of the rebellion of uncles Guan and Cai, with the “remnant of the people of Yin 殷”,⁵ stating that “there was peace” and that “the reason the king early enfeoffed his uncles and brothers was the principle that they should share

wealth with himself”.⁶ The grand concepts of “the general interest” and “self-interest” were to be an integral part of the *fengjian* debate from Tang times on.

3. *Fengjian* in the Medieval Empires

After the Han, this debate about the merits of the two systems, *fengjian* or *junxian*, continued. The prestige of the Zhou enfeoffments, and their association with the Duke of Zhou, the regent under the infant King Cheng, was such that later dynasties, at or soon after their foundation, also considered enacting enfeoffment programmes. Reviewing the Period of Disunion, the historians of the early seventh century were able to claim that both the Liang 梁 (502-557 CE) and the Chen 陳 (557-589) dynastic houses had practised an effective form of *fengjian*. The *Sui Shu* 隋書 editor Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) included an eloquent memorial by Yu Xuandao 于宣道, which argued for enfeoffment, of an imperial prince as prince of Shu 蜀, on historical grounds. In this memorial, all the traditional, canonical images used to commend enfeoffment were brought forward: enfeoffed lords formed “a protective screen”; they were “surrounding defensive walls”, or “great rocks”. Moreover, the resulting devolution of political authority was held to have been successful.⁷

The Tang 唐 has a particularly important place in this long debate, because it represents, for many, a period of effective centralization and therefore a high point in China’s “master narrative”. The early Tang founder Li Yuan 李淵 (Gaozu 高祖, r. 618-626) followed the precedents of the late southern regimes, giving provincial authority to relatives on a large scale. But after Li Shimin 李世民 (Taizong 太宗, r. 626-649) consolidated his control, and in the unusually liberal atmosphere of his court, the issue became controversial. Taizong himself implied that as a prince and army commander under his father Gaozu he had drawn scholars from north and south into his ‘fence and surrounding wall’, his provincial command.⁸ He later made two attempts to implement the *fengjian* principle. Both were unsuccessful. One reason was that of a perennial problem for the late medieval empire: neither princes nor high officials actually wanted to leave Chang’an 長安 and proceed to their fiefs. But a second, more substantial reason was operative as well. This was that the newly constituted corpus of officials had by now begun to feel both a sense of their own power and a political distinction between themselves and the imperial dynastic family. They simply did not want to cede power to a devolved system that would give significant authority to imperial princes, a category of people whom they knew from recent experience to be unreliable and often self-interested and corrupt. Scholars of the Zhenguan 貞觀 era (627-649) court made a number of searching analyses of history to demonstrate

that any supposed connection between implementation of *fengjian* and the longevity or stability of dynasties was spurious.

Like all such controversies in Chinese history, this debate was fuelled by immediate and specific political problems. Like all such debates, its arguments were cast in accordance with the interests of those immediately experiencing the problems concerned. Very broadly, in the medieval period, political debate was court-centred and tended to reflect immediate problems that the emperor faced. In the post-Song 宋 period, the most articulate treatments of the issue reflected local interests in ways that never operated in the medieval period.

The Tang was the dividing line between these two outlooks. Contributions to the *fengjian* debate in the remainder of the Tang demonstrate this crucial shift. They make two basic points. The first is that, after the defeat of Taizong in the Zhenguan court discussion of this issue, the term *feng* changed its function altogether. *Feng* now meant to grant a title and an income drawn from central funds to an imperial prince or a high official. Usually the title had a purely nominal regional and symbolic significance and usually it was archaic. With the title went a “fief income” drawn from a treasury at the capital. At the highest, it might be as much as several thousand bolts of silk per year; at the low point in the scale perhaps as little as two hundred. The Tang sources provide the names of successive enfeoffments quite fully: probably these were drawn from successive *shilu* 實錄, official accounts of individual reigns or parts of reigns. Certainly the source that has the fullest lists, the *Cefu Yuangui* 冊府元龜 was compiled from successive Tang *shilu*, which were still extant in the early Northern Song.

The very specific change in the meaning of *feng*, however, was noted by officials in the period. It did not stop emperors from the start of the dynasty, through the late seventh and into the eighth century from appointing imperial princes to high substantive rather than titular positions, usually civil rather than military, in the provinces. Thus a form of *de facto* enfeoffment persisted, and the images of the “protective screen”, the “great boulders”, the “surrounding defensive wall” were frequently applied to commend these appointments, even though the term *feng* was not used of them. But what became crucial to the debate that followed was that the princes in provincial posts had a very mixed record indeed of competence. Some governed well and earned reputations for ability. Many more were irresponsible and profligate. Others were corrupt and predatory. Sovereigns from Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. as Emperor, 690-705) on must surely have been aware that any form of devolution through the appointment of imperial princes was a risk. There is clear evidence too that they were particularly nervous of giving imperial princes high field command in armies in the provinces. They may be presumed to have had in mind the recent precedents of the kind of armed revolt that had taken place in the Sui and, ironically, the role of the princes

in the military and political instability that preceded Taizong's Xuanwu 玄武 coup of 626.

This issue of how much political or military authority to give the princes was thrown into stark immediacy by the Princes Revolt of 682. This was a poorly organized attempt by the princes of the Li imperial clan in provincial posts to remove the Empress Wu from power and with her the Wu princes. It was defeated easily; but its influence on the *fengjian* issue was lasting. I shall argue in the final section of this paper that, for Li Longji 李隆基 (Xuanzong 玄宗, r. 712-756) in the Kaiyuan and Tianbao periods, the fate of the Li 李 princes and his own campaign to reinstate those who had survived the Empress Wu's savage retribution functioned to revive imperial interest in *fengjian* as a means to protect the dynastic line, and that his interest combined with an administrative interest in devolution among certain official scholars to make *fengjian* an attractive policy option. In a measure charged with irony, Xuanzong was to enact a form of *fengjian* at the very close of his reign, in flight from Chang'an, with disastrous results for himself.

The next full analysis of the issue came some five decades later. By then not only had the attitude of the scholar community to the emperor changed, but the political situation had drastically evolved. Li Gua 李适 (Dezong 德宗, r. 779-805) had alienated the intellectual community by his secretive and miserly style of government. He had lost out in his efforts to re-impose central control over those provinces that had achieved a large measure of independence after the An Lushan 安祿山 Rebellion of 755. The dynasty, following this catastrophic revolt, was faced with loss of control to provincial warlords who had their own armies, dictated their own successors and made their own staff appointments. The outlook of these political satraps on the political centre was remote indeed from the idealized "fraternal love" that governed the *fengjian* provision.

The main participants in the revived debate were Du You 杜佑 (735-812) and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819). They both argued forcefully against the devolution implicit in *fengjian* and for the centralization of *junxian*. Their standpoint involved them in facing in two directions. In the first place, they chimed in with the arguments of those who had pleaded the interests of the dynastic house. For both of them, the *junxian* system secured greater stability and control for the emperor and his line. On the other hand, their interest was not restricted to the security of the dynastic house alone. Du You, though an aristocrat and a powerful official with long provincial experience, argued forcibly that the *junxian* system made for the stability of the Chinese imperium as a whole. Liu Zongyuan did the same.

What is no less interesting is that both sides in this late eighth and early ninth century debate used the terminology of "the general interest" (*gong*) and "self interest" (*si*) that Ban Gu had introduced into it some six and a half

centuries before. For Liu Zongyuan particularly, the centralization that the *junxian* system involved and its denial of private or selfish interests meant that the *junxian* system represented the triumph of the general interest. Hence his valorization of the Qin dynasty (and hence also, many centuries later, Mao Zedong 毛澤東's special praise for this essay). But the opponents of the *junxian* system, though their arguments are poorly preserved, took up a more remarkable position. Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) was more comprehensively conservative than his well-known anti-Buddhist polemics might suggest. For he stated that advocates of *fengjian* defended it on the grounds that those enfeoffed regarded their land as their very own, and treated its people as their own children (*situ ziren* 私土子人). In other words, *fengjian* represented the idealized values of the family, the *jia* 家, the locus for some of the highest ideals in the Confucian moral system. It was precisely this argument that, over eighth centuries later, during the Ming Qing 明清 transition, Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682) was greatly to elaborate.

4. *Fengjian* in the Early Pre-modern Period

For the Song, *fengjian* continued to be an issue for debate. This period is under-researched from this point of view; but certain points can be made in parenthesis. First that the Song was China's period of "precocious modernity". This was a time in which major issues of principle were debated and bureaucratic procedures were fine-tuned to a degree of sophistication that causes astonishment, even today. Secondly, the great Song intellectuals tolerated or even encouraged open debate. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), for example, reviewed Song discussions of the *fengjian* issue. He admired the moral spirit that the *fengjian* provision might foster.⁹ But he is said to have argued against the revival of Zhou style *fengjian*.¹⁰ The degree of centralization or devolution, of both civil and military functions, was certainly a theme in this copiously documented political culture.¹¹ Ye Shi 葉適 (1150-1223) in the Southern Song, for example, admired the degree of freedom from central control and resulting space for their own moral standards that the ancient *fengjian* system had secured.¹² Finally, a related point is that the Song is the first period in Chinese history when locality comes more clearly into focus. Ye Shi first problematized the relationship of the officials with the clerks (*xuli* 胥吏), the permanent, hereditary sub-stratum of administrative assistants and runners in local government that was so prone to venality, later a key consideration for Gu Yanwu.¹³ Indeed the idea of *fengjian* as the devolution of power figures in Ye Shi's condemnation of the clerks, but in an unusually sardonic sense. He observed that "the world holds that for the officials there is no *fengjian*, but that the clerks have *fengjian*." This sarcasm, referring to the hereditary devolved power that the clerks and runners had

abrogated for themselves, surely indicates that *fengjian* was a term current in discussion in Song times.

In the late imperial and modern periods, the trend, usually merely implicit in the earlier debate, to focus on the interests of the locality rather than the centre grew in strength. The *fengjian* issue thus lost its very close association with the imperial centre and came to stand for a measure of devolution, of restriction of the power of the central state. *Fengjian* was seen, ironically enough, as “a critique of imperial power’s encroachment upon the locality”.¹⁴ At a still later stage, another element was introduced into the debate, namely public opinion in the localities, for “*fengjian* stood for the enhancement of local elites and public opinion, against autocratic centralism”.

But this did not happen immediately. One of the best-known contributors to the *fengjian* issue was the seventeenth century scholar and political critic Gu Yanwu. Gu Yanwu lived through a period of political and intellectual turmoil, when a handful of well-known scholars thought unusually radically about “administrative reality” at both the political centre and in the localities, about the stability of the dynastic state and its effective organization. These concerns combined to make him a forceful advocate of decentralization.

For Gu Yanwu, the two very different standpoints implicit in the debate intersected urgently in his discussion of *fengjian*.¹⁵ The first concern was his Ming loyalism, his deep obsession with the failure of the Ming and its defeat by the Manchus and demise as a dynasty. He followed the classical argument here. The first Ming emperor had endorsed sound principle, in conducting a major exercise in devolving political authority through an enfeoffment of his princes.¹⁶ But Zhu Di 朱棣 (the Yongle 永樂 Emperor, r. 1402-1424) and his successors had radically modified this system, disempowering the imperial princes,¹⁷ promoting absolutism and, ultimately, ensuring the disaster of Ming defeat. At the level of administration and also at the military level in the campaigns at the end of the Ming, this defeat could have been avoided if the Ming emperors had selected and entrusted imperial relatives and other capable senior figures to administer the provinces. *Fengjian* was, in other words, a policy for ensuring that the dynastic house could survive catastrophic threats. The language used was classical, borrowed directly from the original canonical references to *fengjian*. Gu’s argument was a very old one.

Gu Yanwu also applied the traditional opposition of “public” or the universal interest (*gong*) and “private” (*si*) to the government of the empire that Ban Gu had first introduced into the debate. But he gave it a new and subtle twist. For him, for the emperor to take the public view of the empire meant rewarding the worthy with lands and enfeoffing them in states. To adopt a private view was for him to over-centralize control. Here, and specifically for the emperor, the term private (*si*) had a negative value, and

its use contrasts starkly with that of Liu Zongyuan. The sage emperors, Gu argued, “had used the self-interest of all [the individuals] in the world to perfect their own attitude of general concern and so the world was brought to ordered rule.” “The collective self-interest of [individuals throughout] the empire as a whole is the basis for the emperor’s broad public concern.” It is Gu’s plea that the self-interest of the localities be recognized as something positive that, while it echoes Han Yu’s phrase, is new. Of course, any system that justifies self-interest at local level immediately recalls European debates about the function of the state as holding the ring between competing private commercial interests.¹⁸

Gu therefore had a second focus, arguably more important to him than that of dynastic survival, that of the deterioration of local society in the Ming that he witnessed all around him. This second concern that led Gu to endorse *fengjian* was altogether different. It sprang from his own observation of local government, administration at prefectural and county levels, and of the interface between the mandarin, always very small in numbers, and the two main forces at the local level, the over-powerful permanent and often hereditary clerical staff at the yamens (*xuli*) that Ye Shi had characterized and the local elites, represented by the *shengyuan* 生員, the tax exempt gentry families. He characterized the “law of avoidance”, by which mandarins were not allowed to serve in their own localities, as one of the main causes of this deterioration. Gu did not want a literal restoration of the *fengjian* system. He rather argued that if it was possible to “lodge the import of *fengjian* within the prefectural system, the empire would be brought to ordered rule.”

Gu’s position was therefore the direct opposite to that of Liu Zongyuan and Du You. Holding that the “law of avoidance” was a cause of misgovernment and corruption, he proposed, instead, that local magistrates be natives of the counties that they administered and that they even have the power, after suitable periods of probation, to pass on their positions to their own kin. He also advocated the dismantling of the intervening layers of administration, the circuit officials and inspectors, appointed by the central government to oversee provincial administration. He argued that it would be in the self-interest of these locally recruited, hereditary magistrates to ensure that their areas were well-governed, and that they would be too small to organize rebellion or resistance to imperial rule. They would apply to the administration of their jurisdictions the high values of the Confucian-trained family figure, the values of the idealized *jia*. They would fulfil the ideal encapsulated by Han Yu eight centuries before: they would consider their territory private and its people as their own children (*situ ziren*). As Philip Kuhn has observed, “Ku’s faith in the ultimate collective benefits to be gained from the workings of enlightened self-interest in politics stands at the core of his effort to reorient the psychology of Chinese government.”¹⁹

Gu also advocated dismantling the provision whereby the local gentry obtained tax exemption, the *shengyuan* system. In the same way, making magistrates hereditary was a way of ensuring that they countered the excessive power of the permanent clerical staff, for these were hereditary also.

Gu's stance represents a combination of two strands in statecraft: he believed in moral regeneration, at least to the extent that he believed that moral outlook, "moral transformation", rather than legal apparatus would ultimately secure good order. But he also believed in re-drafting the traditional framework in quite specific ways, in radically disempowering certain powerful groups and in empowering others. He certainly did not envisage abolishing the "one model" for the political control of China, or in a China without a reigning dynastic house; but he did want radically to re-distribute power.²⁰

This same scholar, Philip Kuhn, has highlighted the standpoint on *fengjian* by the mid-nineteenth century thinker Feng Guifen 封桂芬 (1809-1874). Feng also criticized the "law of avoidance", believing that locally recruited magistrates would discharge their responsibilities far more conscientiously than officials appointed for limited periods from outside the region concerned. For Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848-1905) in Philip Kuhn's analysis, *fengjian* offered not only a long pedigree for the idea of restriction of autocracy but also "a close relationship between the rulers and the people and [promotion of] the public interest, in distinct opposition to the centralized administration of the *junxian* system ..."²¹ Rule by local notables', again echoing Han Yu 韓愈, was like the "nurturing attitude of the father toward his family ...". Liang Qichao, the "most eloquent and influential among [Chinese self-government proponents]",²² in turn, argued for a combination of *fengjian* with Western law: *fengjian* would ensure a localism that was highly beneficial to local societies and, concurrently, Western law would protect the excessive encroachment of central autocracy.²³ This ideal was not in any sense an attempt to claim independence for local society; rather it promoted the idea of interdependence of state and society, while also permitting the process of change. Nonetheless, the movement has been called a "mobilization of a counter-history of *fengjian* to create a public sphere".²⁴ *Fengjian* was an "ancient form to serve as moral guide for the present".²⁵ The advocates of a more devolved political regime in nineteenth century China indeed reached far back into their own history to state their case.

5. The *Fengjian* Issue in Kaiyuan Tianbao: The Need for More Analysis

Let me now return to the Tang dynasty, my own area of research interest. The Tang of course offered precedents for both highly centralized regime, in the seventh and early eighth centuries, and, as Yeh Shi pointed out, for a long period of provincial separatism during which the political and military

central power of the centre had been lost and the provinces were independent states in all but name.

In this period of nearly three centuries, the *fengjian* issue was very much alive. Indeed, it provided the heading under which the most far-reaching analysis of the dynastic state in the Tang period was conducted. *Fengjian* was used in both its two different administrative meanings: it was used to denote the titular enfeoffment and provision of income for imperial princes and others. It, and the ancient rhetoric associated with it since Zhou times, was also used in its original sense, which had by now become almost an academic usage, of devolving government from the political centre by giving regional administrative responsibility to close kin of the emperor.

I have already given the broad outline, which is well known. What follows as the concluding section of this paper amounts to a plea that the long running debate on *fengjian* be subject to much more detailed scrutiny, at least in the late medieval and pre-modern periods.

In the early Tang, Taizong, like other dynastic founders, proposed implementing the *fengjian* provision. It is hard to say, at this distance in time, whether the records of the discussions involved were shaped in part by an atavistic concern that Taizong be recorded as behaving as other dynastic founders had behaved, going back to the Duke of Zhou himself. But the emperor does seem to have envisaged *fengjian* as a realistic policy, mainly because it would offer a form of insurance for the survival of his own imperial line.

In the seventh century, however, the advocates of the centralized bureaucratic system prevailed. The reign of the Empress Wu is recognized as a time when the civil bureaucracy expanded significantly, when the prestige of its elite or fast stream was strengthened by the development of the regular annual civil examinations as a means of selection. This development, linked to the relatively stable tax base and consequent wealth of the late seventh century state, surely strengthened the hand of the centralizers, the advocates of the *junxian* system. And indeed we find, in an essay by the court scholar Zhu Jingze 朱敬則 (635-709), probably composed late in the reign, a reasoned plea for the *junxian* system as preferable to any form of devolution by enfeoffment.

But the Empress was a usurper. She had dislodged the Li imperial line and so disrupted the ideals of the patrimonial state. The revolt of 682, the Princes Revolt, was an attempt by Li imperial relatives to reclaim the throne, and incidentally one of the few wars of succession that took place in late medieval China. The Empress punished the Li princes involved with extreme harshness; but she made no attempt to extinguish the Li imperial clan. When in 705 restoration was achieved for the Lis, her son Li Xian 李顯 (Zhongzong 中宗, r. 683, 705-710) issued a decree that resisted an initiative to reduce the

titular fiefs of the Wu princes, and that gave fiefs to members of the Li clan. The restoration was also presented as a consensual reversion to normality and the titular *fengjian* tradition recognized this.

But when Xuanzong ascended, he took a very different view of his grandmother's usurpation. He embarked on a programme of rehabilitation for those members of the Li imperial clan who had suffered in provincial office. Those princes who had survived were brought back to the capital and given high posts. Those who had perished had their remains brought back and were re-interred with full honours. The point is that in the commemorative compositions that resulted, Xuanzong had the full rhetoric associated with *fengjian* deployed. The imperial princes were a "defensive screen", "great rocks" and a "surrounding defensive wall" for the imperial line. Xuanzong also in 731 warmly welcomed political moral statements that told the princes how they should behave themselves as provincial administrators.²⁶ It may be no coincidence either that in the literary prompt book *Chu Xue Ji* 初學記, produced for the imperial princes in the Kaiyuan period, the rhetoric of *fengjian* is again included and the enfeoffments of the early Zhou and the leader of the Princes Revolt are all given prominence.²⁷

This last initiative points to another strand in the debate: the princes continued to turn in very mixed performances as provincial administrators. In the minds of the emperor and his advisers, it proved in the end safer to have them in domiciliary confinement at Chang'an. Xuanzong, moreover, was dilatory about a related issue, namely the succession. For the chronic indecision that he showed in the Kaiyuan period over investing a final choice as Crown Prince meant that his sons were necessarily involved in the plotting that resulted. This increased the sense of instability in the imperial family and the court and gave urgency to the problem of how the imperial line might most effectively be safeguarded.

The conclusions that can be safely drawn from all this evidence, which comes mainly from epigraphical and commemorative texts rather than the main official accounts, and which will be laid out in detail in a forthcoming article, and is that Xuanzong was interested in *fengjian* as a safeguard against precisely the kind of rebellion that had threatened the stability of the rule of his grandmother, the Empress Wu in 682.

However, the question arises, was Xuanzong alone in his interest in the ancient *fengjian* provision, and did he consider it exclusively in terms of an insurance device for the long-term survival of his imperial line? Or did he see other benefits in a more devolved system of administration? And did he have, among the scholar community, advisers who promoted the *fengjian* ideal and tried to persuade him to implement it?

There is suggestive evidence that he and some advisers at least saw *fengjian* not exclusively as a policy to ensure the survival of the imperial line

but also as an administrative provision that, by devolving political authority, would bring greater stability to the empire at prefectural and county levels.

One strand of evidence concerns his attitude to appointing officials at prefectural and county levels (*taishou* 太守 and *xianling* 縣令) to administer the empire. He endorsed a theme that his great-grandfather Taizong had formulated, by emphasizing the crucial importance of these tiers of official at local level. He arranged to send them off either individually or in groups with feasts and verse writing in which he himself joined. He, and many others, valorized the role of this level of mandarin official in the provincial hierarchy. At the same time he may well have been aware of the danger of replacing them as wielders of substantive political power by the *ad hoc* commissioners, to whom successive emperors had turned to address specific problems in the provinces. By his time, commissioners had acquired a reputation for opportunism and rapacity. He himself made extensive use of them, but he also stood them down, doing so indeed sufficiently often to earn the censure of the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor for inconsistency. It was no accident that among Gu Yanwu's suggestions for the radical reform of administration was precisely the removal of these intervening layers of administrators, so closely identified with venality, from the central government. And when at the very close of his reign, in flight before rebellious forces at the capital, Xuanzong reviewed his own record, he blamed commissioners for leading him into irregular methods of acquiring wealth, and contributing to the disaster of the Rebellion.

Not too much should be made of this, perhaps. At most it suggests that the emperor held the view that the traditional structure of prefectures and counties was the ideal one and that efforts to strengthen the authority of the central government by the commissioner system were an expedient that should be set aside when possible.

As for the question of whether he had advisers who advocated devolution through *fengjian*, here we are on much firmer ground. There were two, Fang Guan 房琯 (697-763), the intellectual son of a chief minister of the empress's reign and Liu Zhi 劉秩 (d.c. 758), one of the sons of the great critic of historical writing Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661-721), who clearly advocated *fengjian*. And, at a moment of acute crisis at the very end of his reign, they persuaded Xuanzong to implement some aspects of the system.

Were Fang Guan and Liu Zhi acting out of political opportunism, attempting merely to gain personal favour with an Emperor whom they knew to be interested in the *fengjian* ideal? There were those soon after the time who may have believed that this was so. Any answer is made difficult by the fact that most of the writing of both these scholars was lost, probably not long after their own deaths. Fang Guan, moreover, was subjected to a process of vilification that surely has distorted his image for posterity. The evidence for

his belief in the *fengjian* system is persuasive enough; but it is contained in Song sources.

In the case of Liu Zhi, it is however clear that he was not acting just to please the Emperor; still less was he concerned to implement a system that had operated in the Han because this was when his remote ancestors had been emperors.²⁸ Rather he saw the need to devolve at least certain operations of the state and to reduce the role of the capital. The prime example is contained in a critique he submitted of the selection system, probably in 740. Liu argued that the literary skill required of examination candidates in the centralized selection system was far removed from the original function of verse, which was to give voice to the outlook of local people. The system imposed excessive strains on the capital and appointments would be much more effectively conducted at local level. Such a proposal resonates with what was believed to have been Han practice and with the concerns of Gu Yanwu and later advocates of *fengjian*.

The final dramatic act of Xuanzong's reign concerned the *fengjian* issue. Xuanzong was in flight from the rebels and had reached the county of Pu'an 普安 in northern Sichuan when Fang Guan and Liu Zhi caught up with him. Desperate not to be forced to relinquish the throne, Xuanzong was persuaded by these two scholars to enact a *fengjian* measure, devolving power to four of his sons, including the crown prince and Li Lin 李璘, prince of Yong 永. The result was disastrous for Xuanzong. Prince Lin rebelled in the lower Yangzi region, while the crown prince persuaded the body of moderate officials who had accompanied him north to force Xuanzong's abdication and accept the throne himself. The handing over of power was managed diplomatically. But Xuanzong had lost the throne, and the *fengjian* principle was implicated in his demise.

6. Conclusion

In the statecraft discourse of late imperial and Republican China, the recognition of any incipient development of a civil society was eclipsed by the "statism that overwhelmed discussion of political issues".²⁹ Of course, it would be grossly simplistic to argue that *fengjian*, even in the final phase of the long controversy that it provoked in China, involved a demand for a sophisticated civil society at local levels, free of domination by the state. The most that can be said is that *fengjian* involved a "plea for localism, for freedom from excessive central government exploitation and control".

The concept of *fengjian*, moreover, did not survive the transition to modern political discourse. By the end of the generation of Kang Youwei 康有為 it had come to an end. What, therefore, can be deduced from this very brief canter through the centuries-old debate that it caused? For almost all

this period, there was indeed one model for government, that of the unitary dynastic state, the “patrimonial state, the personal property of the ruling dynasty”. To parcel out this vast empire to close relatives of the emperor, whose loyalty to the imperial clan might according to all canons of Confucian behaviour be taken for granted, might seem in theory a practical option. But the close kin of the emperor were not in fact qualified either by loyalty or by competence to fulfil this ideal. As a strategy for protecting the imperial line, therefore, the *fengjian* provision had a very mixed record indeed.

The Chinese imperium, moreover, at its full extent comprised a vast area and regions that differed enormously in terrain, ecology and customs and mores. The periods in which the central government had effective control over all these localities were relatively brief. And in a number of periods, efforts to tighten or make more effective central political control through the use of *ad hoc* commissioners despatched from the political centre merely ended by introducing an extra layer of government, one particularly susceptible to corruption. As the developments in the seventeenth century and at the end of the Qing described above show, a dysfunctional political centre historically also proved as much a stimulus to interest in *fengjian* as the perceived interests of the imperial line. *Fengjian* in the late stages of the long-running debate therefore provided a pretext for pleas for the development of local interests.

Whatever the motives driving successive contributors to the debate, the debate itself had early secured the protection of tradition. It served, therefore, over more than two and a half millennia as a respected cover for proposals for redrafting the plan of the imperial state. And these proposals became increasingly radical from the end of the Ming until the final demise of the imperial state.

There is, finally, a subsidiary point that may concern historians of dynastic China. Traditionally, the “master narrative” for Chinese history singles out two periods in which effective central government control was a reality. The achievements of the second of these, the Manchu dynasty, the *pax sinica* in the eighteenth century should not be descried. But for the early eighth century, and indeed for other periods, there is a need for a more fine-grained analysis. Wang Shouan 王壽南 from Chengchi University 政治大學 in Taipei already hinted at the Emperor Xuanzong’s concern that his authority, even early in his reign, was not effective in the provinces. The detailed evidence hinted at above suggests that there were indeed serious problems. If I have succeeded in suggesting the appeal of the *fengjian* concept to intellectuals and to the Emperor himself in the Kaiyuan and Tianbao periods, then at the very least it may be argued that over this period, traditionally a high point in China’s long history, some degree of devolution was seen as desirable and found advocates.

Notes

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1. But see Herbert Franke (1983), "Sung Embassies: Some General Observations", in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *China among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbours, 10th-14th Centuries*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 139-140.
 2. See Li Feng (2003), "'Feudalism' and Western Zhou: A Criticism", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 63 (1), pp. 115-144.
 3. *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhushu* 春秋左傳 注疏 (Yang Jialuo ed'n, Taipei: Shijie Shuju, n.d.), ch. 15, pp. 28a-29a; James Legge (1872), *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen*, London: Trubner and Co., p. 192.
 4. Michael Loewe in Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (eds) (1986), *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 1, The Ch'in and Han Empires 221 B.C.-A.D. 220*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 141-144.
 5. *Shang Shu Zhushu* 尚書注疏 (Yang Jialuo ed., Taipei: Shijie Shuju, n.d.), ch. 13, p. 21a; James Legge (1865), *The Shoo King*, London: Trubner and Co., p. 10.
 6. *Bai Hu Tong De Lun* 白虎通德論 (*Sibu Congkan* ed'n), ch. 3, p. 4b.
 7. *Sui Shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1973), ch. 39, p. 1147.
 8. Quoted by Jack W. Chen, *The Poetics of Sovereignty: On Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010), p. 133.
 9. *Zhu Wengong Wenji* 朱文公文集 (*Sibu Congkan* ed'n), ch. 72, pp. 52b-54b; also ch. 54, pp. 2b-3a.
 10. Hoyt Cleveland Tillman (1982), *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 202-203.
 11. Winston Wan Lo (1974), *The Life and Thought of Yeh Shih*, Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press and Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, pp. 66-69.
 12. *Shuixin Xiansheng Wenji* 水心先生文集 (*Sibu Congkan* ed'n), ch. 3, pp. 2a-2b.
 13. *Shuixin Xiansheng Wenji*, ch. 3, pp. 23a-24b, quoted by Winston Wan Lo, p. 65, p. 134.
 14. Prasenjit Duara (1995), *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 153.

15. This summary of Gu Yanwu's position owes substantially to the PhD thesis by Thomas Carl Bartlett, "Ku Yen-wu's Response to 'The Demise of Human Society'" (Princeton, 1985).
16. See Edward L. Dreyer (1982), *Early Ming China, A Political History, 1355-1435*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, esp. pp. 84-85.
17. Dreyer, p.175 and p, 223, p. 230.
18. Albert O. Hirschman (1977), *Passions and Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 86.
19. Philip A. Kuhn (1975), "Local Self-Government under the Republic: Problems of Control, Autonomy and Mobilization", in Frederick Wakeman Jr. and Carolyn Grant (eds), *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
20. This summary of Gu Yanwu's position owes substantially to the PhD thesis by Thomas Carl Bartlett, "Ku Yen-wu's Response to 'The Demise of Human Society'" (Princeton, 1985).
21. Duara, p. 154.
22. Philip A. Kuhn (2002), *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, p.127.
23. Duara, p. 155.
24. Duara, p. 157.
25. Duara, p. 158.
26. By Pei Guangting 裴光庭 (676-733); see *Tang Hui Yao 唐會要* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955), ch. 36, p. 658; *Wen Yuan Ying Hua 文苑英華* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1966), ch. 884, p. 10b.
27. *Chu Xue Ji 初學記* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), ch. 12, p. 306; ch. 10, p. 238.
28. P.A. Herbert (1988), *Examine the Honest, Appraise the Able*, Canberra: Australian National University, pp. 148-150. Cf. also, Edwin G. Pulleyblank, "Neo-Confucianism and Neo-Legalism in T'ang Intellectual Life, 755-805", in Arthur F. Wright (ed.) (1960), *The Confucian Persuasion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 98-99.
29. Duara, p. 160.

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