Articles

International Journal of China Studies
Vol. 3, No. 3, December 2012, pp. 239-269

Memorials and Essays: Political Protest in Late Medieval China[+]

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Abstract

This paper attempts to place the Tang dynasty tradition of political criticism in its historical context as an aspect of the traditional administrative structure in China. The traditional ideology of government considered the emperor and the political centre of the Chinese empire "corrigible" and it was the duty of morally qualified members of the elite to offer reproof and remonstration. It was also in the interests of both the emperor and members of the scholarly and intellectual elite to keep channels of access to the emperor open. The standards remonstrators invoked were those contained in the Confucian canon, rather than radical views about the organization of the polity. The second Tang emperor, Taizong, formulated ideals under which the common people were notionally given a voice in cases of injustice or oppression. All serving officials were notionally permitted access to the emperor. Recluses from the country were called in and consulted over political problems. There was also a range of specially dedicated posts which carried the duty to monitor the political process and offer criticism. Individual acts of remonstration were particularly valorized; group protests were considered with suspicion. There were certain recognized themes over which protest memorials were traditional and which were therefore safe to promote: excessive imperial hunting, extravagant building projects; excessive court luxury. Other themes, like the religious interests of emperors or the education of the crown prince, were more sensitive. Individual acts of remonstration were recognized for their heroism, and successive sovereigns varied in their tolerance of criticism. In the late eighth century, popular injustices were described unofficially in verse as much as represented through official channels. Intellectuals developed a tradition of political criticism not through direct intervention but in more general discursive essays on the ideals of dynastic government. This more discursive tradition became characteristic of the post-Song tradition of political dissent, when the intellectual community, much larger and provincially based, became alienated from the emperor and the court.

Keywords: *admonition, court and provinces, the emperor's role, political criticism, political dissent, Tang dynasty*

JEL classification: *H11, H12, K40, Z18*

1. Introduction

Political dissent has had an uncertain role in the history of the Chinese state. Neither in theory nor in practice has it provided a sustained theme throughout the rich tradition that documents successive dynasties. The system of imperial government through a highly structured mandarinate remained remarkably continuous over a period of more than two thousand years. Scholars and commentators have searched for the reasons for this durability. In the nineteenth century, the examination system was considered one of the main causes. By opening mandarin service to all and recruiting on the basis of proven examination performance, the emperor effectively softened the autocratic message. Even though in fact the examination system never functioned as an entirely open one, it none the less was considered to have provided an essential safety valve.

Modern commentators have echoed the same idea. Samuel P. Huntington characterized the examination system, in its function of opening state service as a career to the talented, as "the only moderating element [in the undemocratic or anti-democratic government of the classic Chinese polity.] Harmony and cooperation were preferred over disagreement and competition. The maintenance of order and respect for hierarchy were central values. The conflict of ideas, groups and parties was viewed as dangerous and illegitimate."[1]

There have been other characterizations of the traditional system and other explanations of its durability. The absence in Chinese political discourse, from Han 漢 times, of alternative models of government organization was surely one. So was the comprehensiveness and high explanatory value of the traditional world view that underpinned the administrative structure. In Europe, from the early Renaissance on, the political models of classical Greece and Rome provided the basis and justification for dissenting or alternative views of political organization. The long tradition of Chinese political thought offered no such diversity. The Chinese model in practice merely permitted degrees of autocracy, of "despotism", that fascinated and sometimes shocked Western commentators from the seventeenth century on.

It is the argument of this essay that it was not only the examination system or the absence of alternative models that contributed to the durability of the traditional system. Another factor was the ability of the system to

monitor its own performance and to offer self-correction and reproof.[2] The Chinese governmental system could never have maintained its continuity if it had not also been underpinned by concepts of political behaviour that gave it intellectual dignity and that invited the commitment and the loyalty of idealistic and highly principled men. These men assumed the role aptly described as that of "moral virtuosi" or "tutors and guardians" of the dynastic state. For centuries, they maintained and updated a massive scholarly tradition of documentation relating to government. It was a fundamental feature of their positions that the state itself and particularly the political centre was "corrigible", and that it was their role to offer guidance, reproof and correction. The ancestry of this nexus of ideas in the pre-dynastic period is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that two concepts, first that the Confucian ideal of service to the emperor was conditional and could be withheld, and secondly the Mencian idea that the mandate of heaven by which an imperial house ruled was ultimately subject to the consent of the common people, were important principles underlying their position. It is also important that, although the Confucian ethical system retained an essential core, none the less political institutions and practice changed from age to age. Principles that were foregrounded in some periods receded in others. The duty of admonition, of individuals expressing dissident political views directly to the throne, was one of these.

By the end of the medieval period, China's "tutors and guardians" were able to point to a very long record of admonition and reproof of the "corrigible centre". The duty of providing this had from early times been elevated to a major political commitment. It had developed into a tradition: it had identified its heroic figures and its heroic interventions. Until the end of the medieval age, this political principle was, moreover, characteristically tested by the working political system, by successive memorials of admonition submitted directly to the throne. From Yuan 元 times on, however, the court no longer functioned as the testing ground for the implementation of political principles as it had done. There developed a disconnection between the official scholars and high officials who surrounded the late imperial emperors at court and the intellectual communities in the provinces. In the Ming 明 and Qing 清 periods, critical views of the state were expressed in two main ways. The first was through a tradition of political discourse that was pursued through discussions, essays and tracts intended for independent circulation. These only rarely resulted in direct political intervention. The second was through projects of codification, officially approved collections of, for example, memorials on policy. These in effect involved recruiting the leading scholars of the day, and set the parabolas for political discussion. But it was among "intellectuals outside of government that a critical and questioning spirit prevailed among eighteenth century intellectual".[3]

In this late imperial period, there were some remarkably radical formulations of the idea that the scholar community should be privileged to criticize imperial government. To cite one instance only, Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) believed that the school system should be empowered to define right and wrong and that schools should have a privileged position to represent their criticisms to the emperor.[4] But in the later imperial period the mechanism of dissent, the moral imperative to submit "direct admonition", so important as a principle in the early and medieval periods, was no longer invoked in the same way. It has been said that the concerns of the intellectual community at the Qing court, the scholars and officials surrounding the emperor, were severely restricted. "All those who served at court shared an orientation towards the examinations … to the production of polished literary compositions and to formal interpretation of the classics."[5] Kangxi 康熙, Yongzheng 雍正 and Qianlong 乾隆 imposed control over the entire scholarly heritage to differing degrees, by initiating and monitoring large scholarly projects. Analysis of the involvement of the scholarly and intellectual community in such projects has revealed a range of different approaches among them. But these approaches did not typically involve political dissent expressed directly to the apex of political power. In the case of the *Si ku quan shu* 四庫全書, the most famous of these projects, the ultimate result was "mainly one of cooperation and collaboration".[6]

The political climate of the medieval period in Chinese history therefore differed markedly from that of the later period. The medieval scholarly community was centred on the court to a far greater extent than in later periods. The provincial dimension to the intellectual community developed only in the second half of the eighth century. The central bureaucracy was smaller and its monopoly over the political process virtually complete. Any reader in the primary records for the medieval period will know that in medieval times the significant statements of political principle were generally made, not typically in a discrete tradition of discourse developed in the provinces, but rather by the functioning political system at its centre. They occur in memorials, edicts and rescripts and elsewhere in the massive amount of formal documentation that the working state threw up. It was only in the late medieval period, from the late eighth century on, that issues of political thought began increasingly to be analyzed in discrete essays, letters or dialogues. The same readers will know too that especially in the three centuries of the Tang period, the obligation directly to admonish or reprove the throne was foregrounded as one of the most cherished and most frequently adduced principles of political conduct, and that it was important to participants in the political process from the emperor down even, ideologically, to the common people.

There is therefore a long-term dialectic process at work: in this, issues of political principle were treated as part of the political process in the medieval period, to transfer in the pre-modern period to the much more detached and theoretical tradition of political discourse that scholars like Huang Zongxi practised. In the late medieval period, it was the on-going experience of the medieval state that set the agenda. In the pre-modern period, it was for scholars such as Huang, by necessity much more remote from the court or from any direct contact with the emperor, to analyze, expand and elaborate in their discourse what had earlier been in the political foreground as working principles.

What follows will be a summary of the tradition of political dissent in the Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907 C.E.), the end of China's medieval period. This was traditionally considered one of the most open in China's political history. The focus will be on the underlying political dynamics involved, the statements of principle, the range of dissent and its recurrent themes. It will be established that the degree of tolerance for dissent varied greatly with the changes in the nature of authority at the apex of the system, whether it was the emperor or chief ministers or other power interests. Vigilance, if not eternal then at least constant, and the heroism traditionally identified with individual acts of remonstration were needed if this cherished principle was to be upheld.

2. The Dynamics of Dissent

The administrative hierarchy of the Tang at the capital, by virtue of its small size and limited administrative reach, was an "inhibited political centre".[7] The emperor could not hope to govern without the help of his civil officials, the mandarinate. He needed to keep in play a wide range of political interests and to prevent any one group from dominating other contenders for power. He also needed, as Mencius had indicated, the tacit support of the people themselves. Effective management of both his officials and the common people could greatly add to his authority. Conversely, alienation of either his officials or the common people weakened the emperor's rule. An effective emperor therefore kept the political element in the administrative system to some extent open. In effect, he fostered channels of communication with his middle and lower echelon officials. In turn, the majority of officials, especially those in middle or lower echelon posts, not least for career reasons in the harshly competitive official community, had every interest in maintaining access to the emperor and in a political climate in which a degree of dissent was permitted.

But in practice all but the very few politically strong Tang sovereigns often surrendered to one particular individual or group. The emperor Xuanzong 玄宗's (r. 712-756) dismissal in 736 of the principled but vexatious

Zhang Jiuling 張九齡 (678-740) in favour of the cruel and autocratic Li Linfu 李林甫 (d. 752) stands for an inherent tendency among medieval emperors. Despotic Tang chief ministers like Li Linfu used harsh restrictive means, greatly antagonizing the scholarly community, to maintain control; others, more rarely, favoured a more collegiate and open system of administering that was less hostile to "direct admonition".

Whether emperors or chief ministers wielded ultimate power, maintaining centralized control of the vast Tang empire was never easy. The governing elite in Tang times in proportion to the population may have been slightly larger than in later periods, but it was very small. For the Tang it has been estimated at between 17,000 to 19,000 mandarins administering an empire of probably between 50,000,000 and 70,000,000. Of this number, in effect only a tiny proportion were effective participators in the political process. This tiny ratio of governing to governed was another important factor relating to the tradition of dissent. It had the effect of producing, for the apex of the state, an on-going information crisis. It forced the apex of the state to develop sources of information outside the regular or statutory official hierarchy, simply because that hierarchy and its chain of command was too thin and unreliable to be effective, unable to keep the emperor fully informed of the real condition of both the administration and the people beyond the capital. The main traditional system outside the regular executive structure for monitoring performance of officials in the provinces, the use of censors touring on circuit was criticized as loading far too much on the individuals concerned, making them largely ineffective. A system of commissionerships, notionally tenures held temporarily and concurrently with statutory posts (*shi zhi* 使職) despatched from the centre to address specific problems, evolved rapidly in the course of the eighth century. But it was itself flawed. The numbers and types of commissioners proliferated, and they might achieve aims as varied as increasing central government revenue, controlling the local military, public works, monitoring local official performances or collecting and at the same time monitoring, book and manuscripts in the provinces. But some commissionerships became permanent provincial appointments. The system remained at best an uncertain method of reinforcing control from the apex and at worst particularly liable to lead to separatism and corruption, and it provoked strong opposition from conservatives. Tang emperors needed, therefore, flexible lines of communication that both answered to the high ideals of dynastic government and kept them informed of conditions outside the normal hierarchies. The civil hierarchy below the emperor or his proxy in turn had a strong interest in indicating that the emperor needed cooperation to govern. They reminded the emperor that he was not in fact perfect or omniscient, that he could not govern on his own. Since the state fell short of the utopian standards of high antiquity utopia and since it was

"corrigible", it needed systems for representing critical opinion from those qualified to give it. The intellectual elite within the civil hierarchy held, typically, prestigious offices at the capital or temporary provincial tenures that gave them experience of conditions outside the capital. They were heirs to the tradition of "moral guardianship". They were also fully aware of the dangers of autocratic or arbitrary political control and of the instability that, historically, it had brought. They too had very reason to demand that their voices be heard at the apex of the state, that they have effective channels of communication that transcended their rank and gave them safe and, when needed, direct access to the throne.

By Tang times, these forces had been operative long enough for them to have become firmly institutionalized. For the Chinese tradition of statecraft had identified these principles early and with emphasis. But in the new and greatly expanded context of Tang rule, these principles were reemphasized and implemented through the administrative hierarchy's own institutions and by emphatic endorsement from emperors and officials alike. It was no accident that Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-649) in 645 personally sacrificed to Bi Gan 比干, the archetypical remonstrator, who had been murdered by the tyrant Zhou 紂 at the end of the Shangyin period. From the early Tang, the promotion of the ideal of open access and of free discussion became a substantial theme in political comment. The Sui 隋 dynasty (581-618), preceding the Tang just as the Qin 秦 had preceded the Han (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), was identified as tyrannical and violent. Early Tang commentators claimed that it had lost popular support precisely through its intolerance of dissent. Early Tang rulers were particularly aware of the dangers of autocratic and arbitrary government.

The concept of dissent, of admonition of the "corrigible centre" however, is a wide one. Protest from among the common people was recognized at the ideological level, was acknowledged as legitimate, and was also allowed some institutional provision. But in practical terms, it never worked. Remonstration, institutionally internalized dissent, from within the community of serving officials using traditional and to a large extent protected channels was a considerably more effective mechanism. But again, the procedure never ran smoothly. Greatly valued though it was, it gave rise to an uncertain tradition of interventions, sometimes heroic, more often conventionalized and timid. From the mid-eighth century on, more radical expressions of opinion, or protest, came from within the official hierarchy to be expressed unofficially in poetry or in political discourse. In some cases, these statements might even come from the margins of the administrative hierarchy or even beyond it. The distinction between dissent produced *ex officio* by holders of monitory office and independently initiated dissent is important in what follows.

3. Protest from the Common People

The Tang thus inherited established channels both for internalized dissent and for independently initiated protest. But they also developed their own provisions. In their response to the need to be informed on dissenting views, they interpreted and expanded a well-established tradition that encompassed the whole polity, from the common people upwards to the senior officials at the capital.

The people, *a priori* a likely source for dissenting views, were prominent as a topic in political discussions from the start of the dynasty until its close. It was considered that the "feelings of those below" (*xiaqing* 下情), the opinions of "grass cutters and reed gatherers" (*chu rao* 芻蕘) were important and should be taken into account in the political process. The emperor himself should be aware of popular conditions. In the ninth century, the two emperors later Tang tradition most clearly identified with open government and political success, Taizong and Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756), were praised for their own personal experience of popular conditions. Taizong was reminded in 637, by one of his own officials that "as a young man you lived among the people and knew the hardships of the people, so that the victories and defeats of earlier time as what you have seen with your own eyes." In 819, an official commended Xuanzong, who had been "born and grew up among the people and in person braved hardships. Hence early on his accession he knew the sufferings of the people and personally showed compassion over the many administrative tasks." Taizong was told that he should "make the mind of the common people his own mind", as the rulers of antiquity had done. He himself was said to have asked his officials regularly about the "benefits and losses of the common people"; to have advocated light taxation so that they could "retain their wealth". The need to represent the voices of "grass cutters and reed gatherers" was stressed, not only by Taizong but also by his advisers. Taizong claimed of himself that he was "for ever worried that above he did not match the mind of heaven and below that he might be resented by the common people." He acknowledged that individual acts of cruelty would stir resentment among the common people; he worried that his regional and prefectural officials were not "nurturing the common people", and that the selection of irresponsible officials "would damage the people". Other officials emphasized the key role of "prefects and county magistrates". The "toxic and detrimental" effects on the common people of hereditary rather than meritocratically appointed local officials was used as an argument against enfeoffment (*fengjian* 封建). The crown prince, who grew up deep in the palaces should learn to listen to the views of the grass-cutters. Taizong suggested in 628 in the context of drought and famine in Guanzhong 関中 that, "When flood and drought are not adjusted, in all cases it is because the prince of men has failed in virtue. When my

virtue is not practised, then heaven should reprimand me. What offence have the common people committed that they encounter so many hardships? I have heard that they have sold their sons and daughters, and I am full of compassion for them."

Popular disaffection, not in the abstract but as the result of specific and excessive government demands, was frequently represented as a crucial issue in the dynastic narrative. Exhausting the people had been one of the main crimes of the preceding Sui dynasty. Excessive labour requirements, the failure of military campaigns to yield anticipated rewards for the soldiers who took part, or extortionate and irregular taxation, all these could give rise to popular discontent. The desirability of gaining popular support, or the achievement of having done so, by more positive means, such as for example a moderate penal code, was also recognized.

This view was, however, essentially "top-down" or paternalistic; the common people were seen in moral terms, either as a source of occasional moral insight about government that they could not themselves represent to high authority or else as a morally unsatisfactory body awaiting "transformation". They were a passive component of rather than participants in the polity. The symbolic channels the state provided through which popular injustice could be stated represented were little more than symbolic.

The state made notional provision for individuals from among the common people to present their complaints to high authority. They had two ancient mechanisms: the emperor Taizong himself mentioned the "petitioner's drum" (*dengwen gu* 登聞鼓) held to have existed in the Zhou 周. The "lung-stone" (*fei shi* 肺石) was a symbolic rock described by the *Zhou li* 周禮 as having been placed outside the king's palace and used by those from the common people who had grievances against the state. In the pre-Tang period, it was occasionally cited, probably in most cases as a literary image. But it seems very probable that the stone was reintroduced under the Liang 梁 emperor Wudi 武帝 (r. 502-550); there are references to it in Liang history. The empress Wu 武 (r. as emperor 690-705) expanded the channels of communication between the sovereign and lower officials and common people. It seems very possible that she re-introduced the lung-stone, perhaps even in conjunction with her revival of *Zhou li* names for central offices and posts. Her initiative is to be linked with the boxes that she set up to solicit the opinions of the people at large. The lung-stone and the petitioners' drum were to the east and west of the Chengtian Gate 承天 in Chang'an and, after in 663 the Daming Gong 大明宮 became the site of government, in front of the Hanyuan Dian 含元殿. At Luoyang, the second capital, they were outside the Yingtian 應天 Gate.

Xuanzong indicated his commitment to an open system for monitoring popular opinion when in 724 he issued a high flown edict encouraging

submissions on a very wide range of grievances. He stipulated that "Anyone who beats the petitioners' drum I commission the Jinwu 金吾 guards to take in and bring to my presence; he is not to suffer any harm, nor may anyone conceal or forbid him. Those in charge of the boxes are merely to let those putting memorials in the boxes do so, and as normal bring them forward. They may not forcibly retain a copy, or falsely interrogate or prevent as they see fit. Matters in the thousand states should not be cut off from the Ninefold Palace; plans for proceeding or discontinuing should not be omitted from my hearing and reading." However, even Xuanzong did not necessarily respond positively to constructive policy advice submitted in this way, perhaps merely issuing a monetary reward and not summoning any figure concerned for audience, while if he was irritated by submissions, those responsible could pay a heavy price.

The commissioner system, evolving to provide the emperor with flexible mechanisms for addressing specific problems in the provinces, was used ostensibly to monitor the condition of the common people. It was referred to again in the context of the greatest ritual undertaking of all, the Feng 封 and Shan 禪 rites on mount Tai 泰 in 725. Nothing in the record, however, suggests that this was a real exercise. Commoners themselves had no legal protection and their best entitlement was to sympathy and possibly redress from an impartial authority. It is clear that, when they wanted to represent their suffering or hardship to authority, the dice were usually heavily loaded against them.

The ideal of monitoring popular conditions was kept officially alive, remaining a theme in the emperors' pronouncements. But by the mid-eighth century it became creatively important and significant in the history of Tang political thought in an altogether different way. For the next substantial reference to it comes not as a dignified expression of paternal concern from high authority, but rather in the form of stark description of popular conditions given literary expression by middle echelon officials. For if the people could not represent their hardships to authority, then it was for morally aware individuals in the official community or on its margins, assuming the mantle of the "guardians of the state", to do so on their behalf. Thus from the late period of Xuanzong's rule until the ninth century, a tradition developed of describing popular suffering in "ancient style" (*gu shi* 古詩) poems, the freest style of verse and therefore the closest to the folk songs of the people, grew up. Its first representatives were men of the generation of Du Fu 杜甫 (710-762) and his contemporaries. There were also instances of commoners (*bu yi* 布衣) doing the same. A provincial official Yuan Jie 元結 (719-772) portrayed the fruitless attempts at petitioning a local administration of an old peasant woman and the beseeching of the emperor by a farmer. Du Fu himself was a man of extraordinarily wide social sympathies, expressed admiration

for Yuan Jie's stance, and he wrote numerous poems expressing concern for popular conditions.

This movement for representing popular distress, however, remained a literary one. It culminated in the "New Music Bureau" (*xin yuefu* 新樂府) poems of Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846). This was a series of fifty poems, each picking up on an abuse of administrative power. Many, though not all, concerned injustices inflicted on the common people. The kidnapping and castration of young boys from Daozhou 道州 in southern Hunan for eunuch service in the palaces was one; it was in Bai Juyi's view illegal according to the dynasty's statutes. Enforced purchase of peasant produce at extortionately low prices by eunuch commissioners from the palace was another. The suffering caused by military adventurism was another well-established theme. Other issues were more cultural: Bai Juyi attacked the extravagant fashion for growing exotic tree peonies, which led connoisseurs to pay prices for individual blooms that amounted to two years of the tax that peasants paid. Bai's protests were never part of a formal process of representing discontent; but they did reach the emperor and they were read and admired, and seen as the realization of ancient principles and values. The descriptions of popular conditions in verse that flowed from the brushes of men of letters from the mid-eighth century on have rightly been seen as one of the great humane strands in the medieval cultural tradition.

4. The Recluse as Protestor

In another strand in Tang political ideology, the world away from the capital, especially that of "mountains and forests" was considered morally purer than that of the capital or of prefectural or county seats of government. A Tang emperor should therefore personally summon such figures and listen respectfully to their comments on political and administrative problems. Recluses were summoned from the mountains and directly appointed to posts, sometimes to those which carried the duty of remonstration. Here they became, usually only briefly, high profile examples among the "moral virtuosi" at the capital. Zhang Hao 張鎬 in the reign of Xuanzong, promoted from commoner status on the recommendation of an omissioner to be himself an omissioner, and later a chief minister, is one example. Yuan Jie was summoned to court, first in 758, when the summons did not reach him, and then in 759. His review of the military and political situation led Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756-62) to state, "You have broken my depression." And indeed he was almost certainly better informed on popular opinion than metropolitan officials. A few years later for example, he is among the first to mention the names of commoners in his memorials to the throne. He also wrote poems that in 766 protested fiercely against the venal commissioners who visited

his prefecture, Daozhou, to demand back taxes at a time when it had been despoiled by barbarian invaders. Another, who became a cause celebre in 795, in the claustrophobic climate of Dezong 德宗's (r. 779-805) later years, was Yang Cheng 陽城 (d. 805). When he was sacked from a post in the state academy, there was a student protest demanding his reinstatement, the first in the late medieval period. Li Bo 李渤 (773-831) under Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805-20), a prolific critic of policy who submitted over 45 memorials despite holding office only in the duplicate administration at Luoyang, the second capital, was another summoned from reclusion. Li Bo was an acquaintance of Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824), the most celebrated remonstrators of the dynasty, as was Lu Tong 盧仝 (d. c. 813), who "was twice summoned to be a monitory official but did not stir." To be summoned from reclusion to offer criticism and advice to the emperor in this way was a recognized path to preferment, so much so that there was open cynicism about it, and withdrawal was called "a short cut to office".

This principle that voices from outside the political structure might express ideas that would benefit the polity as a whole was occasionally codified by imperial statements that any person with an urgent message for the emperor might be allowed, subject to safeguards, to see him. There were also imperially initiated decree examinations calling for those able to provide upright admonition to come forward and sit special examinations. These examinations bore titles such as "Examination for the good and upright and those able to speak directly and offer extreme admonition" (*Xianliang fang zheng neng zhi yan ji jian ke* 賢良方正直言極諫科). These channels, however, remained uncertain and even potentially risky ways of approaching the apex of political power.

5. Admonition from within the Official Hierarchy: A Charge on All Officials

The ideal of listening to popular grievances from the people or from their representatives therefore remained exactly that, an ideal, albeit one that in the second half of the dynasty was expressed unofficially and with increasing eloquence by members of the literary community. Without question, the greatest volume of critical comment on Tang government came from within the bureaucratic administrative hierarchy itself. It was overwhelmingly in this context that the issue of access to the emperor and criticism of the "corrigible centre" was advocated. Idealistic Tang officials guarded jealously the ideal of open access to the emperor by officials and very frequently referred to it.

From early in the period of its consolidation, this principle of remonstration from within the official community was immensely important to the Tang political world. The scholars who controlled the documentation believed

remonstration was a major moral principle. They reserved it as a heading in biographical collections, in institutional compendia, in a hand-book for literary composition, and in anecdotal collections. Memorials of remonstration were collected and formed into anthologies or formed themes of collections. Editors organizing the writings of their friends or relatives into anthologies and composing laudatory prefaces for them used remonstration as a term of commendation for individual compositions. Remonstration was divided into various kinds: the nearest the Tang came to a written constitution, the *Liu dian* 六典 of 738 or 739 lists five, citing in its commentary the Han dynasty *Bai hu tong* 白虎通 to suggests that these corresponded with the five constant elements of man's nature. Remonstration represented the responsibility of the "moral virtuosi" to the "corrigible centre". There was a deeply held conviction, indicated by the many statements supporting the principle, that willingness to brave what was called the "thunderstorm of the moment" (*yi shi zhi leidian* 一時之雷電), the emperor's anger, was essential to the moral health of the polity. The prominence accorded it in the "tutelary narrative", the official history that official scholars maintained and updated for successive Tang sovereigns also had the aim of reinforcing for scholar officials their own role as "guardians and critics" of the polity.

The remonstration that Tang historians so valorized was a peculiarly circumscribed activity. The word remonstration (*jian* 諫) meant to submit critical advice to a superior. As Confucius had stated, a son had the duty to remonstrate with his parents "in the gentlest way" (*ji jian* 幾諫). A wife could remonstrate with her husband, a junior official with a senior one; a Chinese with a foreign state, a foreigner with a foreigner. The criteria for certain canonization titles included the ability to "accept remonstration" or to "give remonstration without tiring". The very fact that Congjian 從諫 was a given name suggests the pervasiveness of the ideal. None the less, overwhelmingly in the extant record, members of the bureaucracy saw remonstration as the submission of critical advice by an official to the emperor.

Tang political tradition promoted this obligation of remonstration as a general moral charge on all officials, and did not restrict it to the schedule of monitory posts in attendance on the emperor to be described in more detail below. All members of the official hierarchy, and even those beyond it, had a responsibility to represent important opinions to the throne. Even out of office, a prospective official could not altogether escape from imposing this obligation on himself. There was therefore a tradition for Tang emperors to "issue edicts to seek for guidance", through a system of "sealed submissions". Such initiatives might be taken in the aftermath of a disaster such as a famine or the loss through fire of an important precinct, and would expressly ask for "extreme admonition". Or they might follow an auspicious event like the change in a reign period. The emperor undertook himself to read them, and

rewards, either in monetary form or in the form of promotion, were offered. At the start of the dynasty, submissions from outside the monitory establishment were delivered directly to the palace, at gates behind the central Taiji 太極 Gate, or later after the Daming 大明 Palace became the seat of government, at the Yanying 延應 Gate, though there were also other places. There were also rules to which submissions should conform. Thus in 709, it was required that a submission should have:

> "a single column in large writing, not exceeding eighteen words, with the signature not in a large hand. All submissions relating to matters of the army and the state must all expound substantive situations, and cannot wantonly cite ancient and modern. Any submission does not need to go through the central secretariat. If the matter is small, then it can be presented within the memorial, so that the matter is completely accounted for. If there are more points to be made than can be completely written out, then a list of items may be supplied at the front of the matter [concerned], but there should be no repetition within the memorial itself."

Confidentiality, or secrecy was considered important, and there were heavy, legally stipulated penalties for breaking confidence. This provision serves to emphasize that one of the motives behind the broad canvassing of opinion in this way was to keep the emperor more fully informed than the rival power groups that contended for power beneath him of the overall condition of the empire.

But emperors tired easily of the work such provisions brought. Another response is suggested by an edict of 773 asking for views from fifth class officials, monitory officials and censorate, and above. "Because at that time there was an abundant harvest, the emperor was anxious that taxation was [unnecessarily] heavy and would harm agriculture and that the deleterious effects would extend to the people." Within a ten day period over one hundred people had submitted responses, each with variant proposals. "I shall read them all," the emperor stated. But "they were kept within and not issued." Other emperors, like Dezong, complained about the quality of submissions, finding that they "lacked loyalty and good quality" and reprehending himself for being too credulous with his officials.

Remonstration in this official, institutional context involved criticism of specific acts or policies by those within the political hierarchy, or exceptionally by members invited in from beyond it. It was typically represented in the narrative record as voluntarily initiated, the result of independent moral insight and courage by single individuals. It involved a challenge to the "corrigible centre" and might be misunderstood, ignored or punished, just as it might be appreciated and rewarded. In the longer term, it was not normally considered a politically deviant or disruptive act. Remonstration by single officials, however, because it proved moral seriousness in the individual

and required courage, carried particular prestige. In addition, there was a tradition of "moral super-virtuosi" of a sequence of individuals, very few, who managed to stand for a while behind the throne, to sustain their contact with emperors and build up a body of monitory advice. The main figures in the Tang records are Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643), to a lesser extent Zhang Yue 張說 (667-730) under Xuanzong, but supremely Lu Zhi 陸贄 (754-805) under Dezong. These men are represented as having themselves promoted the ideal of remonstration.

Yet in Tang times, this tendency to valorize the individual remonstrator is likely to mask a more diverse, and indeed more natural, reality. Dissenting memorials were by no means always submitted by one person alone. From early in the dynasty, mention is made of "the many officials" submitting memorials of remonstration. Officials in monitory posts might send in joint memorials. In 799 when an official was appointed to a major provincial commissionership, the censorate, considered that the appointment was inappropriate, and the monitory officials, the grand secretary of the chancellery, the omissioners and remembrancers all resorted to the chancellery and had a group discussion. When the narrative records that "the officials" (*qun chen* 群臣) memorialized or remonstrated, it is likely to have been the case that numbers of officials were involved. It also becomes clear, especially from the mid-eighth century, that very often a single remonstrator represented group interests from within the community at the capital. The existence of group interests was again acknowledged, but represented in moral terms: a group of "petty men" (*xiao ren* 小人) formed a "faction" (*peng dang* 朋黨), while group of *junzi* 君子 did not. As a chief minister expressed it in 818, "The *junzi* and the petty man will always have adherents. It is just that when the *junzi* has adherents then they share their minds and share their virtue. When the petty man had adherents, then this is a faction. These phenomena are externally very similar; but inwardly and in fact very different. It is for the emperor to observe what they actually do, in order to tell the difference between them." The terminology here, especially the pejorative term *dang*, clique or faction, remained in play for the rest of the imperial era, to be used to condemn political activity judged hostile to imperial interests.

Not only was the content of remonstrations often likely to be the expression of group interests, but the question of who was suitable for appointment to remonstrating posts was also itself represented as a matter of general concern, and therefore of group interests. But the dynasty several times forbade the signing of memorials by numbers of monitory officials or censors, in 785, explicitly linking the practice with factionalism, and in 844.

The concern here shown for the individual moral purity of the remonstrator touches on a feature of political protest that was again to run through Chinese political history for long after the Tang. Ultimately, it derives from the

fact that the remonstrator was almost by definition, disempowered. Lacking hands-on experience of political process, his claims to legitimacy had to rest on assessment of his motivation. And if their motivation can be shown to be tainted, by association with dubious political agents, then the programme itself that remonstrators promoted could be discredited. A credible political opposition must have access to the practicalities of political action, to hands-on political experience. Reading successive memorials of protect in the near three centuries of Tang rule, it does not seem difficult to identify those that were formulated in practical political and administrative terms.

The very nature of the formal system, particularly the unpredictable factors it necessarily involved, the temper of the emperor and the courage of the submitting figures, made for a tradition that was diverse and rich in anecdote. Thus the fraught might be recorded alongside the trivial; the very dangerous with the safely conventional. Remonstrations that were intended to modify the conduct of the emperor at the capital were different from those that adduced information from outside the court or the administrative city. For a monitory official as a participant in a drunken poetry competition led by the emperor to criticize the tone of the proceedings might require as much moral courage as remonstrating against excessive spending on a religious building programme beyond the capital. But the process was at its most dangerous when remonstration involved attempting to intervene in court conflicts that had already declared themselves violent. Influencing administration by representing intelligence from beyond the court was generally less immediately dangerous.

6. The Monitory Establishment

Officially sanctioned dissent from within the political system took a number of distinct forms, using a number of distinct and specific channels. At the apex of the "three ministries" system, there was a mechanism for rejecting or modifying political decisions that had already been provisionally taken. Formally, and as an innovation early in the dynasty within the chancellery, the senior officials had the power to reject policies that the emperor and the secretariat had formulated in written edicts intended for promulgation. They had the right to send back unsatisfactory policy documents, with their own written comments attached. This process was informally called, "returning with a pasted [note]". However, the fact that the holders of these senior chancellery posts were also holders of the rank of chief minister or were very close to them and therefore themselves took part in policy discussions, made this provision impracticable. This left the responsibility of returning unsatisfactory documents to the grand secretary. The record shows that the grand secretary fulfilled this function, at least intermittently, through the dynasty.

This channel, however, involved a process of vetting existing policies rather than of active protest or criticism and did not result in any formulation of independent views that have survived. But there were posts that did involve expressing independent critical positions. A number of posts in the capital bureaucracy were reserved for official who had a specific duty to offer criticism. The majority belonged to a group called the "inner officials in attendance" (*nei gong feng* 内供奉). Their formal rank in the hierarchy was low, but they commanded great prestige and their high standing was recognized in various ways. Formally, they formed separate files in court assemblies and then, when the large formal audiences were over, went on with the emperor and chief ministers to inner court discussions. Under a ruling of 716, their appointments were made formally by the emperor, rather than by the department of affairs of state, which otherwise had responsibility for posts of the sixth class and below. Tenure as a monitory official and inner official in attendance' was informally recognized as one of the fast track posts that a young and able civil official might expect to hold.

Men appointed to these posts had a duty to protest errors in government that was sanctioned by ancient tradition. They were most often examination graduates, educated in the only political tradition that the state recognized. They were mediators not originators of ideas: they commented on current practice by the standards of ideals of statecraft recognized as ancient and authoritative. But, as "guardians and critics", they claimed a continuous right of independent judgment; they identified a higher good for the state. This category, of institutionalized dissent through remonstration, may be termed structural, in that it was a provision that the Tang state inherited, endorsed and built into its own structure. In the Tang it was distinct from the "surveillance" arm of government, the censorate (*yu shi tai* 御史臺), although censors might well also be involved in remonstration. It was only in the post-Tang period that the censorate came to have more general responsibilities for remonstrance.

The Tang expanded this traditional provision for institutionalized dissent. They re-instituted the provision for monitory officials, which was said to have lapsed under the tyrannical Sui Yangdi 隋煬帝 (r. 605-617), appointing seven in number in imitation of, allocating them to the chancellery. In 643, the emperor Taizong transferred two high ranking posts, the left and right grand councillors from being titular offices to being functioning posts, where they had the duty to be "in charge of remonstrating over errors, to be in attendance for consultation". Under Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649-683), the succeeding emperor, the number of these grand councillor posts was doubled, with those of the left being assigned to the chancellery and those of the right to the secretariat. Although the ranks of these officials was comparatively low, under a ruling

of 716, their appointments, like those of the other "officials in attendance", was again made formally by the emperor. Bai Juyi saw their low rank as a deliberate policy: young officials relatively unencumbered by political ties and status considerations were freer to make radical criticisms of central government policies.

The empress Wu increased the establishment of monitory officials by adding four more entirely new posts, the two left and right remembrancers (*buque* 補闕) at seventh rank, secondary class upper section; and the two left and right omissioners (*shiyi* 拾遺) at eighth rank secondary class upper section. The terminology for these new posts was ancient: it was taken from a Han dynasty, but their rank was thus again low. Four years later, the empress increased the number by three more in each category, making the total of these new posts twenty, notionally ten in the secretariat and ten in the chancellery, though the blurring of responsibilities between these two ministries made this allocation purely formal. These officials were charged with bringing up important matters orally in the court and with representing less important ones in written submissions. Important issues were itemized as: "appointments that proved inadequate for their posts; edicts and statutes that were unsuitable for the time; laws and prohibitions that were inappropriate; punishments or rewards that were not apposite; levies that were uncontrolled; grievances among the people". The less important items were also considered an integral part of the monitory officials' brief, at least after the rebellion. In 759 and 761, the emperor required written sealed reports from them at stipulated intervals, first every ten days and then every month. In later reigns, the numbers were further augmented, by four under Daizong 代宗 (r. 762-779) in 769; and the number of monitory officials to eight under Dezong. Under Daizong, the number of grand councillors was augmented by four and their rank raised third rank secondary class.

In later periods of the dynasty, commentators identified the principle of open remonstration with periods of notable political success. Similarly, Tang commentators attributed some of the catastrophes of the dynasty to the break down in the remonstrating mechanism. Late in Xuanzong's reign, the autocratic chief minister Li Linfu had required remonstrators to report first to the chief ministers, thus depriving of their essential independence. He also banished a remonstrator for resisting his authority, thus effectively closing down the system. The emperor Suzong explicitly disallowed this practice, reasserting the independence of the remonstrators. But Li Linfu's period of autocratic control incensed the idealistic scholar community. Its condemnation by Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 (709-785) in 766, a time when another autocratic minister dominated the capital bureaucracy, is one of the most eloquent pleas for direct access to the emperor from the dynasty.

7. The Role of Emperors

In ideological terms the emperor was the supreme being and his power was on a cosmic scale. As a political agent, he could follow his own temperament and act with fewer constraints than any other agent in the polity. He could be even-tempered and consistent or arbitrary, volatile, capricious and violent. He could also be derelict. The performance of the eighteen Tang sovereigns varied greatly and so did their attitude to remonstration.

At the outset of the dynasty, Gaozu 高祖 endorsed the principle of remonstration, attributing the failure of the Qin to their failure to "have their own errors made known", and indicating the failure to listen as one of the causes of the Sui collapse. But was the great figure of Taizong who dominated the reformulation of the ideal of remonstration. Despite, or perhaps because of, his towering martial achievements and intimidating presence, this was an image that Taizong went to great lengths to promote. He is portrayed as a figure who expressly welcomed open debate at court, from middle ranking as well as senior officials. He punished an official who obstructed a submission that he considered he should have heard. He spoke of the risks that remonstrators had faced, and praised those who had braved the "backward facing scales" (*ni lin* 逆鱗) under the throat of the imperial dragon. He stated, "I often ponder this, whenever an official wants to remonstrate, he always fears the calamity of losing his life, in a way no different from proceeding to the cauldron [to be boiled] or facing the naked blade." Hence it is not that the loyal and upright official does not wish to fulfil utmost loyalty, it is rather that to do so is exceptionally difficult.

Taizong was seen as the emperor who above all others promoted the ideals of freedom of discussion and freedom to admonish. The very emphasis that later Tang sources put on his outlook indicates that the emperors who followed were unable to follow suite. Under Taizong's son and successor, Gaozong, the climate of the court changed abruptly. Especially after the ascent to power of his consort Wu, frank speaking in the inner court became very much the exception. It was ironical therefore that as empress, Wu Zetian 武則天 maintained her position by a skilled promotion of channels of access to the sovereign. She expanded the provision for monitoring and receiving reports of grievances from among the people. Undoubtedly, her main motive was to detect subversion and suppress it before it threatened the capital. The new monitory posts that she established became part of the regular establishment and later in the dynasty were held by numbers of well-respected officials, including, for a brief period by Du Fu and later by Bai Juyi among others. The empress's expansion of the system had the dual motives characteristic of the tradition. Her historic achievement has been masked by the fact that at the same time she gave licence to a group of sadistic officials to implement an arbitrary reign of terror.

The reigns of Zhongzong 中宗 (r. 683 and 705-710) and Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 683-710 and 710-712), themselves traumatized from their youth by the incessant blood-letting of the late seventh century court, were hostile to frank admonition. Several of the holders of court monitory posts perished in the violence, to be commemorated later for their valour and self-sacrifice. A number of very informative memorials of admonition criticizing over expenditure on temple buildings and corruption among the members of the imperial family were submitted as soon as the prospects of stability and regularity improved.

Xuanzong's reign has been seen as the high point in Tang court prosperity, in military success and in effective government. But although he occasionally commend individual officials for remonstrating, the emperor himself did not like to see disagreement among his ministers and he was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to restore the openness of the system under Taizong, his great-grandfather. After the death of Zhang Yue, who had advocated restraint in the treatment of factional losers at court, and particularly after in 736, power passed to his autocratic and intolerant successor as chief minister Li Linfu, any sense of freedom in the court evaporated and another reign of terror was instituted.

In the reigns of the post-rebellion emperors Suzong and Daizong, politics at court were highly factionalized. A succession of chief ministers monopolized political power. The intellectual community however, never surrendered the ideal of open access to the emperor. The statement by Yan Zhenqing in 766 attacking the venal and autocratic Yuan Zai 元載 (d. 777) has already been mentioned. Under Dezong, Lu Zhi was a particularly eloquent advocate of the moral value and function of admonition. Under Xianzong, the tradition of political comment on the working system reached a high point, and eloquent statements pleading the importance of the monitory principle were made. In the ninth century, Xuanzong 宣宗 (r. 847-859), was notably committed to controlling the administration. Among later Tang emperors, Muzong 穆宗 (r. 821-824) and Jingzong 敬宗 (r. 825-827) were derelict, though not on a scale to approach the Wanli emperor in the late Ming.

8. Recurrent Themes

Remonstration, then, was a structural component in the medieval Chinese state. It had been present since early times, and was part of the political tradition inherited by the Tang. But the dynasty elevated it to much more than one of many principles of political conduct. Despite the fact that individual sovereigns varied so much in accepting remonstration, there were recognizable continuities and recurrent themes, and these in turn were an important aspect of Tang political life. Remonstration had tended to identify

certain topics, which in turn became routinized. The more firmly established the theme, the more political and institutional tradition functioned to shield the remonstrator from any frustration from the emperor. Doubtless the provision of these routinized topics served to establish the political climate, the responsiveness, for example, of a new emperor to remonstration. In turn, they became part of the political theatre of the state, in the sense that they were repeatedly staged and that the outcome in real political terms was presumed in advance. So too was the response of the emperor, whether in the form of gifts to the remonstrator or a variant of the traditional remark, "This is a true act of remonstration."

It is useful to characterize some of the recurrent themes in the political tradition. For variations between emperors and even within reigns took place against a continuous tradition of policy submissions, even at times when emperors seemed to discourage this. For example, the dangers of excessive interest in hunting or horsemanship, on the grounds that it disrupted agriculture and the people's livelihood, was so well-established and so often repeated a theme that it is hard to believe that it involved risk. It was, with lavish palace building, expensive clothing and jewellery and provision of erotic entertainments for the court, a thoroughly traditional concern. It had after all its classic formulation in famous rhapsodies by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 and Yang Xiong 揚雄 of the Han, compositions to which numbers of Tang verse writers referred. Warnings to the emperor or the heir apparent against excessive hunting, sometimes on the ground of the damage it did to popular agriculture, were submitted in 627, 631 639, 650, and 682. Under Xuanzong, there are examples from 712, 719 and in the run up to the climactic imperial sacrifice on mount Tai of 725. Li Jin 李璡, the prince of Ruyang 汝陽, the emperor's own nephew, whom Du Fu 杜甫 greatly admired may have remonstrated with Xuanzong on this topic.

Some of the recurrent topics in the tradition of remonstration, however, involved contested ground, or potentially contested ground, those parts of the political structure where the emperor and the civil bureaucracy were in competition for control or at least influence. One of these was the education of the crown prince, the future sovereign, an issue that one official in the reign of Taizong identified as the most important to concern the state. Taizong himself sanctioned remonstration on this, in 633, by inviting admonition on this subject. There followed a sequence of remonstrating memorials, for example in 639, 640, 643, 672, 680 and 682. Much later, Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-839) as a remonstrator identified this as the first issue for the dynasty.

Another recurrent theme concerned the emperor's diversion of the state's wealth, for temple building, for the honouring of sacred Buddhist relics, for provision of large Buddhist feasts, or for the construction of palaces and gardens for the emperor or members of the imperial family. There were, for

example, memorials in 631, 667 (two), 700, 704, 707-9 and 710, 711 and 713, and again in 757, in 764, and, from a *jinshi* 進士 candidate, two in 767. There were other well-established themes relating to the value of restraint or austerity: remonstration against lavish burial or the lavish upkeep of imperial mausolea. Remonstration against military adventurism was a recurrent theme, with some very senior officials submitting statements, including Fang Xuanling 房玄齡 (579-648), on his deathbed and Du You 杜佑 (735-812), the complier of the *Tong dian* 通典 in 801.

A succession of memorials urged the emperor to conform to the criminal code in punishing those who had angered him, rather than go to excess or to disregard procedures. There are examples from 618, 626, 627, 631, 650, 651, 676, 679. These were not, of course, attempts to make the emperor himself subject to the law. Rather, they were intended to persuade him to abandon arbitrary or impulsive decisions and follow the letter of the penal code in punishing others. The arguments were sometimes made in terms of protecting the emperor's reputation; he should not be seen as arbitrary vindictive or cruel and unusual. But an issue of control may also have been in play.

Thus in 633, for example, Taizong wanted to execute a county magistrate for employing a man on official corvee as his private janitor; 651, Xiao Jun 蕭鈞 memorialized remonstrating against Gaozong's sentence of death on a man who had stolen property from a treasury. Similar, though less explicit, admonitions followed, for example in 717, 719 and 737. The same issue was rehearsed in 722, when Xuanzong was persuaded to reduce a public beheading he had imposed on a magistrate from a family of eminent dynastic servants first to death by flogging and then to a hundred strokes of the heavy cane, followed by banishment to "an evil place in Lingnan 嶺南". The specific role of the emperor in relation to the penal code was not an issue in the review of the polity given by Du You and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) in the early ninth century. But Du You and other scholars of this period were implicitly concerned with this demand when they advocated a moderate penal code.

9. The Beginnings of a Discursive Tradition

After this necessarily highly condensed sketch of the copiously documented tradition of remonstrating to the emperor, a conclusion should return to the concept of "protest". In his *History of Chinese Political Philosophy*, Xiao Gongquan, having discussed the thought of Liu Zongyuan and Han Yu, makes a brief reference to the writing of Yuan Jie, the middle ranking official of the reigns of Suzong and Daizong referred to above for his dissenting stance towards the central government. Yuan as a young man had written sweeping denunciations of the society of the late period in Xuanzong's reign. These characterize an overwhelming and all-pervasive moral decadence in society,

and plead for a restitution of the simple values of high antiquity. But Xiao is surely right to suggest that, unusually strongly worded though they are, "his statements profoundly convey regret over harshness against the people, but do not suggest doubt as to the basic form of government.". Yuan's outlook both as a young man and later as an administrator in the provinces may have been angry enough to be termed "protest"; but his comments do not amount to a critique of the political system.[8]

It was not to be until some five decades later, that the scholarly world formulated for itself serious and broadly based critiques of the Tang administrative structure. The intellectual world of Liu Zongyuan and Han Yu was shaped by the recognition that the centre was no longer able to impose its political will on the provinces. The court had lost the highly centralized role and with it the enormous prestige that it had enjoyed at the start of the dynasty. The result profoundly affected the intellectual climate at the capital. Scholar-officials remained wholly committed to the ideology of dynastic rule; but they could only appeal rhetorically to the centralized authority of the seventh and early eighth centuries. Especially during the later years of the reign of Dezong 德宗 (r. 779-805), there is documented for the first time a climate of intellectual discussion that was not restricted to specific political issues but was much more free ranging and, in one or two instances, more radical. Dissenting views were expressed and circulated unofficially. At the same time, however, direct criticism to the throne on specific issues did not diminish either; the heroic tradition of remonstration continued.

It was the generation that lived through the restrictive political regime of Dezong's last decade that formulated the clearest expression of this fundamental shift. A key transitional role may have been played by Du You.. A provincial administrator for much of his career, he formulated his opinions as editorial insertions in his *Tong dian*, a grand review of the state's administrative structure. Du You's compendium underlines how Tang scholar-officials up to this time had expressed their opinions through political action more often than in discourse. When he selected materials to demonstrate the correct policies for confronting the barbarians, he selected first a memorial of 697 from a remembrancer, Xue Qianguang 薛謙光, then a passage from a lost work on military policies by the mid-eighth official scholar Liu Kan 劉貶, before giving his own editorial judgment. The same point could be made about another issue of key importance in Tang political philosophy, the *fengjian* issue. The principal Tang statements in the documentation for this issue that antedate Liu Zongyuan are first particularly long memorial of remonstration to Taizong and, secondly, an editorial insertion in the *Zheng dian* 政典, a lost compendium of Xuanzong's era by Liu Zhi 劉秩, that Du You used as the basis of his work, and thirdly Du's own editorial insertions in the *Tong dian*.

Having been worsted politically in the early period of his career, Liu Zongyuan was an exile, a rejected official forced to serve in the far south. Much influenced by Du You through a mutual contact, Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842), he expressed his political ideas in essays and letters not intended as acts of remonstration but designed for a readership of fellow scholars like himself. His most forceful expressions of dissent are thus given in the tradition of political discourse in the Tang that interested Xiao Gongquan and that was to expand so significantly in the post-Tang era.

Liu Zongyuan's writing therefore enables us to turn away from the tradition of direct intervention, of dissent expressed directly to the emperor from within the administrative framework, to a more radical form of dissent. Liu did not produce a systematic political philosophy. But certain general ideas recur in his comments on aspects of the political world of his day. It is one of the main arguments of this essay that these ideas may be related to the tradition of remonstration that preceded them. Liu's ideas, in other words, identified issues from the political agenda of the preceding decades and gave them more detached, rigorous and incisive expression. He was, like so many Tang scholar officials, a firm believer in evolutionary change, while endorsing as permanent certain underlying moral principles. One idea was his skepticism, his impatience with the idea that supernatural agency played a role in the fate of the dynasty. This was a theme that had informed more than one memorial of remonstration to emperors in the earlier years of the dynasty. His treatment of this theme was implicitly a criticism of the emperor, for many of the Tang emperors had been, in memorials of remonstrance, identified as credulous in this respect. Others had vested too much effort in the system of correlative cosmology.

Liu Zongyuan put forward another of his ideas in one of his most celebrated and eloquent essays. Developing the argument of Du You, he proposed that the system of government though prefectures and counties, the *junxian* 郡縣 system, was greatly superior to that of hereditary fiefs, the *fengjian* 封建 principle. Again, this had been a theme in direct remonstration or expression of dissent to the throne. What was remarkable in Liu Zongyuan's analysis was that he adopted a perspective on Chinese history that ran through the process of "regime change" and argued that when dynasties changed, the prefecture county system brought less disruption and less suffering to the polity as a whole.

A further idea, more directly related to the concept of political dissent, was Liu's promotion of the idea that the general good (*gong* 公 or *da gong* 大公) was the supreme value, and by which even the emperor was to be judged. But again it can be shown that in giving express form to this argument, Liu Zongyuan was picking up on the rhetoric of the "general interest" that was much used, by emperors and officials in a wide range of contexts in political life.

Xiao Gongquan, in his review of Tang political thought, reserves a single comment only on the writing of Yuan Zhen and Bai Juyi. He suggests that the *Celin* 策林, a series of model decree examination answers that Bai composed in 806 was coloured by the Daoism that the Tang dynastic house promoted. The series is in effect a review of the Tang polity, addressed to the emperor, since the emperor was formally responsible for decree examinations. The mode of writing is therefore midway between the memorial of remonstration to the emperor and the more detached and analytical discourse of Liu Zongyuan's essays. It suggests that the ideas to which Liu Zongyuan gave analytical depth and a sharper edge were generally current in the intellectual and political world of the first decade of the ninth century. Bai Juyi represented moderate reforming opinion. He was also a convinced relativist, who believed in adapting institutions to historical change, while promoting permanent moral principles. He discussed many of the issues that Liu Zongyuan treated, the role of the supernatural in history, the *fengjian* issue and others such as the desirability of a moderate penal code. He specifically countered the idea that history represented a progressive decline from high antiquity, quoting a discussion between Taizong and Wei Zheng in 630 to make the point. But his use of Tang history is significantly selective. In his 75 short essays, he adduced the early history of the Tang in two main contexts. The first is the primacy of the welfare of the common people, and here he quoted Taizong's own remark. The second was another point that found echoes in contemporary discussion, the relative lenience of the Tang criminal code, and again he was able to commend the Zhenguan period. But in another essay, he suggested that the Tang, though it inherited a deteriorated situation, had by creating new posts for remonstration brought about good order. "These [posts]," he wrote, "were established by your illustrious ancestors, and honoured by successive emperors. Even the way of Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 has no means to surpass them. Thus the great harmony of the Zhenguan and the perfect order of the Kaiyuan were rapidly brought about through this."

Even as Liu Zongyuan was formulating his radical unofficial analyses and Bai Juyi drafted his model examination answers, other officials continued to deliver direct memorials of remonstration to the emperor on specific issues. Since the Xianzong was reasonably tolerant of criticism, the principle of remonstration was eloquently reasserted and refined over this period. One official who had remained largely silent through the middle and late Yuanhe 元和 period, despite deeply held opinions, especially on Buddhism, was Liu's friend and correspondent Han Yu who was also a friend in the early 820s of Bai Juyi. Then in 819, Han dramatically broke his silence, submitting his "Memorial Discussing the Bone of the Buddha" (*Lun fo gu biao* 論佛骨表), one of the most famous memorials of remonstration in all Chinese history. This eloquent attack on the emperor's plan to pay ritual homage to a holy

Buddhist relic paraded before him incensed the emperor, and Han was saved from execution only by the intercession of friends.

The very different responses by Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan to the deterioration of Tang power and the fact that they remained correspondents and friends is to be explained by their shared rather than their divergent assumptions. Both, like Bai Juyi, were morally committed to service under the Tang dynastic state and to the ideal of a harmonious and effective administrative system. In turn, each of them took his commitment to an extreme in terms of the traditions available to him. Liu expressed in keener form the skeptical ideas that had been current in the political arena of the preceding century. He also reformulated the role of the emperor in relation to the good of the whole polity. Han exploited the tradition of remonstration to submit a highly specific and dangerous attempt to persuade the emperor to change a course of action. Han Yu proved at the end of his life, long after he had ceased to be active in leading the anti-Buddhist campaign for which he is best known, that the remonstration that he had eloquently promoted more than two decades before, meant action and with it high risk.

10. Summary and Conclusion

It has been argued in this essay that in the Tang period, remonstration and the principle of open access to the throne were ideologically very important to the political community. They had deep historical and ideological roots and were an accepted part of the political structure that the Tang inherited. But the Tang expanded the provision for remonstration. The system that they developed, despite appalling irregularities, fulfilled important political functions: it provided the political centre with sources of information that were necessary to maintain a political balance; it kept the "eyes and ears" of the emperor open. Sanctioned as it was by remote antiquity, it also conferred dignity and moral self-respect on both sovereigns and officials and even on the very few commoners who were able to use the provision. Like the ideology of open recruitment to official service, its implementation contributed to long-term stability in the governmental structure. The system, with its prominently located physical symbols and its array of dedicated and prestigious posts in attendance on the emperor, came close to recognizing that substantive dissent and political contention were inevitable and that they should be protected rather than penalized. The fact that it lasted through the very different conditions that obtained during the Tang suggests the stability of the administration below the emperor, in the structure of which it was embedded.

It was the strong emperor Taizong who formulated the principles most eloquently, while the empress Wu significantly expanded the system at the

institutional level. Weaker emperors or emperors who became tired as their reigns wore on tended to rely on one or more chief ministers and effectively to block off access. The result was that the ideal of remonstration and open access, was episodically and emphatically reasserted, though in contexts that differed greatly. The official community as a whole had in practice no means to promote these ideals except through the single initiative. Hence the need to keep channels of access open that Yan Zhenqing, demanding that the restrictive regime of Li Linfu should not be repeated under Daizong, advocated so eloquently in 766, and the long sequence of highly articulate comments endorsing the system that followed from the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

For the guardians of the "tutelary narration", the ongoing dynastic history, the record of remonstration provided a varied and complex theme, punctuated by incidents of great heroism, that perfectly illustrated their moralistic reading of history. Remonstrance did not involve promoting radically new alternatives to dynastic government; rather it represented attempts, typically by single voices, to apply lofty ideals derived from the Confucian canon to current political practice. Failure to remonstrate or to respond to remonstration had persuasive explanatory value, as a telling factor in historical causation. Thus the climactic events that were held to have threatened the survival of the Tang dynastic state, the ascent to power of the empress Wu and the decision of An Lushan 安祿山 to use his military might against the dynasty, could have been anticipated and avoided if channels of remonstration had been kept open and if emperors had responded to the messages that remonstrators gave them.

A longer perspective on the Tang system and its historical importance is more elusive. The point made by Bai Juyi, selecting and commenting on the Tang dynasty's achievements, should be accepted; the Tang system truly surpassed anything that had preceded it. Moreover other evidence from the early eighth century suggests that the political community then came closer than before to recognizing that politics, in the sense of competitive disagreement among able and experienced officials at the apex of the administrative hierarchy, should not necessarily be stigmatized, nor should political losers be unduly punished. When Zhang Yue argued against corporal punishment for high-ranking officials under sentence for losing in factional struggles, he was in effect arguing for a political climate that was more tolerant of diversity and dissent.

Generalizations about this issue in the late imperial period are inevitably broad-brush and impressionistic. It is difficult to determine whether the Tang system was more open than those of later periods, and, if it was, whether this greater openness was historically significant or interesting. The Northern Song 宋 dynasty (960-1127), China's age of "precocious modernity", attained a level of political sophistication that surely surpassed that of the Tang.

Especially in the eleventh century, the intellectual elite discussed principles of government with a rare degree of freedom. The style of government was more collegial, the emperor's rule both more constrained and more restrained. Political dissention among the governing and scholarly elite was assumed to be inevitable and perhaps even desirable. It did not necessarily end in violence or harsh recrimination. Institutional provision for remonstration and criticism was expanded and refined. A Northern Song specialist analyzing the Song experience of political dissent would surely be able to produce a picture every bit as sophisticated as that of the Tang sketched above.

It is particularly hard to generalize about the state's response to political dissent in post-Song China. The issue of how to respond to dissent involved precisely the same political dynamics that had underlain the system in Tang times. But the emperor's reaction to political opposition could be far more extreme in later periods. There were thus periods following the Song when the imperial dynastic intolerance of dissenting views was far harsher, conditions at the apex of the administrative hierarchy much more dangerous, and the emperor far more despotic. The early Ming is a particularly well known example. Yet, after the Ming had attained some political stability, the sophistication and effectiveness of its provision for remonstrance from within the serving bureaucracy, now made an official function of the censorate, should not be underrated.[9]

The late imperial period as a whole, the Ming and the Qing have been seen as one of increasing despotism.[10] The censorate may have come to function as a channel for forwarding specific policy recommendations to the political centre. But the disjunction between remonstrating about specific policy errors or righting specific injustices that it discharged and the more general tradition of political discourse that had started in the late eighth century now became much deeper. The Donglin 東林 movement, its suppression and its protracted sequel in the Ming-Qing transition indicated how alienated from the court and the throne the provincial intellectual communities had become.[11] The early Qing saw a "split between court and literati", that the writing of Huang Zongxi, highly articulate but politically ineffectual, represented. The reign of Yongzheng has also been seen as a period when imperial control was exceptionally effective and when traditional means of articulating dissent were suppressed.[12] The split was effectively papered over as the Manchu emperors realized the need to "express respect for Chinese literati without surrendering any of [their own] authority."[13] The Qing emperors repeatedly endorsed the Confucian canonical ideals of government. They drew the scholarly community into large scale and highly dignified scholarly projects.[14] By codifying the learned tradition, they continued to monitor and police the intellectual community. The Qianlong emperor allowed an assessment of the Donglin movement to be incorporated in the *Si ku quan*

shu. But he also condemned the participants in the movement in terms that harked back to Tang judgements on dissenting factions: they had "let small men into their ranks, just like opening the door to invite in thieves."

The Qing therefore continued to be intensely suspicious of protest that involved a larger political base or promoted a wide programme of reform. And they were faced with a far larger population of educated and often frustrated literati than had existed under the Tang. Yet the need for the emperor to be fully informed that had been one of the motives behind the Tang system remained. As Qing government expanded in the course of the eighteenth century, it gave rise to the palace memorial system that also had its analogue in the distant Tang dynasty. But the Qing system was combined with the tendency for the inner court to take secrecy to extreme lengths. The eighteenth century political climate therefore continued to be hostile to open political discussions and opposed to open dissent in the outer court and beyond it. The procedures, often extra-legal, of the grand council (*junji chu* 軍機處) in the eighteenth century that were developed to cope with the vastly expanded administration of the Qianlong period exemplified this hostility to political opposition. The interface between protesters, political thinkers, particularly in the provinces and the enormously increased numbers of educated and disempowered literati and palace interests remained an enormous problem.[15]

When in the course of the nineteenth century the power of the late Qing emperors weakened, intellectuals began to think deeply and independently about the functions of the state. They now effectively turned their attention away from the system that had concentrated so much political power into the hands of one figure. Their review of the polity was thoroughgoing, bringing into their purview the issues of *fengjian*, devolution and localism, the applicability of Western knowledge and the representation of popular opinion. They no longer gave the prominence to the principle of open access to the emperor that had been so conspicuous a feature of the late medieval system.

But one dimension at least of their campaigning provides a common thread between their predecessors in the late medieval period, the Donglin movement of the late Ming and their own roles as reformers. This was their conviction that in protesting about political conditions and proposing reform they were fulfilling an unavoidable moral charge, that they operated within a moral and historical framework that was comprehensive in its view of the Chinese polity and its claims on the individual. This was much the same moral charge that had compelled remonstrators in the Tang dynasty to take risks by political intervention or reformers in the late Ming to formulate their ideas on the state in discursive writings. The late nineteenth century reformer Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), one of the last political dissidents to have been sacrificed under the dynastic system, might be said to have combined this dual aspect of the Chinese tradition of political protest. He laid out a

view of Chinese history that differed sharply from that of Han Yu, whose strictly hierarchical concept of society he singled out for criticism.[16] On the other hand, he had in common with Han a willingness to intervene, to brave ultimate danger in promoting his views. And his perspective on Chinese history, with its emphasis on popular empowerment and resistance to arbitrary rule and despotism, had roots in the thought of Han Yu's friend Liu Zongyuan and later of Huang Zongxi, whom he particularly admired.[17]

Notes

+ This essay is a summary and adaptation of my article, "Traditions of Political Dissent in Tang China", in *Institute of Chinese Studies Visiting Professor Lecture Series (I)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005), pp. 1-33.

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave, Democratization in the Later Twentieth Century* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 300-301, quoted by Yu Ying-shih, *Democracy, Human Rights and Confucian Culture* (Oxford: St Antony's College, 2000), pp. 1-22.
2. Charles O. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 3, quoting E.A. Kracke Jr, "The Chinese and the Art of Government", in Raymond Dawson (ed.), *The Legacy of China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 321.
3. R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 5.
4. William Theodore De Bary, *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 31-35, pp. 105-105.
5. The view of the enormous *Si ku quan shu* project as functioning to define the relationship of intellectual to the state has been lucidly put forward in R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 1-34.
6. R. Kent Guy, p. 7.
7. Thomas Metzger, "The Western Concept of Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History", in Sudipa Kavaraj and Sunil Khilani (eds), *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 217-218.

8. See Xiao Gongquan 蕭公權, *Zhongguo Zhengzhi Sixiang Shi* 中國政治思想史 (Taipei: Zhonghua Wenhua Chubanshe, 1954), pp. 404-422, for his summary of Tang developments.
9. The classic modern study of this in English is Charles O. Hucker, *The Censorial System of Ming China*.
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11. John W. Dardess, *Blood and History in China: The Donglin Faction and Its Repression, 1620-1627* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).
12. Pei Huang, *Autocracy at Work: A Study of the Yong-cheng Period* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974), esp. pp. 3-23, "Introduction".
13. R. Kent Guy, p. 25.
14. See especially R. Kent Guy, pp.19-23; and for the increasing despotism of Yongzheng, see Pei Huang, pp. 3-23.
15. Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723-1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
16. Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 (ed.), *Tan Sitong Wen Xuan Zhu* 譚嗣同文選注 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), "Ren xue xia 仁學下"; p. 147, "Ren xue shang 仁學上".
17. *Tan Sitong Wen Xuan Zhu*, p. 177, "Ren xue xia 仁學下".