Summary and Keywords

Emperors were the symbolic and administrative pivot of the Chinese empire ever since its establishment in 221 BCE. They were arguably the most powerful human beings on earth. Their nominal authority was limitless, and it encompassed the administrative, military, economic, social, religious, and intellectual spheres to mention only a few. Moreover, the emperors’ semi-sacral status added superhuman dimensions to the imperial position. And yet, only very few emperors were able to impose their will in full. The combination of limitless institutional authority and limited personal power is the major paradox of China’s emperorship.

The contradiction between the emperor’s nominal omnipotence and his limited ability to impose his personal will on his subjects was imbued into the imperial institution from its very inception. Chinese thinkers of pre-imperial age (pre-221 BCE) sought peace and stability in their realm and came to the conclusion that these are attainable only under the omnipotent universal sovereign. Yet being aware of the dangers of the ruler’s potential mediocrity, these thinkers tried to create a system in which the ruler reigns but not rules, and the effective power rests with the ministers of proven intellectual and moral abilities. Although the system they envisioned never worked perfectly and allowed periodic recurrences of the emperors’ abuse of power, overall their goal was achieved. The imperial literati were more often than not able to moderate the emperor’s whims and create a viable mode of rule in which the hereditary monarchy at the top was maintained by the meritocratic bureaucracy below. Despite persistent tensions, the system was flexible enough to ensure the empire’s exceptional political durability.

Keywords: authority, autocracy, bureaucracy, checks and balances, China, emperors, Han dynasty, Mandate of Heaven, Ming dynasty, monarchism, Mongols, Qin dynasty, Qing dynasty, Yuan dynasty

China’s emperors were paradoxical figures. On the one hand, they were arguably the most powerful human beings on earth. Their nominal authority was limitless, and it encompassed the administrative, military, economic, social, religious, and intellectual spheres to mention only a few. Moreover, the emperors’ semi-sacral status added superhuman dimensions to the imperial position’s. On the other hand, very few emperors were able to impose their will in full. Many more were satisfied with reigning but not ruling:
their ritual prestige was enormous but their actual power remained quite limited. Understanding this ostensible paradox is crucial for understanding the complex functioning of China’s imperial institution.

**Religious Foundations of Monarchic Rule**

The history of China’s emperorship officially starts in 221 BCE, when King Zheng of Qin, the unifier of Chinese “All-under-Heaven,” adopted the title of an emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝, literally “August Thearch”). Yet whereas the title itself was the invention of the First Emperor of Qin (r. as king 246–221 BCE; r. as emperor 221–210 BCE), the idea of a universal omnipotent monarch was not a novelty. To a significant extent, the emperor’s position can be considered the summa of intellectual developments of preceding centuries. Moreover, some aspects of the imperial institution were formed even earlier, at the heyday of China’s Bronze Age (c. 1500–400 BCE).

The notion of exceptionally powerful monarchs is traceable to China’s first historical dynasty, the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE). The Shang kings were active—and singularly important—political players. They led the armies, initiated public works, maintained friendly ties with neighboring polities, and so forth. Yet perhaps the most important source of their authority was the religious one. Being chief mediators between the deified ancestors (and other divine powers) and the community of the living, the Shang kings performed a variety of divinations and sacrificial rituals to ascertain the deities’ attitudes toward royal undertakings and to ensure their support through appropriate offerings. These pontifical powers of the king remained the sine qua non of China’s monarchical institution for millennia to come.¹

The Zhou dynasty (1046–255 BCE) that replaced the Shang was more bureaucratically sophisticated, which meant that many of the kings’ administrative and military tasks could in due time be relegated to their underlings. Even in religious terms the kings lost part of their power, as they no longer held a monopoly on interpreting divination results. Nonetheless, the idea of the rulers’ preferential access to the divine remained intact. The Zhou kings claimed that their right to rule derives from Heaven’s Mandate. Although Heaven was in principle an impartial deity that could transfer the Mandate to a better incumbent, the Zhou kings maintained very close ties with it. Adopting the proud title of “Sons of Heaven,” they acquired the position of the exclusive representatives of this supreme deity. In addition, they benefitted from a preferential access to the deified spirits of royal ancestors. Rulers on the lower levels of the Zhou sociopolitical pyramid similarly possessed preferential access to lower-level deities and spirits. In the Zhou world every ruler was not just an administrator but also the supreme pontiff of his community.

In these supreme, exclusive, lifelong, and non-dispersible pontifical powers of the community’s leader, it is not difficult to identify some of the foundations of China’s monarchical institution. Yet in the short term, the rulers’ favorable access to the supramundane powers did not suffice to ensure their earthly authority. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, the Zhou realm entered profound crisis marked by progressive political
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disintegration. At the root of this crisis was the dramatic weakening of the ruler’s authority. First, the Zhou “Sons of Heaven” lost power to their nominal underlings, the regional lords; then these lords in turn were eclipsed by the assertive heads of major ministerial lineages in their countries. Dozens of lords were expelled, assassinated, or just sidelined by their ministers, becoming nothing more than ritual figureheads. The results were disastrous. The Zhou world became entangled in a debilitating web of inter and intrastate struggles. The crisis reached its nadir in 453 BCE with the disintegration of the major power of Jin among rival ministerial lineages. But it was also the turning point. On the ruins of the aristocratic order seeds of the renewed centralization were sown.

The Ideology of Monarchism

The two odd centuries prior to the imperial unification of 221 BCE are known as the age of the Warring States (453–221 BCE). As the name suggests, this was the age of perennial warfare and ever-aggravating bloodshed. However, it was also one of the most dynamic eras in China’s long history. It was the age of radically novel developments and bold reforms in social, economic, administrative, military, and other spheres. It was also the age of exceptional intellectual creativity, especially in the field of political thought. This creativity was bolstered by the proliferation of new employment opportunities for intellectuals, as well as by absence of clearly defined political and intellectual orthodoxy. The ensuing free competition of thinkers gave the period under discussion its nickname as the era of the Hundred Schools of Thought.2

The age of the Hundred Schools of Thought is renowned due to its remarkable ideological pluralism. Yet this pluralism notwithstanding, there were certain ideas that the competing thinkers held in common. The most significant was the belief that peace, stability, and moral order are attainable exclusively in the unified realm. This conviction that “stability is in unity”3 had a logical consequence: there is no unity without the unifier. Only concentration of authority in the hands of a single individual would ensure political order in “All-under-Heaven.” And before the goal of unifying the entire subcelestial realm becomes accomplishable, one needs to ensure political order within a single state, which also requires strengthening the ruler’s authority there. This mindset stands at the backdrop of profound political reforms of the Warring States period, which were directed at restoring the effective power of the rulers in each of the competing polities.4

Political reforms of the Warring States period—especially restoring the ruler’s control over appointment and dismissal of his ministers—allowed to stem the forces of disintegration that plagued the preceding centuries. Yet in the long term what mattered even more for the shaping of the future imperial institution were ideological stipulations of the monarchic rule promulgated by competing thinkers. These stipulations differed from one thinker to another. Different texts provide historical, cosmological, and even moral justifications for the principle of indisputable monarchic authority.5 Two of these are of utmost importance: the social and the administrative rationales for monarchic rule.
From social point of view, there was a broad agreement that society without a single locus of authority will descend into turmoil. The competition for scarce resources will bring about fight of all against all, unless a powerful monarch would rein in competing groups and individuals. The authors of a compendium composed on the eve of the imperial unification of 221 BCE, emphasized:

There is no turmoil greater than the absence of the Son of Heaven; without the Son of Heaven, the strong overcome the weak, the many lord it over the few, they incessantly use arms to harm each other.6

This sad state of perpetual bitter competition derives from the preponderance of all (or majority) of society’s members to pursue their private interests (si 私) at the expense of common (gong 公) good. The only possibility to rein in this selfishness is to establish a powerful state apparatus headed by the monarch who would by his mere existence represent and serve the polity’s common interests.7 Although most thinkers readily acknowledged that only a few rulers would be able to transcend their selfishness and serve the common good, the impartial and fair monarch forever remained the thinkers’ desideratum.

The sovereign’s perceived impartiality made him not only an ideal social leader but also a singularly fitting person to regulate intra-bureaucratic rivalries. This was the second major rationale for the monarch’s elevated status. To attain unity among officials, one person had to be the supreme arbiter of their conflicts. His say had to be final and inviolable. The same compendium cited above specifies:

The army needs the general: thereby it is unified. The state needs the ruler: thereby it is unified. All under Heaven needs the Son of Heaven: thereby it is unified. The Son of Heaven upholds oneness, thereby unifying it [the realm]. Oneness brings orderly rule; doubleness brings chaos.8

The military simile in the above citation is revealing. Just as the army cannot act without a clearly defined chain of command with a supreme commander at its top, so, too, the state requires a unified command as the only way to survive in the violent competition with its neighbors. And, since political unification is the only reasonable solution to ongoing warfare, it should logically culminate in the unification of power in the hands of a single person. Any alternative to this strict monarchism will have devastating effects on the entire realm.

The very broad agreement of pre-imperial thinkers that the future of the realm requires unification under a single omnipotent individual became one of the cornerstones of their legacy to the subsequent imperial age. This agreement was achieved during the most free and most pluralistic period in China’s intellectual history. The thinkers of that age displayed remarkable self-confidence; and most of them remained bitterly critical of contemporaneous rulers. That despite this frustration with acting sovereigns, not a single text (with the single exception of a radically iconoclastic Zhuangzi) appears to have questioned the principle of monarchic rule is remarkable. Rationalized and justified long be-
fore it came into existence, Chinese imperial system became the singularly powerful intellectual construct. Individual emperors were the major beneficiaries of this consensus.

**Sages, Tyrants, and Mediocrities**

The almost unanimous support for the monarchic principle of rule did not mean that the Warring States-period thinkers were not aware of the pitfalls of this system. To the contrary, the awareness of these pitfalls permeates their writings. Fundamentally, there were two problems with monarchy. One was the possibility that the throne would be occupied by a vicious tyrant. This gloom possibility, though, was less frightening to the discussants, since in this case there was a simple solution: the overthrow of the tyrant. The principle of righteous rebellion was embedded in the ideology of the Mandate of Heaven, formed in the aftermath of the Zhou overthrow of the Shang in c. 1046 BCE. According to this ideology, the supreme deity, Heaven, “sees through what the people are seeing, hears through what the people are hearing” and “inevitably follows the people’s desires.”² Where we should not exaggerate the democratic potential of these statements (which were after all meant to be primarily a warning to the rulers rather than a guide for the people’s action), it is true, nonetheless, that for millennia to come the right to rebel served to alleviate abuses of the monarchic system.¹⁰

The second problem of monarchic rule was less acute but much more widespread: that of a mediocrity on the throne. These mediocrities were prone to reappear time and again insofar as hereditary power transfer remained intact. In the Warring States period, as meritocratic principles of appointing officials and military commanders proliferated, an odd situation ensued. The ruler’s was the only position of authority that was determined by one’s birthright rather than by one’s qualifications. Practically, this meant that in terms of intellectual abilities and individual morality most rulers would fall much behind their aides. This created a potentially explosive situation: the supreme arbiter of intra-bureaucratic debates was more often than not the least capable member of the government. How to deal with this problem without jeopardizing the monarchic principle of rule was the major challenge faced both by pre-imperial thinkers and by their heirs, the literati custodians of the unified empire.

Not a few solutions were proposed to better the monarch’s quality. One, the least controversial, was ensuring proper education to the crown prince and proper instruction to the reigning monarch. Yet despite the overt popularity of these means it was also tacitly understood that moral education does not necessarily work well in many cases. An alternative and much more radical idea, mulled in the middle of the Warring States period, was circumventing the principle of hereditary succession by encouraging the monarch to abdicate in favor of the worthiest minister. This idea, though, turned out to be utterly impractical. When one genuine abdication attempt was made (in 314 BCE), it ended in a disaster: a civil war broke out and the state of Yan in which the abdication occurred was almost swept out.¹¹ Clearly, there was no feasible alternative to the hereditary power transfer. This meant that mediocrities on the throne will remain a rule rather than exception.
In order to deal with this problem, thinkers of the Warring States period proposed twofold solution: an ideal and a practical one. The ideal was that of the True Monarch, the one who would unify All-under-Heaven and impose perfect moral order. The precondition for his success would be his intellectual and moral superiority. In most texts of the Warring States period the True Monarch was identified as a Sage, a semi-divine person positioned infinitely above other humans. Due to this superiority, the sage monarch could expect absolute conformity from his subjects, be these ordinary commoners or proud intellectuals. Even staunch supporters of the intellectuals’ moral autonomy, such as Xunzi (d. after 238 BCE), plainly summarized that when the sage occupies the throne “the one who conforms with him is right, the one who differs from him is wrong.”

Recurrent panegyrics to the sagacious True Monarch permeate the texts of the Warring States period. They may mislead us to believe that the thinkers of that age were empty flatterers whose support of the monarchical principle of rule blinded them to its potentially negative consequences. This impression is patently wrong, though. In the Xunzi and elsewhere, exaltation of the True Monarch—the future unifier—coexists with strong criticism of contemporaneous inept sovereigns. In reality, the idealization of sage monarchs of the past and the future served to buttress the inadequacy of current, fraudulent kings, who after all could not claim the True Monarch’s mantle insofar as they failed to unify the realm. As such, regular sovereigns could not expect the degree of obedience and subservience that would be owed to the True Monarch. To the contrary, they were strongly urged to heed their ministers instead.

The thinkers’ suggestion to average rulers was to preserve their unrivalled nominal authority and the facade of the monarchical omnipotence while limiting their intervention in everyday political affairs to an absolute minimum. The ruler should retain his ritual prestige, his right to appoint chief ministers, and should have the final say on major political matters; but he should not directly impose his will. Rather, he should relegate everyday tasks to the meritorious ministers who would rule the state on his behalf and in his stead. The ruler would dwell in a blessed situation of “inaction” (wu wei 無為), enjoying the benefits of his prestigious position, but also avoiding mistakes that could cause irreparable damage to his state. The rationalizations for this proposal differed considerably from one thinker to another, but the bottom line was very clear: anybody but the True Monarch was supposed to reign but not to rule.

This amalgamation of the principles of monarchism (preserving a singular locus of authority) and meritocracy (assigning the governing tasks to the ministers of proven abilities) had strong intellectual appeal from the Warring States period on, but in practice it faced considerable challenges. The ruler’s deactivation was never institutionalized. It was based only on the thinkers’ ability to convince the sovereign that preserving impartiality, exercising self-restraint, and avoiding whimsical intervention into policy-making would be beneficial for his authority. Yet not every ruler was convinced. The most blatant example of the thinkers’ failure to preserve the situation of inactive ruler was the case of China’s First Emperor, the founder of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE).
From Qin to Han: The Institution of Emperorship Formed

The First Emperor turned the tables on his advisors. Being immensely proud in his unprecedented achievement—attaining unity and peace after more than 500 years of incessant interstate warfare—he boldly proclaimed that his merits dwarf even those of legendary paragons. Consequently, he appropriated the posture of the True Monarch proclaiming himself “sage,” which meant that he placed himself above his aides not only politically speaking but also intellectually. This meant in turn that the emperor did not need any longer to heed advice and rubberstamp proposals: rather he could rule actively (which he did). Even the deities were henceforth subordinate to the August Thearch, who adopted a theomorphic posture for himself. The First Emperor even defied tradition by eschewing any mention of Heaven as the supreme deity. The emperor was no longer a mere “Son of Heaven”: he was second to no one.\(^\text{15}\)

The First Emperor’s hubris, his hyper-activism, and his readiness to over-rule his aides set him on a collision course with members of the educated elite. When criticisms accumulated, the emperor adopted the advice of his chancellor, Li Si (d. 208 BCE), and outlawed “private learning.” The decree of 213 BCE ordered to collect and burn privately possessed copies of canonical texts and of the \textit{Speeches of the Hundred Schools}. Henceforth, the learning should be concentrated in the court only, maintained by the emperor’s erudites. And as Li Si concluded, “If one desires to learn laws and ordinances, he should make officials his teacher.”\(^\text{16}\)

The First Emperor’s assault on the educated elite and his hyperactive policies in general backfired. The Qin dynasty was toppled by a huge popular uprising—the first of its kind in China’s history. Generations of literati henceforth did their best to convince their rulers that Qin’s major fault was the First Emperor’s hubris, over-reliance on his personal abilities and shunning loyal remonstrance. This argumentation was partly successful: from the subsequent Han dynasty (206/202 BCE–220 CE) on, most emperors preferred to distance themselves from the Qin model, at least declaratively. Yet widespread condemnation of Qin notwithstanding, the basic parameters of its legacy, most notably the imperial institution itself with its new sacral status had been adopted by all the subsequent dynasts. So was the title of “sage” which in due time became an adjective synonymous to the term “imperial.”\(^\text{17}\)

Continuities aside, under the Han and later dynasties there was a major change in the conceptualization of the emperor’s sagacity. Although any emperor was considered sage ex officio, it was also tacitly understood that the ruler’s personal abilities do not necessarily qualify him for this designation. Hence, the emperor was urged to heed remonstrance, to respect his meritorious aides, and to refrain from personal policy initiatives. These suasions did not always work as smoothly as the thinkers and imperial ministers wished, but overall the majority of the emperors accepted their sagacity as nominal rather than real.
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This opened the way to the renewed drive toward diminishing the emperors’ active political role.

Another subtle move toward restraining emperors was undertaken in the realm of the official religious ideology. From the moment of their ascendance, the Han emperors reaffirmed the early Zhou concept of Heaven’s Mandate, which was shunned by Qin. The emperors restored the earlier title of “Sons of Heaven” and displayed humble and pious attitude toward the supreme deity. Gradually, an additional layer had been laid to the emperors’ relations with Heaven: a theory of “resonance” promulgated by Dong Zhongshu (c. 195–115 BCE). According to this theory, Heaven resonates with the humans through omens and portents. It is specifically attentive to its “son,” the emperor. On the one hand, any malfunction of the emperor and of his immediate entourage may create negative celestial and terrestrial phenomena (e.g., comets, earthquakes, floods, drought, and so forth). On the other hand, a properly functioning emperor would bring about “all the things of blessing and all the auspicious omens.”

This theory ostensibly benefitted the emperor by making him the focal point of interaction between Heaven and the humans, and thereby further bolstering the sacredness of the imperial institution. Yet the interpretation of Heaven’s omens and portents (and more broadly, of its will) was not the prerogative of the emperor. Dong Zhongshu and his followers considered their own knowledge of classical texts as giving them the key to understand Heaven’s intent, and they used omens and portents to criticize the emperor’s transgressions. The theory of resonance, then, once again, strengthened the imperial institution but allowed restraining the whims of individual sovereigns.

By the middle of the Han dynasty the final formation of China’s imperial institution took place, the basic parameters of which would remain unchanged until the very last years of the empire’s existence, early in the 20th century. For sure, there would be considerable fluctuations. For instance, changes in the nature and power of elites through China’s long imperial history would be accompanied by considerable alterations in the modes of interaction between the emperors and these elites. Some emperors would try to further enhance their sacral status by acquiring divine features borrowed from Buddhism, Daoism, or other creeds, presenting themselves as Buddhas, bodhisattvas, Daoist deities, or the Buddhist Wheel-Turning King, the Chakravartin. The nomadic dynasties (discussed in a separate section of this article) brought with them distinctive norms of leadership that were eventually amalgamated with Chinese concepts of emperorship. Yet beyond these considerable individual and dynastic differences, one can discern marked continuities in the conceptualization of the imperial institution and in the ongoing tensions between the emperors’ institutional and personal power. Henceforth, it makes sense to discuss henceforth the imperial institution as a whole rather than tracing chronological changes.

The Emperor’s Institutional Power

The power of China’s emperors had two distinct aspects: the institutional and the personal one. The emperor as an institution enjoyed almost unimaginable superiority over his
Subjects. This superiority had symbolic dimensions, the most notable of which was the sacralization of the emperor’s figure, but it also had many practical implications. A skillful utilization of this superiority could contribute to the effective regulation of society. Yet the emperor’s exceptional power could also be woefully abused, generating notorious outbursts of despotism.

The symbolic position of the emperor was arguably his most important asset. By the mere fact of his singularity, the emperor personified the supreme principle of the realm’s unity, while in his capacity as the “Son of Heaven,” he acted as the sole mediator with and representative of the supreme deity, Heaven. He was venerated as the regulator of time and space: years were counted according to his reign titles, and the annual ritual calendar was invalid without his approval. Elaborate rites elevated him to superhuman heights; his body and his paraphernalia were considered sacrosanct and any harm to them regarded as the gravest and unpardonable crime. This sacredness of the imperial figure can be interpreted as a Chinese variant of “civic religion,” which transcended the diverse creeds and faiths of emperors, courtiers, and the populace at large. Any emperor ex officio had semi-divine status.

The sacredness of the emperor was not personal. The emperor was neither understood to possess individual superhuman qualities nor posthumously to join the popular pantheon. Rather, his godlike position approximated certain features of the God Almighty of the Abrahamic religions, with its aura of singularity and omnipotence. In what resembles a conceptual inversion of medieval Europe—where multiple loci of secular authority were tolerated, but there could be only one God, one Church, and one legitimate pope—in China, conversely, multiple gods and creeds were legitimate, but only one legitimate monarch could exist. The first biblical commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” is perfectly applicable to the emperor of China, whose subjects were free to worship any deity but could not possibly contemplate simultaneous recognition of two competing emperors.

Further resembling the Jewish God, the Chinese emperor remained aloof, mysterious, inscrutable, and invisible for the vast majority of his subjects. He was generally enclosed behind the walls of the Forbidden City; and even when he left it for ritual or other purposes, he was usually not supposed to intermingle freely with his subjects (although some rulers did so—often incognito). Normally, no statues or paintings of the emperor decorated temples or individual dwellings; his name was tabooed; his image was not reproduced on coins; and individual communication with him was difficult even for the majority of officials, not to speak of the public in general. This position might not have ignited strong religious feelings in the populace, but it evidently strengthened the emperor’s mysterious majesty.

The symbolic importance of the emperor was duly matched by the magnitude of real power that he was expected to hold. The emperor was the chief administrator, legislator, and judge of the realm; he was its commander in chief, supreme pontiff, and top educator; he was the nominal possessor of all the property “within the seas”; no important decision or
major appointment could be valid without his explicit approval. There were no institutional limitations to his power; no group enjoyed legal autonomy from his will. As a nominal sage he could have a final say on the issues of doctrinal clarity and preside over scholarly debates. No single undertaking in the empire was, legally speaking, outside the emperor’s control.

How this magnitude of power was realized differed tremendously from one reign to another. Needless to say, imposing one’s will on huge and heterogeneous realm was impossible without the cooperation of at least the bureaucracy and local elites, and even then the implementation could be thwarted by the reluctant populace. Imperial China was rarely a manifestation of Wittfogel’s “Oriental Despotism” as it is sometimes imagined. Yet the emperor’s power was not just a smokescreen hiding the throne’s impotence. A skillful utilization of the emperor’s supreme authority and his sacral status could bring about remarkable results. For instance, at times of dynastic weakness, the resort to the emperor’s authority could stem the forces of disintegration and even allow partial restoration of the dynasty’s fortunes after major domestic turmoil. The clearest example to this extent was the ability of the Tang dynasty (618–907), badly battered by the military mutiny of 755–762, to partly restore domestic order by the early ninth century. Although the court remained militarily and economically weak, its symbolic superiority sufficed to subjugate most (although not all) of the competing warlords. The latter were keen to preserve their autonomy, but normally dared not defy the emperor overtly, because such an act could have greatly delegitimize the warlord’s rule even among some of his subordinates.

The emperor’s power could also be effectively utilized to control unwelcome religious activities. Religiously speaking, China’s emperor was subordinate to Heaven alone, on behalf of which he reigned. Otherwise, he had the right to appoint, promote, or demote any deity of the official (and supposedly popular) pantheon; he could patronize or outlaw any cult, any type of religious ceremony, any scripture; he could approve or disapprove of the establishment of monasteries and temples, or demolish them altogether. Although these prerogatives usually had only a marginal impact on popular religious activities, and even strict regulations with regard to monasteries and temples were rarely implemented to the letter, the very right of the political establishment to supervise the religious life of the populace could be utilized, when necessary, to counter the potentially destabilizing effects of domestic or foreign religions. Thus, whenever the emperor became convinced that Buddhism became socially, economically, or politically disruptive, he could regulate, monitor, or curb its activities; exceptionally (in 446, 574, 845, 955) the hugely popular foreign creed could be outlawed altogether. The effect of these measures was mixed (the proscriptions were particularly short-lived), but undoubtedly they contributed toward Buddhism’s adoption of humble posture when encountering China’s imperial rule.

Or take for instance socio-economic realm. The words from the classical Canon of Poems according to which “Everywhere under Heaven is the Monarch’s land, each of those who live on the land is the Monarch’s servant” did not necessarily reflect reality. De-facto (even if not de-jure) private property on land was recognized in China ever since the Han
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dynasty; and powerful local elites whose status only partly depended on the government were also an intrinsic part of imperial China’s social landscape.\textsuperscript{26} And yet, at times the imperial government could utilize its nominal control over the entirety of material and human resources for bold acts of social and economic engineering. It could initiate far-reaching reforms of landownership, capping the size of individual plots of land or ordering massive reallocation of fields; it could create, redefine, or abolish hereditary social groups, from the aristocracy above to different types of outcasts below; it could profoundly reorganize rural and urban society, and even order the change of the subjects’ surnames. Many of such reforms were instituted, for instance, by Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–499) of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) established by Tuoba Xianbei nomads. Notably, although some of his steps met with tough resistance even from the emperor’s closest kin, none of the opponents claimed that the emperor has no right to reshape landownership patterns, to outlaw nomadic garments and surnames, or to reorganize the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{27} All these were prerogatives of the throne, which were rarely utilized, but which could suddenly turn into a means of creating an entirely new sociopolitical, economic, and cultural order.

The sacral status of the emperor could be instrumental not just in improving the empire’s functioning, but also in generating most ugly cases of despotism. Insofar as the emperor was sacrosanct, any assault, however indirect, on his position could be interpreted as lèse-majesté, one of the “ten abominations.” Thus, although Chinese court etiquette welcomed and even at times prescribed “loyal criticism” directed against the throne, an outspoken critic always had to be wary of crossing an invisible line between legitimate remonstrance and criminal “great irreverence.” At times, the definition of this crime was broadened to produce some of the gloomiest manifestations of arbitrariness: the death penalty could be inflicted for a poem, for a careless usage of the emperor’s tabooed personal name, for insufficiently strict observation of mourning rules for an empress, for a potentially subversive examination question, and even for the “crime of criticizing [the ruler] in the stomach” (\textit{fu fei zui}), that is unspoken but presumed dissent.\textsuperscript{28} Although outbursts of imperial tyranny were less frequent than some historians would like us to believe, their intimidating presence behind the scenes of normal political life chilled the court atmosphere throughout the centuries.

Friends and Foes: The Emperor and His Aides

The magnitude of the emperors’ power was a blessing and a curse. It elevated the emperor to superhuman heights, but it also required of him superhuman abilities. Since these were normally lacking, the emperor had by default to rely on multiple aides to perform his endless tasks. How to maintain the relations with these aides became the thorniest question of emperorship.

From the point of view of the literati, who wrote both prescriptive and descriptive analyses of emperorship, the only normative situation was that the sovereign relies on his civil servants. For many emperors this was indeed the default choice. Imperial bureaucrats
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were considered the crème de la crème of the educated elite. They were the most brilliant literally minds of the empire: well educated, committed to civil service, selected and promoted (in theory and sometimes in practice) due to their superior skills. Their loyalty to the imperial political system and to the dynasty they served could normally be taken for granted.

These advantages aside, the civil servants posed two problems for the emperors. First, their intrinsic links to local elites made most of the bureaucrats unwilling to implement policies that would curb these elites’ wealth and power. Second, the bureaucrats’ feeling of moral and intellectual superiority over society at large and (even if tacitly) over the emperors made them uneasy servitors. Behind their polite and loyal remonstrance, there was a conviction that they, the literati, should guide the throne rather than just implement orders. This desire to make the monarch comply with what his servants perceived as the singularly correct moral Way (Dao 道) encompassed not just public sphere but also, annoyingly, the emperor’s personal life. At times, bureaucratic opposition to the emperor’s behavior could become vociferous, including public demarches, petitions, and spectacular acts of protest such as mass kneeling at the Meridian Gate (the entrance to the Forbidden City). The recurrence of such protests made many emperors willing to seek aides from outside civil service.

The major pool of these aides was the emperor’s kinsmen—from brothers and sons to more distant relatives. Under certain dynasties, such as Eastern Han (25–220 CE), the emperor’s affinal relatives could become an exceptionally powerful group. A broader pool of potential aides was a variety of aristocratic groups, such as the military aristocracy in the beginning of many dynasties, or tribal aristocracy under the nomadic rulers of China. In some cases, most notably under the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1261–1368), these groups could be supplemented by the emperors’ personal confidants who would be skyrocketed to the highest positions in bureaucracy. Yet members of each of these groups remained a problematic replacement for the literati officials. First, they were less administratively competent—or so, at least, the literati historians want us to believe. Second, and undeniably, they were more threatening for the throne. Even the closest kinsmen could become completely unruly once given strong political and military standing. In the early Han dynasty, then under Western Jin (265–318), and again in the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644), it were the emperor’s closest kin elevated to highest positions in regional administration who became the major source of instability. In the nomadic and semi-nomadic dynasties, the threat from unruly tribal leaders who considered the empire a common possession of their clan rather than an individual emperor’s patrimony was a permanent feature. Overall, kinsmen and other aristocrats could be used at times to counterbalance the civil service, but they could not replace the literati officials.

Another source of alternative aides for the emperors came from the so-called inner court, in which the eunuchs played the most prominent role. Much maligned by the literati, the eunuchs were indispensable for running the emperor’s inner quarters. Unlike bookish bureaucrats who expected the emperor to fit their abstract moral demands, the eunuchs treated the emperor as a human being, catering to his personal needs, and developing in-
timate relations with him ever since his childhood. They were amicable, reliable (they could never usurp the throne), and immensely useful for the emperors who either mistrusted their bureaucrats or simply preferred more easy-going aides. Under not a few dynasties, the inner court evolved into a parallel bureaucratic structure run by the eunuchs. At the very minimum they could handle the flow of documents into the palace’s inner quarters, which allowed considerable political leeway. Yet not a few sovereigns went a step further, entrusting the eunuchs with a variety of sensitive tasks—from maintaining security in the palace and around it, to supervising the armies, serving as commissioners and envoys, maintaining additional sources of income (such as mining or collection of commercial levies), and the like. Under a few dynasties, most notable Latter Han, the second half of the Tang dynasty, and much of the Ming, eunuchs could become—much to the bureaucrats’ chagrin—the most powerful political group in the empire. In a few cases our sources imply that the eunuchs developed a kind of group solidarity and acted in unison not just against the bureaucrats but sometimes against the emperors, manipulating succession and trying to perpetuate therewith their power. However, even at the apex of their power, they could not replace the civil service but maximum to partly counterbalance it. In the final account, the emperors had no alternative but to collaborate with the literati officials.

Mitigating the Emperor’s Activism

The emperors’ ultimate reliance on the literati officials explains why, despite the magnitude of the monarchic power, the sovereign’s whimsical rule was much less frequent than could have been expected. In practice, the bureaucrats succeeded to neutralize most of the emperors to such an extent that the individual political input of all but a few exceptionally assertive and/or capable emperors remained minuscule.

How did the bureaucrats succeed to rein in most of the rulers? The answer can be divided into two: ideological and practical one. Ideologically, the literati exercised intellectual hegemony. It was they who interpreted the classics, wrote histories, edited administrative manuals, prepared educational materials, and disseminated literary production throughout the empire. It was they who formed the public opinion, both synchronic and diachronic (through historical writings projected into posterity). Hence, their views mattered a lot. In particular, their monopoly on educating the crown prince ensured that they imbue him with their ideas. Already at the tender age, the would-be emperor learned that the ruler should embody impartiality and fairness, that to preserve his impartial image he should refrain from display of personal preferences and minimize personal initiatives, that he should heed remonstrance and loyal criticism, and that overturning the ministers’ advice could bring about grave consequences for him personally and for the dynasty as a whole.

On a practical level, the insistence on the emperor’s impartiality meant that he should not initiate policies but rather approve or disapprove the suggestions submitted by his officials. This norm severely impaired the emperors’ initiative. An astute ruler could overturn this hurdle by relying on personal confidants within the officialdom, who would submit
the desired proposals for his approval. However, placing these confidants in the positions of power or fostering cronies within the civil service was not an easy task, and many emperors lacked sufficient skills to play this sophisticated game.

Aside from fostering norms that did not favor initiatives from the throne, the imperial bureaucrats developed a covert system of invisible checks and balances that prevented most emperors from giving free rein to their whims. This system bears unmistakable resemblance to some of the tricks played by Sir Humphrey Appleby from the brilliant British sitcom, *Yes, Minister*. The bureaucratic tricks included overburdening the emperor with so many administrative and ceremonial tasks as to make personal attendance to all these physically impossible and turn relegation of one’s responsibilities to the underlings into a default choice. Besides, some of the essential information could be withheld or hidden behind either highly technical language or literary embellishments that prevented an emperor from fully grasping the situation on the ground. An emperor could try to gather additional information about the empire’s situation either through eunuch commissioners or through personal tours of inspection. However, these tours were bitterly opposed by the bureaucrats who claimed that they endanger the monarch and waste precious resources. In fact, it is highly likely that the real source of opposition was the officials’ desire to limit the possibility of the emperors’ acquiring extra-bureaucratic sources of information about the life of his subjects.

This combination of overt and covert means of deactivating the emperors was highly effective, as can be demonstrated by the example of the Ming dynasty. Its founder, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), was an exceptional personality. Having risen from the very bottom (all the way from a begging monk to a petty rebel, a rebel leader, and finally the emperor of China), he had very strong ideas about how the society should be run. The government should take care of the commoners needs; bureaucratic corruption and excessive wealth concentration in the hands of elites should be eliminated; and a powerful state should regulate every aspect of the people’s lives. When his officials disagreed or tried to thwart his initiatives, Zhu Yuanzhang subjected them to unprecedentedly ferocious reign of terror. For good or for bad, he succeeded in dramatically reshaping the country’s economic, social, religious, and cultural life. He had also changed the administrative system so as to concentrate all imaginable executive powers in his own hands and reduce the officials to his servitors. His reign can be justifiably viewed as one of the peaks of China’s authoritarianism and despotism.

Zhu Yuanzhang was aware that his descendants, “born and bred deep within the palace, unfamiliar with the world,” may well lack the necessary qualities to “extend imperial benevolence and authority throughout the realm,” or, in other words, to continue his mode of rule. He tried to solidify his legacy by developing rigid Ancestral Instructions aimed to fix the system once and for all and prevent malevolent officials from hijacking it. Yet his hopes were thwarted. The dismantling of some of his initiatives—precisely those aimed at curbing the power of officials and of local elites—started immediately after his death. The Ming dynasty ended as one of the most corrupt regimes in China’s his-
From Khan to Emperor: The Conquest Dynasties

Conquest dynasties provide the most interesting case study to test the functioning of the Chinese mode of emperorship in a highly different cultural setting. The nomadic and seminomadic conquerors of China represent a military-oriented political culture that differed in several crucial aspects from that of China proper. To make a rough generalization, it may be said that while the latter was predicated on stability, the former valued the ability of the ruler. The nomads shared the Chinese concept of Heaven’s Mandate, but in their view it rested with the ruling clan as a whole, each of whose members could lead the steppe dwellers insofar as he possessed sufficient charisma and martial skill. Moreover, Heaven (Tengri) did not bestow its mandate on every generation; only through military success could a leader demonstrate Heaven’s ongoing support. The role of the leadership was therefore constantly contested: if the ruler failed to deliver victories, he could expect a coup and replacement by a more able candidate. The position of an heir was even more contestable: violent struggles among rival clansmen became such a persistent feature of nomadic life that Joseph Fletcher termed their succession system “bloody
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tanistry,” that is, violent competition among potential heirs, resulting in the success of the fittest. This system ensured the high quality of nomadic leaders, but it also introduced immanent instability in nomadic polities, which were repeatedly torn apart by bloody succession struggles among the closest kin.

Adoption of the Chinese model of emperorship became one of the most important steps taken by the nomadic regimes on their road toward eventual adaptation to the norms of sedentary rule, which was crucial should their state aim at conquering parts of China. Practically, it meant elevating the tribal leader to a new height: no longer would he be the primus inter pares, whose military skills determined his right to rule; rather, he would be a sacrosanct True Monarch, aloof from his subjects, whose position was unassailable in all but truly exceptional conditions. Similarly, according to the new rules of the game, the heir apparent was to be established through a regular procedure, diminishing the potential for violent succession clashes. This radically different pattern of rule was beneficial to the rulers and to political stability in general; but it also represented a cultural break with steppe heritage and potentially undermined the military prowess of the conquest leadership. Hence the adoption of Chinese imperial culture was usually a lengthy and gradual process, during which many steppe rulers tried to combine the posture of a Chinese emperor with that of a tribal khaqan or khan. Those who succeeded in blending the advantages of Chinese and nomadic traits of rulership were renowned as the most magnificent leaders in China’s history, such as the great Qing emperors discussed in this section. However, this synthesis between the active/military and passive/civilian models of rulership was not sustainable for long. Gradually but inevitably, alien conquerors moved toward the Chinese model of a passive ruler.

A brief glimpse of two major alien dynasties, the Mongol Yuan (1271–1368) and the Manchu Qing (1636/1644–1912), illustrates this process. The leaders of each of these dynasties were well aware of the traps into which some of their predecessors had fallen, having become absorbed into the Chinese mode of life to the extent of losing martial prowess. The Mongols were particularly averse to the enticements of sedentary civilization; hence their full-scale adoption of the Chinese imperial system (even in its “reduced” form) took place only in 1271, a full sixty-five years after the establishment of the Great Mongol State by Chinggis Khan (c. 1162–1227). Their early leaders were each renowned for military prowess, assertiveness, and activism; their succession system prior to 1271 retained traits of “warrior democracy,” as the supreme leader had to be approved by the qurlitai meeting of the tribal chiefs. Inevitably, succession struggles marred every reign after Chinggis Khan’s death. It was partly the quest for internal stability that prompted Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) to adopt the Chinese imperial title in 1271.

Khubilai himself was a powerful and resolute leader, whose adoption of Chinese ways did not reduce his charisma; but his successors were progressively marginalized by their entourage. While the middle period of the Yuan dynasty is marred by bloody succession struggles that reflect the strong impact of the steppe heritage, court life moved gradually but irreversibly in the “Chinese” direction of decrease in the emperor’s activism. The last emperor of the Yuan, Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1368), ended his lengthy tenure in a very
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“Chinese” way, as a hapless spectator of his empire’s disintegration, unable to meaningfully influence the course of events. It is noteworthy that Zhu Yuanzhang, who overthrew the Yuan, averred that the emperors’ weakness rather than excessive power was one of the major maladies of the nomadic dynasty. Thus, despite its relative brevity, the Yuan demonstrates the same pattern of marginalization of individual monarchs as is characteristic of Chinese dynasties.

The Qing dynasty exemplifies this pattern even better. Having crowned China’s lengthy imperial age, this dynasty manifested, during its first century and a half, the best ever blend of alien and Chinese, of the civilian (wen) and the martial (wu), of stability and efficiency. The first six Manchu emperors were renowned activists: they closely supervised and at times personally led their armies, toured the country, and directly intervened in policy making, if necessary through ruthless oppression of real or imagined opposition. The imperial princes also participated in military campaigns and in civil administration; and although the dynasty did not escape bitter succession struggles, those remained generally manageable, while generating efficient rulers. The dynasty benefited in particular from the combined civilian and military experience of its fifth monarch, the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723–1735), arguably the most administratively astute ruler in China’s long history. Having ascended the throne as a mature statesman, this emperor had exceptional understanding of the functioning of the bureaucratic apparatus and was sufficiently self-confident to impose his view on the opposition without sinking into senseless despotism. His reasonable leadership brought about, among other benefits, a tremendous improvement in the dynasty’s financial situation. The Yongzheng Emperor’s father and son, Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) and Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) Emperors, also proved to be particularly adept leaders, whose military and diplomatic skills contributed to the unprecedented expansion of the Qing realm. The succession of capable monarchs was one of the major reasons for Qing’s overall success.

The Qing model of assertive emperors adopted from the dynasty’s tribal past was one of its major assets, but it was not a lasting solution to the gradual atrophy of imperial charisma. When we jump to the nineteenth century, the picture becomes dramatically different from the early Qing reigns. Again, we see passive leaders, whose activities are largely confined to the imperial capital in Beijing and the nearby summer capital in Rehe (modern Chengde)—leaders who appear to have been entirely unable to influence the adverse course of events that led to the ultimate collapse of the empire. The familiar pattern of the Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties (to mention only a few)—namely, a vigorous, if violent, beginning and an inglorious end—is exemplified in the Qing dynasty as well.

These trajectories of rulership atrophy in even the most charisma-oriented dynasties in Chinese history suggest that the pattern of the monarchs’ declining ability to influence political processes can indeed be considered one of the basic characteristics of the Chinese imperial system. The same internal logic of the empire, which favored stability above all, was conducive not just to the concentration of all imaginable power in the hands of an emperor as an institution but also to systematic reduction of the impact of in-
individual emperors on political processes. Invisible as they were, Chinese checks and balances effectively reduced the danger of autocratic arbitrariness to a tolerable level. Yet, like every political choice, the one made by Chinese statesmen had its price, both in terms of reduced efficiency and in terms of persistent and sometimes debilitating tensions at court. It is time now to assess the advantages and disadvantages of this choice.

**Afterthought: Stability Versus Ability**

China’s imperial institution was a highly contradictory construct. It constantly fluctuated between the conflicting demands of ensuring the incumbent’s abilities and ensuring the system’s stability. Speaking of the first, we should recall that whereas most of the emperor’s tasks could conveniently be relegate to the underlings, two of these were not easily dispensable. The emperor was supposed to be sufficiently clear-minded to make appropriate appointments, especially on the top bureaucratic level; and he was expected to be sufficiently knowledgeable to handle bureaucratic cleavages appropriately. Whenever these tasks were relegate to a substitute (e.g., to a powerful regent acting on behalf of a minor or otherwise incapacitated emperor), the tensions inevitably run high. From the Han dynasty on, it was known that a powerful regent—be it an empress-dowager or a powerful minister—can utilize her or his power as the emperor’s surrogate to promote her or his cronies and even try to highjack Heaven’s Mandate. The cases of Empress-Dowager Lü (r. 194–180 BCE), and of the (in)famous usurper, Wang Mang (45 BCE–23 CE) were well known to any educated Chinese. Hence, a weakling on the throne was an unwelcome option.

In principle, it was possible to ensure succession of capable monarchs. This required, first, implementing, when necessary, lateral rather than lineal succession (i.e., preferring an adult brother of the reigning monarch to a minor child), and, second, maintaining a broad pool of potential successors, who would undergo administrative (and if necessary) military training, and who would be therefore fit to occupy the throne. Both principles were implementable in certain circumstances, most notably under the nomadic dynasties (e.g., the Qing) or under the dynasties influenced by the nomadic political culture, such as the early Tang. The best-known example of this violent competition was the case of Li Shimin, the illustrious Tang Taizong (r. 626–649). Taizong was one of the most capable and most admired emperors in Chinese history, but few would forget the problematic start of his emperorship. Li Shimin’s remarkable military and civilian career as a minor prince allowed him not only to gain precious political experience, but also to amass sufficient backing to stage a bloody coup against his brothers and force his father to abdicate. This was not a precedent that most Chinese statesmen would like to follow.

This brings us to the second imperative of China’s imperial system: maintaining political stability. In the long term, it was prudent to avoid succession struggles by establishing regular norms of lineal succession. Indeed, sooner or later, every dynasty opted for a system, in which an emperor designated a crown prince (ideally, the emperor’s elder son) early in his reign, and did not change the incumbent unless under very exceptional cir-
cumstances. The incumbent was duly educated, but normally the training remained scholastic with little if any chance for a crown prince to serve in consequential military or civilian positions. Inevitably, given the emperors’ average lifespan, this system often brought about succession of minors. In several dynasties (Eastern Han, Ming) most of the emperors who ascended the throne were adolescents, without any practical experience in governing. Yet although this situation was considered undesirable, in the final account, stability of succession was preferred over ensuring the ruler’s ability.

China’s imperial system had numerous flaws. At times it brought about outbursts of tyranny, at times evolved into an opposite direction generating impotent monarchs precisely when the state required strong leadership. These weaknesses notwithstanding, two points can be considered as manifestation of this system’s success. First, the ultimate goal of the imperial architects—eliminating multiple loci of power and creating a unified system of decision-making aimed at preventing internal disorder—was realized remarkably well. Although China did not avoid lengthy periods of turmoil and disintegration, those were less damaging and less frequent than in most other polities of comparable size and complexity. The unifying presence of the supreme monarch as the embodiment of the Great Unity of All-under-Heaven contributed toward political stability.

Second, the imperial system appears to have been quite manageable in the long term. Throughout millennia, the dragon throne was occupied by megalomaniacs and minors, by generals and peasant rebels, by nomadic warriors and refined literati, by elderly, infantile, and mentally or physically impaired monarchs. That none of these, whatever temporary disruption they caused, inflicted lasting damage on the imperial enterprise is truly remarkable. It seems that despite its ostensible awkwardness, the Chinese variant of checks and balances—namely, distinguishing between the institutional and the individual power of the monarch—was well adaptable to changing circumstances and could withstand most woeful crises, including (in the case of the Northern Qi dynasty, 550–587) a chain of mentally unstable monarchs, without collapsing and disintegrating, and at times even without significantly impairing the normal life of the empire’s subjects. This is an undeniable achievement, unparalleled in other ruler-centered polities. In the final account, imperfect and full of contradictions, the Chinese imperial institution contributed nonetheless to the empire’s impressive durability.

Discussion of the Literature

After the disastrous collapse of the Ming dynasty, many intellectuals tried to understand the reasons for its demise. Some—most notably Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) and Gu Yanwu (1613–1682)—identified the excessive centralization of power in the emperor’s hands as one of the major maladies of the imperial system as a whole and of the Ming dynasty in particular. In the early 20th century, these ideas were translated by thinkers such as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) into a novel interpretation of Chinese history as a continuous descent into the abyss of dictatorship. This idea of the ever-aggravating “despotism” in
imperial China became highly popular among Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars through much of the 20th century.

In a nutshell, the theory of aggravating despotism viewed the Song dynasty (960–1279) as a starting point toward the monarchical “absolutism,” either due to the demise of the hereditary aristocracy which remained prominent in the previous dynasties, most notably the Tang (618–907), or due to the overall trend toward centralization of power under the Song, which logically culminated in strengthening the emperor’s position. Later, according to this theory, the despotic potential of the Song government was further exacerbated because the alien Yuan dynasty had no respect toward the Chinese literati and diminished their position to that of the ruler’s petty servitors. These trends had been inherited and aggravated under the native Ming and the alien, Manchu, Qing dynasty, bringing about the ever more despotic rule over China. For not a few scholars it seemed the most logical explanation of what they saw as the culmination of China’s despotism under the rule of Mao Zedong (1893–1976).

A new series of studies that started shortly after Mao Zedong’s death and continue well into our days have undermined the “aggravating despotism” theory. The singularly important study with this regard was that of Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance*. Huang had shown that one of the alleged “despots,” the Ming emperor Shenzong (r. 1572–1620) was in fact disempowered by his officials, who had repeatedly obstructed his moves. Later scholars of the Song and Yuan dynasty had demonstrated the inaccuracy of the “despotism” label attached to these periods in China’s history. However, it is not difficult to find many instances of imperial tyranny under earlier and supposedly less “despotic” dynasties. Rather than neat progression, we have permanent fluctuations of relations between the emperor and his literati officials, in which despotic potential is surely present but which are not marked by despotism alone.

As the interest in the topic of “despotism” receded in Western scholarship, the focus of the studies of the imperial institution shifted toward its cultural aspects: from representation of emperors’ authority and its overall impact on political, intellectual, and cultural life of Chinese empire. Of many studies published since the 1980s, those by Liu Zehua (1935–2018) are singularly important. Liu Zehua, who dubbed the term “monarchism” (*wangquanzhuyi 王權主義*) as the essential feature of Chinese political culture, was the first to systematically explore the ideological foundations of Chinese emperorship. He had also published extensively on the impact of monarchic authority on all aspects of life in imperial China. His studies had been developed by some of his disciples, most notably Ge Quan and Yuri Pines.

In distinction from the West, where studies of Chinese emperorship are just one and not necessarily most important topic for Sinological research, in China the attitude toward the monarchical experience of the past remains politically relevant well into our days. It is interesting with this regard to observe that whereas mainstream academic publications
view the concentration of power in the emperor’s hands in highly negative terms, in the broader cultural realm (popular historical books, TV series, movies, and the like), powerful emperors are often presented much more positively, and some (most notably the greatest Qing emperors)—with open admiration.\textsuperscript{57} Time will say whether or not this bifurcation reflects deeper cultural and ideological trends.

**Primary Sources**

The ideology of monarchism formed during the Warring States period is spread through the writings of the so-called “Masters” (philosophers, \textit{zi} 子) of that age. Their texts are conveniently accessible in Chinese series \textit{Newly Edited Collection of the Masters (Xinbian zhuzi jicheng 新編諸子集成)} published by the Zhonghua shuju publishers. Almost all of the Masters’ works had been translated into English with a lot of recent translations and retranslations, which make these texts easily accessible to the students and comparatists.

For the imperial period, the most important primary sources are the so-called dynastic histories. Twenty-four histories thickly cover all the period from the pre-imperial age to the end of the Ming dynasty; they were composed between the 2nd century BCE and 1739. All merited easily accessible punctuated editions by Zhonghua shuju. In addition to these histories, of particular importance to scholars of China’s monarchism is the monumental \textit{Comprehensive Mirror to Aid the Government (Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑)}, a historical work by Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) that covers the period from 403 BCE to 960 CE (also republished by Zhonghua shuju). Only a tiny portion of these voluminous works had been translated into English, most notably the earliest one, \textit{Records of the Historian (Shiji 史記)} by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–90 BCE).

In addition to preparing histories of specific dynasties, Chinese scholar-officials compiled a variety of digests of institutional regulations, collections of imperial edicts and of ministerial memorials, and the like. Among most valuable of these collections is the \textit{Great collection of the edicts and commands from the Tang (Da Tang zhaoling ji 唐大詔令集 [Xuelin, 1992])}, and the parallel edition for the Song dynasty (\textit{Da Song zhaoling ji 宋大詔令集 [Zhonghua, 1962]}). Another useful collection is \textit{Memorials of famous ministers from different periods (Lidai mingchen zouyi 歷代名臣奏議 [Shanghai guji, 1989])}. The collections of essential documents (\textit{huiyao 會要}) survived for the Tang to Song and Ming dynasties (collections for earlier periods were composed retroactively since the 13th century onward). Most of them merited modern editions by Zhonghua shuju or Shanghai guji publishers.

The ten encyclopedic histories of government institutions (\textit{Shi tong 十通}) comprise a considerable number of institutional developments related to the functioning of the emperors and their entourage. Most (but not all) of these merited Zhonghua shuju editions, and some are even available in several online free-access sources.

Voices of individual emperors are preserved, aside from their edicts and speeches cited in the dynastic histories, in several compositions directed either to the emperors’ immediate entourage and descendants or to the broader public. A representative sample includes \textit{Plan for the emperors (Di fan 帝範)}, by Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626–649), \textit{Rules for subjects (Di min 帝民)}  and others.

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\textsuperscript{57}See the discussion of the reception of imperial power in Chapter 7.
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(Chen gui 臣軌), by the only female emperor, Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705), and manifold texts by the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang. The former two texts were published in Zhonghua shuju collections; the latter (The Collected Works of Ming Taizu [Ming Taizu ji 明太祖集] were published in 1991 by Hefei Huangshan shushe.

Links to Digital Materials

Most of the philosophers’ texts and many relevant historical texts (including the dynastic histories and some of the institutional histories) are conveniently accessible on the Chinese texts project database.

Further Reading


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Notes:


(4.) For these reforms and creation of the “ruler-centered” state, see Mark E. Lewis, “Warring States: Political History,” in The Cambridge History of Ancient China, 587–650.

(5.) Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 25–53.

(7.) Not incidentally, the word “common” is identical to that used for a regional lord (gong 公): the lord’s interests are supposed to be identical to those of the community under his control (Paul R. Goldin, After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005], 59).

(8.) Lúshi chunqiu 17.8, translation modified from The Annals of Lü Buwei, 434.

(9.) These three statements are cited from the original text of “The Great Oath” (“Tai shi” 泰誓) (which was subsequently lost and replaced with a forgery currently incorporated in the Canon of Documents). In all likelihood, the original is from the Western Zhou period (c. 1046–771 bce). For citations, see Mengzi 9.5 (Mencius, 144) and Zuo zhuan Xiang 31.3, translation modified from Stephen Durrant, Li Wai-yee, and David Schaberg, Zuo Tradition/Zuo zhu (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 1275.


(12.) For the divine attributes of the sages, see Michael J. Puett, To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).


(16.) For Qin biblioclasm, see Kern, Text and Ritual, 183–196; Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire, 180–183.

(18.) *Hanshu* 56: 2503; cited from Puett, *To Become a God*, 295. For Dong Zhongshu’s theory, see Puett, *To Become a God*, 289–300.


(21.) Patricia Ebrey notes that “the relative rarity of reverencing likenesses of rulers makes China stand out among the early civilizations of Eurasia” (“Portrait Sculptures in Imperial Ancestral Rites in Song China,” *T’oung Pao* 83, no. 1–3 [1997], 46n13). Whereas imperial portraits were produced, their circulation generally remained limited to members of the upper elite; in the Ming dynasty “it was made illegal to make or possess an image of a ruler or former rulers, apparently out of fear that it would be used for anti-dynastic ends” (Portrait Sculptures,” *T’oung Pao* 83, no. 1–3 [1997], 46n13).


For the de-facto recognition of private property on land (without defining it de-jure), see Philip C. C. Huang, *Civil Justice in China: Representation and Practice in the Qing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996). For the ups and downs in the state’s relations with local elites throughout the imperial history, see Pines, *Everlasting Empire*, 104–133.


See, for instance, Harry Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China, 1572–1644* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).


For example, think just of the emperors’ ritual responsibilities. The court ritualists persistently multiplied the emperor’s ceremonial tasks so that by the late imperial period “even with the best of intentions, it was virtually impossible for an emperor to carry out all the prescribed rituals.” Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 212–213. In this situation, relegation of power to the underlings was the default choice of the majority of the monarchs.
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(34.) For the emperors’ tours, see Michael G. Chang, A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring & the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007) (Chang deals with the Qing emperors but his study contains plenty of references to early instances of imperial tours and the bureaucratic opposition to those.)

(35.) For Zhu Yuanzhang’s rule, see, for instance, John W. Dardess, Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983); Wu Han, Zhu Yuanzhang zhuan. For the complexity of Zhu Yuanzhang’s image, see Sarah Schneewind, ed., Long Live the Emperor: Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History (Minneapolis, MN: Society for Ming Studies, 2008).


(37.) Farmer, Zhu Yuanzhang.

(38.) For the changes following Zhu Yuanzhang’s death, see Dardess, Confucianism and Autocracy; Edward L. Dreyer, Early Ming China: A Political History, 1355–1435 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982); for the elite’s power in the late Ming, see Miller, State versus Gentry.


(41.) Huang, 1587, 46.


(43.) For the qurlitai in Mongol political culture and its gradual fading away under Khubilai, see Elizabeth Endicott-West, “Imperial Governance in Yuan Times,” Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, 46, no. 2 (1986): 523–549.
For Khubilai Khan, see Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); and for subsequent Yuan history, see John W. Dardess, *Conquerors and Confucians: Aspects of Political Change in Late Yuan China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973). David M. Robinson, ‘s *Empire’s Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 18–21, questions the widespread denigration of Toghon Temür as a weakening but does not produce compelling evidence to overturn the negative verdict. For the Qing Qianlong Emperor’s indignation with regard to Toghon Temür’s loss of nomadic prowess, see Chang, *A Court on Horseback*, 108–111.


For the classical presentation of this theory in English (which is based on much of early to mid-20th-century Chinese and Japanese scholarship), see Frederick W. Mote,
China’s Imperial Institution


(52.) See note 40.

(53.) See Peter K. Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 115-152 (for Song); and Endicott-West, “Imperial Governance,” 523-549 (for Yuan).

(54.) See, for instance, the articles collected in Frederick P. Brandauer and Huang Chün-chieh, eds. Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China (Seattle, WA, and London, U.K.: University of Washington Press, 1994) and in David Robinson, ed., Culture, Courtiers and Competition. See also Schneewind, ed., Long Live the Emperor.


(56.) See, for instance, Ge Quan 葛荃, Quanli zaizhi lixing: shiren, chuantong zhengzhi wenhua yu Zhongguo shehui 權力宰制理性—士人、傳統政治文化與中國社會 (Tianjin, China: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2003); Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire; Pines, Everlasting Empire, esp. 44-75.

(57.) See especially lengthy and very popular TV serials, Kangxi wangchao 康熙王朝 (2001), Yongzheng wangchao 雍正王朝 (1997), and Qianlong wangchao 乾隆王朝 (2002).

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