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*Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in
Sung Dynasty China*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (eds.). *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

The Sung¹ Dynasty spanned three of the most remarkable centuries in China's long history. Its predecessor, though celebrated in Chinese annals as the "Glorious" Tang Dynasty, lapsed irreversibly throughout its latter half into indiscriminate bloodshed and institutional decay. In A.D. 960 the first Sung Emperor, Chao K'uang-yin, definitively brought to a close two centuries of violent internal disorder. He swiftly undertook administrative and military reforms that were to serve his descendants well. By 1279, when Khubilai Khan's Mongol troops had displaced the last Sung emperor from his throne, Chinese society had effloresced into the most complex and polished agrarian bureaucracy on the planet. Its population, estimated at 60 million in the opening years of the Dynasty, had soared by 1100 A.D. to over 100 million people. Ten cities of over a million inhabitants each were sustained by agricultural products transported from the hinterlands on a dense network of roads, rivers, lakes, and canals. Stimulated by the glitter of urban prosperity, massive rural emigration occurred throughout this period; and its scope, and despite the emergence of a large urban proletariat, the division of labor in the cities of Sung China soon came to exceed anything to be witnessed anywhere else before the European Industrial Revolution. Contemporary descriptions of the concomitant cultural and recreational activities of a giant middle and upper-middle class of merchants, financiers, rentiers, and civil servants still dazzle the reader.²

During the Sung centuries, the people of southern China became firmly incorporated into the institutional patterns of imperial Chinese ("Han") society. Meanwhile the densely populated heartland was becoming further integrated as a largely monetized economy governed by a meritocratic national bureaucracy now selected almost completely through impersonally graded written examinations. Landscape painting—perhaps the Chinese artistic achievement most universally admired—reached a peak in the Sung era that by common consent it was never to exceed. Woodblock printing, gunpowder, and ocean-going vessels guided by compasses and stern-posted rudders became common elements of daily life. Eleventh-century technological innovations in the impressively large iron and steel industry brought Sung China closer to what could be designated an industrial "revolution" than any such development in world history preceding the eponymous breakthrough in those industries in 18th-century Britain. In short, Chinese society in this period not merely ranked ahead of its contemporaries around the globe. Along virtually every dimension, it set standards of techno-

logical, institutional, and cultural sophistication that had not been reached before, and were not to be reached again, before the "European Miracle" many centuries ahead. How it reached this level, and why it failed to sustain its advances while succumbing to external forces, are problems that seemingly demand some response from any writer on the era.

Ordering the World refutes that plausible proposition. Few of the above developments are reflected in its 437 pages. None of the ten contributors appear much preoccupied with the accompanying puzzles. Despite the highly detailed narrative histories embedded in some chapters, the organizing concerns of the authors are quite different. The "world" of which they write is a literary construct. What modes of discourse, they ask, were characteristically employed by a limited number of prominent Sung scholar-administrators in prescribing remedies for the social evils (principally a fluctuating supply of grain) they perceived? And what do such prescriptions reveal about these scholars' understanding of the motive forces and predictable consequences of societal action? These are worthy questions. The answers provided are in many cases not without interest. But it should be said at the outset that the questions are addressed to a readership presumed versed in the intricacies of Sung scholarship, and the answers are targeted at those who so qualify. Within this closed circuit neither framing the societal setting of the questions nor assessing the historical validity of the subsequent analyses appears to have been incumbent on the contributors. Excluded from the opening conversations, other readers may well feel like eavesdroppers on a very private scholarly symposium.

A mostly unseen presence at this round table is the philosophical historian John Pocock. The contributors' concerns arise in large measure from their joint acceptance of his contention that discursive conventions offer a crucial-indication—perhaps the definitive clue—to the true nature of a society (5–12).³This thesis defines their project. All contributors remain exquisitely attentive to the nuanced connotations of "keywords" (the term is English literary critic Raymond Williams's) that may mislead the unwary, especially in translation into modern English. They document—and often seem to endorse—a characteristic Chinese equation of rectification of terms with rectification of the world. Throughout the book they seek to identify and elaborate the distinctive Wittgensteinian "languages" of politics in which the public affairs of Sung China are discussed.⁴

Because—over time and through space—these "languages" overlap, evolve, and shift in their meaning, the editors insist that "we cannot...regard our 'discourses' as all-determining, all-encompassing, as it were all-imprisoning" (8). Yet only one of the sixteen chapters, an historical investigation by Paul J. Smith with the unpromisingly narrow subtitle of "The Tea and Horse Trade and the 'Green Sprouts' Loan Policy, 1068–1085," actually explores the interplay of conceptual commitments with institutional logic in accounting for the miscar-

riage of state policies. So it is only there that readers can weigh the actual importance of discursive formulations against contingent empirical variables and situational logic in determining historical outcomes. Elsewhere, the level of analysis remains unremittingly ideational.⁵ And so persuasive do the contributors find their approach that only very rarely in this volume do they see the need to enter into discussions of the statistically or sociologically representative nature of such "languages," the degree of institutional leverage exercised by its propagators, or the evidence that discursive indicators of perceptions determine observable policy choices. Like the Chinese scholars they study, they take for granted that surviving texts offer the best access we have to the mental landscapes of an historical era—and thus (also by assumption) to its determining currents.

To a surprising extent, much of what is most memorable in this book is said in the introductory chapter. There the two editors, Professors Hymes and Schirokauer, develop a broadly configurative context for the essays that follow. They describe the organizing focus of the volume as the point in Sung China "where political or institutional history meets intellectual history" (2). The Sung era, they note in several concisely summary opening paragraphs, was a period of major demographic and mercantile expansion, but also one in which the Chinese state was continuously beset by the need to generate sufficient revenue to maintain the huge standing armies required to fend off nomadic threats to its western and northern borders. Eventually this burden proved fatal. Before it did, however, it stimulated imperial ministers to search for the new sources of revenue a diversified commercial base made possible. It also led a greatly enlarged, better educated, and newly energized scholarly elite to ask basic questions about the relation of government to society. In turn, the answers they provided to these questions led them to engage in vigorous debate over what government could and should do as a potential agent of social change.

Out of this debate emerged a structured identification of a "public space" (2) located between the state itself and the private or familiar sphere. Previous Chinese political thought has focused on issues of "statecraft"—i.e., what policies the emperor should follow in order to promote the well-being of his domain, and what tactics might best aid him in such ventures. Sung political philosophers added theoretical sophistication to this traditional concern. For the first time they gave full recognition to the *institutional* nature of states. Setting aside assessments of the personal strengths and failings of individual emperors, they took up the question of the shaping forces in governmental recruitment and decision-making. They then proceeded to ask what these revealed about the prospects for comprehensive, coherent governance. They also looked more systematically at the interplay of interest with moral constraints within the field of forces determining societal dynamics. Reflection on the joint implications of these analyses appears to have progressively increased skepticism concerning the imperial state's capacity to transform society in accordance with its ministerial

elite's intentions. Policies that failed to take into account the probable responses of intermediate elites to imperial initiatives seemed doomed to failure; and because such responses were typically complex and hard to foresee, social change was less likely to reflect an act of imperial will than the unanticipated outcome of unplanned adjustment. From these philosophical confrontations evolved a conception of state–societal connections that set the parameters for scholarly discourse in China for the next eight hundred years—parameters that were to be increasingly challenged in the waning decades of the Ch'ing Dynasty but that conclusively collapsed only with the imperial system itself.

According to Professors Schirokauer and Hymes, two broad historical trends reinforced this evolution of Chinese political thought. In the first place, the negative trajectory of contemporary scholarly estimates of state capacity during the Sung era correlate well with modern perceptions of a secular shift in China's state–societal balance in favor of the latter term. William Skinner among others has noted that from the T'ang Dynasty (618–906) through the Ch'ing (1644–1911) the population of China grew roughly tenfold. Meanwhile, the number of state administrative centers and the size of the imperial bureaucracy appear to have changed very little, if at all (2). Thus without appreciable expansion in its numbers of agents or improvement in its techniques of governance, an apparatus that once controlled 50 million subjects sought later to control nearly 500 million.

Secondly, during this period the center of gravity of imperial control shifted steadily southward from the T'ang capitals of Chang–an and Loyang through Kaifeng to the late Southern Sung capital city of Hangchow. This shift, Schirokauer and Hymes contend, was not merely territorial but even more social in its significance. It accompanied the decline of aristocratic dominance over a Yellow River heartland of subsistence cultivators and traders in small–bulk, high value luxury goods and its replacement by a system that required a small cadre of successful examinees to attempt governance of a region of mountains and rivers containing a much more populous and far more complex society of commercial rice and tea farmers, independent urban merchants, industrialists, and coastal traders. Following Sung specialist Robert Hartwell, Schirokauer and Hymes detect in the latter setting the growth of a quite distinctive "southern" political outlook that assigns to government a more passive, less centralized, and more ceremonial role. Such an outlook, they contend, gave pride of place to a diversified elite that "seems to have entrenched itself in its home localities, to have married locally, lived locally, and in many ways...thought and acted locally" (4). Despite important exceptions and cross–currents, they find more innate resistance to centralizing imperial claims among southern thinkers and a livelier appreciation of the potency and legitimacy of localized religious sects, clan organizations, urban corporations, and semi–autonomous overseas mercantile initiatives.

Schirokauer and Hymes believe that the more general patterns and overall trend of scholarly discourse during this period can be instructively portrayed through specific pairings of the leading controversialists. Of these, perhaps the illuminating polarity—one carried forward in greater depth in a chapter by Peter K. Bol—is the one that can be drawn between the celebrated Wang An-shih (1021–1086), chief councillor to the Emperor Shen-tsung from 1070 to his retirement from the imperial court in 1076, and his almost exact contemporary and chief critic, Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086), who enjoyed a much briefer period of imperial favor in the last year before his death. The differences between these two scholarly memorialists appears in almost every respect in their conflicting visions of state and their recommendations for state action.⁵ For present purposes, however, these may be reduced to a few of the most elemental contrasts.

Wang, one of the major figures in Chinese history, is a prototypically activist reformer with unlimited optimism concerning the possibilities for purposive use of state action to transform society. Many of his writings, indeed, appear to deny the validity of defining a boundary between the two. In Wang's view, expressed in memorials to the emperor both before and while in power, the state is the primary—perhaps the exclusive—agency behind all social change. It can penetrate deeply into the interstices of the encompassing society without loss of integrity. Through its conduits flow the resources that critically determine societal allocations of political, economic, and social power. At will it can establish or dismantle private clusters of power. Humanity at large is highly malleable, and the state can therefore shape behavior into the desired mold through creating new institutions to which subjects will swiftly become accustomed. The imperial state of his time therefore bore a unique, nearly exclusive responsibility for reordering contemporary society so as to assure that the distribution and exercise of socio-economic power and its perquisites would conform to the demanding standards of social justice envisaged in the philosophical classics of the ancient sages. Its duty lay in overcoming resistant societal institutions through opening up new opportunities for gaining wealth and through undermining traditional hierarchies restricting the rise of a meritocracy. To assure that it discharged this responsibility vigorously and justly, the state should require—and provide the economic means for—all children to engage in purposive study of the classics of good government, after which a comprehensive selection system should enable the state to recruit its most talented and ambitious subjects. Once the services of the most talented had been secured, however, they should be freed to exercise initiative on behalf of their chosen public welfare projects without excessively inhibiting supervision from above.

This Platonic vision of society as a purposively integrated extension of a just state appears as a virtual ideal type of modern activist totalitarian Communism without the trappings of police and party, though all the authors scrupulously refrain from drawing anachronistic parallels with Mao Tse-tung in

his radically reformist phase. Conversely, Wang's most insistent critic, Ssu-ma Kuang, deploys an arsenal of arguments with overtones inescapably reminiscent of Edmund Burke and Friedrich Hayek (though again the authors put forward no such points of reference). Chief among these are three: the frailty of human attempts at utopian social engineering, and the probability that its miscarriages will cause much suffering; the consequent need for limiting state agendas to a few essential programs, appreciation of the zero-sum relationship between public and private wealth, and a firm delineation of the boundary between states and the societies they govern so as to preserve the integrity of both; and finally, a clear recognition that virtue is acquired through reflective refinements of experience in context rather than through formal instruction and must therefore be expected to emerge from those classes of humanity that have had ample practice in its exercise, with, as a consequent corollary, the need for traditional social controls through stable hierarchies as a check on the morally unguided propensities of the merely talented. Government, in Ssu-ma's view, is no more than a small sphere of action within a vast and only partially comprehensible network of social relations; and it is through the long-established processes of the latter that most of the great challenges to humanity must be met and the great conflicts resolved. Adam Smith would have found little to disagree with in these words.⁷

At such moments, the justification for the imposing scholarly enterprise of this volume becomes plain to the general reader. It is fascinating to learn that many of the most searching epistemological, social, and political doctrines of modern European philosophy were anticipated, not merely in general outline but in their self-conscious application as criteria for state action, in the scholarly controversies of Sung China. The specific formulas may differ, but not the underlying formulations. Professors Schirokauer, Hymes, and Bols convincingly draw out numerous theoretical formulations from the often stiffly-worded and parochial texts they discuss, and their elaborations have therefore much to offer to readers interested in the theoretical aspects of political discourse in ancient civilizations, and more particularly in Sung China. But what else does the volume have to offer such readers? Disappointingly little in view of its bulk. Many chapters are little more than an increasingly wearying slog through a featureless terrain toward undefined objectives. We are told what various scholar-bureaucrats thought and wrote but not why we should care about their conclusions—let alone whether these were valid. Others offer year-by-year narrative accounts of policies adopted and actions taken without indicating what hypotheses they test. Nearly half the essays in the volume offer prolonged, extensively overlapping accounts of controversies generated by efforts to establish "ever-normal" granaries as a form of state-administered famine relief. Why do they do so? Because famine relief was strategically critical to the survival of the Sung Dynasty? Because it demanded higher expenditures than any other state policy? Because it peculiarly well illustrates the problems of establishing an operative

boundary between state and society? Because it was the topic that most frequently appeared in the surviving writings of the scholar-administrators under study in this volume? The underlying question is never addressed. Readers may suspect that the last of these possibilities was controlling, but that is only a guess.

Matters are made no easier for the uninitiated by what is omitted. To plunge readers *in medias res* is a better guide to dramatic art than to scholarly exposition. Thus in a disappointingly uncontextual account of "Chu Hsi's Sense of History," Professor Schirokauer informs readers in his opening sentence that "Although Chu Hsi did not develop a fully articulated 'philosophy of history,' he was nonetheless highly sensitive to history and not only as a subject to be incorporated into his philosophy" (193). But what was that philosophy? Why should Chu Hsi's sensitivity to history concern the reader? Professor Schirokauer does not say (either here or elsewhere) that Chu Hsi was one of the pivotal figures in Chinese history because of his reformulation of scattered Confucian texts into a "Neo-Confucian" canon that was to serve as the primary point of reference for all Chinese scholars and administrative examinees down to the collapse of the Empire. Nor does he mention at any point that Chu Hsi's literary textualism made him the prime target of critics of the dissociation of Chinese higher education from technical, mathematical, observational, or practical content.⁸

Fear of patronizing the reader is pervasive throughout this volume. William Theodore de Bary's essay on "Chen Te-hsiu and Statecraft" opens with a six-page description of Chu Hsi's writings, following which we are told that "Chen Te-hsiu's admonitory verse at the conclusion of his *Heart Classic* opens with (the) declaration..." (354). One can accept that it does. But who is Chen Te-hsiu? A silly concern, apparently.⁹ So, apparently, is any momentary uncertainty caused by the assertion (141) that "Wang's sympathies lay with those who had been associated with Fan Chung-yen's reforms of 1043-1044"; it is true that neither these reforms nor their progenitor is mentioned earlier in the essay, but the index reveals (and an attentive reader should presumably have noted) that Fan Chung-yen is helpfully referred to 97 pages earlier in a different essay in the sentence "Yet Liu showed over twenty years ago that the position had been asserted fifteen years before, and again immediately before Ou-yang's essay, by Fan Chung-yen" (44). Such ping-ponging of references is seemingly predicated on the axiom that in scholarship, as in exercise, there can be no gain without pain. But many doctors are now challenging that axiom in the latter endeavor, and some readers may experience the unworthy temptation to do so here.

Ordering the World promises much in its title. For specialists in Sung China, it may well deliver on that promise. Other readers are more likely to withhold such judgments. Sung China is an endlessly fascinating historical era. How it became represented—and ordered—in the minds of its most sophisticated observers is a topic that should readily engage all inquiring minds over many hundreds of pages. This volume fitfully illuminates that process. But in too

many of its pages narrowly formulated questions receive uninspiring answers. China in some of its most remarkable centuries deserves better than that.

NOTES

¹The Sung Dynasty nominally extended from its inauguration in A.D. 960 by Chao K'uang-yin, the "Grand Progenitor," to its definitive collapse in A.D. 1279 following the Mongol conquest of Hangchow. In 1126, however, the Sung emperors' longstanding inability to establish firm control over their northern borders reached a climacteric with the conquest of Kaifeng and the capture of the Emperor Hui-tsung ("Excellent Ancestor") and his court by Jurchen horsemen. After a decade of fugitive existence, one of his sons, Kao-tsung ("High Ancestor"), settled down in Hangchow to initiate a second period of dynastic rule of a dramatically contracted empire with a distinctly more southerly base that lasted to the Mongol Interregnum. Historians have commonly found many reasons for employing the terms "Northern" Sung and "Southern" Sung to demarcate the sharp break in continuity between these periods. The essays in this book very largely focus on controversies occurring in the earlier, "northern" period; but for the sake of simplicity, I shall follow the practice of the authors in referring without further geographical differentiation to the "Sung" Dynasty. I shall also conform to the undefended authorial choice of the old Wades-Giles transliteration of Chinese names and terms in preference to the now widely adopted pin-yin system.

²See Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250-1276* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962) for an especially memorable summary of these accounts as they pertain to the Southern Sung lakeside capital of Hangchow

³Unless otherwise identified, all parenthetical numbers refer to pages in the volume under review.

⁴The authors do not themselves refer to the later philosophical writings—most notably, the *Philosophical Investigations* (1951)—of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and in fact the cooptation of his name in the search for the "languages" of disciplined discourses may constitute a faulty, if widely popular, reading of that influential text. See the discussion in William Warren Bartley III, *Wittgenstein*, (Lasalle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1985), pp. 131-138.

⁵Some of the contributors—most notably, Richard von Glahn in an <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol34/iss34/7>

essay on "Community and Welfare: Chu Hsi's Community Granary in Theory and Practice"—do link their exposition of ideas to certain historical policies which were said to implement them. And Robert Hymes, in the only essay in the book that systematically interleaves theoretical propositions with narrative ("Moral Duty and Self-Regulating Process in Southern Sung View of Famine Relief"), does structure a scholarly controversy through sustained reference to imperial policy experiments. But the linkage is by way of illustration: we are shown how precept led to practice. What we do not see is whether these practices reveal faults in the precepts, whether they led to revision of the original formulations, and whether practices elsewhere (e.g., in industrialization, commerce, military activity, or construction of infra-structure) throw light on the outcomes (when they are mentioned at all) of the agrarian institution here illustrated—let alone whether and why these policies and their fate were strategic in any way to the survival or change of critically important institutional components of Sung civilization.

⁶The material dimensions of these disagreements are quite sufficient to fill the long chapter by Peter Bol (128–192) and it is taken up at numerous points in the volume, including the initial summary and recapitulation in Schirokauer and Hymes's introductory chapter (16–18, 47–53).

⁷Ironically, Wang An-shih was born and reared in Fuchou, barely 300 miles up the coast from the two southerly entrepots of Hong Kong and Canton, whereas Ssu-ma Kuang lived most of his life west of Loyang on the Yellow River. If the reversed provenance of the two chief exemplars of the "northern" and "southern" political philosophies discussed above in any way disturbs that schematization, the authors do not say so.

⁸Chu Hsi was to be criticized in these terms as early as the 15th century, e.g. by General Wang Yang-ming, often described as the "outstanding thinker of the Ming period." See Raymond Dawson, *Imperial China* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1972), p. 245.

⁹Later in this essay, de Bary does offer uninformed readers a clue to Chen Te-hsiu's identity by referring to a "proclamation issued by Chen Te-hsiu when he was prefect of Ch'uan-chou" (336).

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