

REVIEW

FANG CHENGFENG 方誠峰, *JUNZHU, DAOXUE YU SONG WANGCHAO* 君主、道學與宋王朝 [MONARCHY, THE LEARNING OF THE WAY, AND THE SONG DYNASTY], BEIJING: BEIJING DAXUE CHUBANSHE, 2024. 299 PP. ISBN: 9787301354018.

Reararticulating the nature of Chinese monarchical power, *Junzhu Daoxue yu Song wangchao* 君主、道學與宋王朝 (Monarchy, the Learning of the Way, and the Song Dynasty) examines how monarchy, as a form of political domination, maintained its grasp over the state in the Southern Song (1127–1279). Drawing upon Max Weber's concept of *patrimonialism*, Fang Chengfeng offers an unequivocal assessment of the debate over a crucial component of the Tang-Song transition thesis: the autocratic tendency of the Song monarchy. Scholarship on Song political history over the past half a century has highlighted three major developments during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: the emergence of autocratic chief councilors, recurrent policy oscillations between peace and war, and the rise of *Daoxue* 道學 (Learning of the Way or Neo-Confucianism). These three developments, as Fang shows, were all closely related to the shifts between the personal and the indirect rule of monarchy. By focusing on these two ideal types of exercising monarchical power, Fang argues that, more broadly, monarchical domination throughout Chinese history operated within a realm of personal relations.

The debate into which Fang seeks to intervene, namely whether the Song monarchy and its mode of domination were autocratic in nature, is concerned with how to periodize Middle Period China. This problématique was first raised by early twentieth-century Japanese scholarship to assert an independent Asian trajectory toward modernity. It was further developed by Chinese scholarship to contend that the Song monarchy was not autocratic. Since Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990), Chinese scholars have argued that the development of meritocracy, underpinned by the examination system, gave rise to a *shidafu* 士大夫

(scholar-official) political culture that placed constraints on autocratic rulership and thus ushered the Song state toward a rational government. Yü Ying-shih 余英時 (1930–2021) carried this argument further in *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie* 朱熹的歷史世界 (*Zhu Xi's Historical World*), contending that Neo-Confucianism offered a meaningful constraint to the autocratic tendency of the monarchy. By reifying Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130–1200) idealization of ethical authority that Confucian scholar-officials supposedly possessed, Yü argued that Confucian scholar-officials were independent actors who could counteract the Song rulers when the latter erred.

Fang disagrees. Part I of the book under review, titled “Monarchical Domination” 君主支配, contains three chapters. It directly challenges this idealization of the power relation between the emperor and his officials by abstracting two ideal types of monarchical domination. Shifting back and forth between the roles of imperial steward and secretary, *zaixiang* 宰相 (chief councilor) sat at the pinnacle of imperial government administering the empire on the emperor's behalf, a synecdoche of *shidafu* politics in the Song. Yet, a councilor's capacity in the public realm, Fang suggests, derived from the extent of his personal relationship with the emperor in the private realm. By and large, the same applied to scholar-officials who served the state. Part II of the book, titled “Political Theory and Practice of *Daoxue*” 道學的政治理論與實踐, contains four chapters, which, altogether, a critique of the tendency among modern intellectual historians to overemphasize the significance of Neo-Confucian influence on high politics while overlooking its tangible impact in daily administration. As Fang demonstrates, rather than placing a check on monarchical power, Neo-Confucian hermeneutics provided the emperor with additional leverage to sacralize imperial role in governance while minimizing potential criticism he would incur. Meanwhile, even though Neo-Confucian proponents attempted to uplift the general populace from excessive taxation, when confronted with the constraints of real-world conditions, their efforts only worsened the problem. In the following sections, I will examine each chapter of the book in detail to assess the merits of Fang's arguments.

Chapter One traces the political genealogy of *zaixiang* up to the eleventh century and identifies two ideal types of monarchical domination centered on the office of chief councilor. From the Qin-Han period to the Northern-and-Southern Dynasties period, the functions and roles of chief councilors, according to Fang, diverged along two courses. During Qin-Han period, they oversaw all aspects of imperial governance on behalf of the emperors, possessing power superior to all other officials. Qin-Han councilors can thus be regarded as *zongtong*

總統 (executive managers, literally “to direct and manage”), typifying the first ideal type that embodies a form of political entrustment. Yet after the Han, the official titles that had once denoted this “chief” councillorship devolved into honorary sinecures, while personal palace attendants assumed their role by drafting edicts and advising on policy. Fang refers to these as *shuji* 樞機 (close assistants, literally “cardinal office”), the second ideal type that represents a form of personal rule by the emperor. Once these close assistants subsumed the role of the former chief councilors, that office came to depend on the emperor's utmost trust and confidentiality. In the later years of Empress Wu 武則天 (r.690–705) during the Tang, the close-assistant type fully incorporated the executive-manager role by establishing sub-agencies that corresponded to the Six Ministries within the newly instituted *zhongshu menxia* 中書門下 (Secretariat-Chancellery).

This transformation is significant because it coincided with a crucial observation of the Tang political trend, in which inner-court commissions encroached upon the functions of the outer-court ministries. Fang's distinctive intervention into this long-standing consensus is to demonstrate that the conflict between the inner-court commissions and outer-court ministries was rooted less in their differences than in their similarities. Fang argues that Tang chief councilors, as close assistants with regular access to the emperor, were not fundamentally different from eunuch commissioners. Both, through the lens of Weber's *patrimonialism*, functioned as stewards of the emperor's household. The seeming rivalry between the Southern Offices under chief councilors and the Northern Agencies under eunuch commissioners was therefore not a structural opposition between inner and outer, or North and South, but a conflict of interests arising from the shared close-assistant nature of these roles operating in the private realm. This power relation continued through the Song. Though he does not explicitly address this power relation in the language of private versus public, by invoking Weber's *patrimonialism*, Fang undoubtedly gestures toward a private realm that mediated these relations. The Tang-Song monarchs, as Fang concludes, switched back and forth between the two ideal types to exercise greater control over the state.

Chapters Two and Three reexamine the political significance of autocratic councilor in late Southern Song politics through the ideal types of “executive managers” and “close assistants.” Such a dual mandate by the chief councilor produced a dual entrustment relationship: on the one hand, between the emperor and the councilor, and on the other hand, between the chief councilor and regional military commanders. This structure was crucial for managing persistent military threats from Jurchens and then the Mongols. While

the primary entrustment between emperor and chief councilor had existed since Southern Song's founding, the secondary entrustment between the councilor and regional defense commissioners emerged only during the tenure of Shi Miyuan 史彌遠 (1164–1233). Using the tenures of Shi Miyuan and Shi Songzhi 史嵩之 (1189–1257) as case studies, Fang shows how this structure allowed for consistent policy execution and effective national defense, as the councilors leveraged their personal ties with the military and fiscal acumen in balancing the budget. However, Shi Songzhi's eventual fall reveals the structure's core weakness: the councilor's power was entirely dependent on the emperor's favor. When this structure collapsed, as it did during periods of dual councillorship in 1230s and 1250s, trust between the court and regional military commanders in turn faltered. The resulting crises in border defense necessitated an autocratic councilor who could secure the mutual confidence between the court and the periphery, leading to the rise of Jia Sidao 賈似道 (1213–1275) to fill that role.

The next four chapters turn to the final element of the title—Neo-Confucianism—and its impact on both the emperor and local governance. Chapter Four provides a concise yet insightful synthesis of how Zhu Xi's reading of the *Daxue* 大學 (*The Highest Order of Cultivation*) offered the Song ruling class a new framework for situating the ruler in relation to the governed. Within *Daoxue* political philosophy, two core principles stand out. First, the individual—especially the monarch—must pursue self-cultivation to fully realize one's moral potential. This occurs through *gewu* 格物 (investigating myriad things), which for rulers means studying the classics, deliberating on governance, and making policy decisions. Second, the enlightened ruler and his officials bear the responsibility of guiding the governed toward the same attainment. Yet Zhu Xi acknowledges that within the boundless reality, *gewu* is an unending process—one may never fully perfect oneself. The extent to which such cultivation benefits the governed depends on how far the ruler or official applies his moral insight in governance, a principle originated from *Daxue* known as *xiejuzhidao* 絜矩之道 (the way of measuring by the carpenter's square). In practice, this required officials to treat the governed equitably, safeguarding their livelihood through food, housing, and work. Yet as shown in Fang's examples, because self-cultivation was individually realized, Neo-Confucian proponents demonstrated a diverging, if not conflicting, understanding of their commitment when it is being put into practice.

Chapter Five demonstrates how Lizong 理宗 (r.1224–1264) incorporated and manipulated Neo-Confucian discourse to deflect political criticism from his ministers and elevate his own position in the order of Confucian orthodoxy. In Lizong's postscripts to a

now-lost *Jingtian tu* 敬天圖 (*Chart of Revering Heaven*), Fang offers a reading of how Lizong constructed an inherent relationship between the monarchy and the Confucian canon and, by extension, the Way. According to Lizong, the canon is a varying manifestation of the Way, and by copying and studying that canon, the monarch is able not only to bring forth his complete inner potential but also to manifest his reverence for Heaven. His postscripts demonstrate a mastery of the Neo-Confucian discourse, but the irony here is that the very discourses that supposedly motivate the monarch to strive for his very best were adopted to nullify political criticism and responsibility; since there was no end to *gewu*, the policy errors and political mistakes committed by the ruler were always forgivable and merely reasons for his greater self-improvement. The Neo-Confucian advocates at the court, limited by their intellectual orientation and political subservience, had no other discursive repertoire to counter Lizong's self-serving posture of "revering Heaven."

Chapter Six presents several case studies on how Neo-Confucian proponents addressed financial challenges with the principle of *xiejuzhidao* in local governance. Military pressure along the borders forced many local magistrates and prefects to choose between fulfilling their duties as tax collectors and adhering to the Confucian principle. This dilemma was embedded in a system of extraction based on monetized levies, a major source of agony for the commoners. Zhu Xi and his disciple Chen Mi 陳宓 (1171–1230), while serving in Nankang Commandery at different times, had to meet various tax quotas, many payable in cash. Committed to the ideal of relieving the people from excessive taxation, they sought exemptions and reductions through relief distribution with varying results. While Zhu refused to expand monetized levies, Chen did not. Believing that poor counties would benefit, he reallocated unmet quotas from subordinate counties. Yet since total quotas were fixed, the difference still had to be offset by certain methods. One of them, known as *daishu* 代輸 (substitute payment), allowed local governments to substitute tax shortfalls by collecting extra, often monetized, payments from specific groups and transferring the loss to them. Fang aptly terms such tactics "a kind of alienated good policy 一種異化的善政". This transfer of loss explained Zhu Xi's refusal to expand monetized levies. Few instances of *daishu* ever benefited the governed, which was why Jia Sidao and his Neo-Confucian allies advocated the *Gongtian Fa* 公田法 (Public Fields Policy) instead, using funds generated from confiscated state lands to cover tax shortages.

Chapter Seven investigates the personal back grounds and intellectual orientations of the proponents of the Public Fields Policy, which Fang interprets as a Neo-Confucian initiative that aligned state interests with the moral activism of practicing *xiejuzhidao*. Although many

scholars have written about the sociopolitical context of the Policy and its economic impact, it seems little attention has been paid to the individual history and intellectual tendencies of its proponents. Fang's contribution is to show that Neo-Confucian proponents at the court, with the support of Jia Sidao, proposed, administered, and oversaw the Policy; it was safeguarded by officials with Neo-Confucian affiliation at every level. While Neo-Confucian statesmen often appear as benevolent elders in local sources, as Fang shows, many of these officials who implemented the Policy were remembered as ruthless extractors who hurt the local wealthy by forcefully seizing their landholdings. Their actions stemmed from a conviction that the Policy was the only viable solution to uplift the populace from predatory levies. At the same time, Jia Sidao and many at the court saw the Policy as an opportunity to strengthen mired state finances by decreasing its reliance on monetary policy. In the name of practicing *xiejuzhidao*, the transactional loss or the cost of implementing the Policy was transferred to the large landowners, who were seen as mere externalities under the Policy.

In conclusion, I would make two observations regarding the scope and nature of the book. First, it represents an ambitious attempt to generalize the characteristics of Chinese monarchy through an insightful analysis of the types of monarchical domination. Fang's two ideal types and the framework of dual entrustment offer a refreshing perspective to reconsider the features of political centralization in Chinese history: on the one hand, exercising the centralized power within the monarchy entails delegation, thus there would always be varying degrees of indirect rule; on the other hand, the delegates chosen by the monarch were both readily available and dispensable, further highlighting the master-servant relationship that had been embedded in imperial bureaucracy. The chief councilors, such as the Shis and Jia Sidao, gained their primacy as managers who maintained the emperor's family-state economy. Neo-Confucian doctrine could not check, let alone effect changes in, rulers like Lizong because it could not reverse this fundamental power relationship. The mode of monarchical domination after the Song, Fang argues, swings between indirect and direct rule exemplified by these two ideal types. The Song monarchy therefore was an autocratic institution underpinned by varying sets of personal relations, and this is Fang's unequivocal answer to the autocracy debate.

Second, this book exposes a different side of *Daoxue* proponents by evaluating the financial impact of Neo-Confucian political practice in local governance. In his recent work,

Charles Hartman characterizes technocracy as a crucial feature of Song governance.<sup>1</sup> While the two ideal types of imperial technocrats and Confucian institutionalists stand at opposite ends of Hartman's continuum model, the officials serving the daily administration were somewhere in between. Fang's explanation for this in-betweenness, as mentioned above, is that it stemmed from the private relationship that underpinned the operation of the imperial bureaucracy. Neo-Confucian scholar-officials were not as pedantic as described in the conventional sources. They were just as technocratic and exploitative as imperial technocrats typified in Hartman's model. The Public Fields Policy can be seen as a dark litmus test for *Daoxue* proponents to demonstrate their determination in resolving the financial burden placed on the populace while maintaining their allegiance to the throne and the state. As they saw that the lower classes were being exploited beyond grief and that the need for national defense necessitated continuous tax collection, going after the wealthy landowning class was a pragmatic solution, even if this meant a severe disruption of the local social order. This sheds lights on a crucial nexus where Neo-Confucian doctrine and practice diverged, in which the pursuit of social welfare only translated into inequity. In this divergence, one also sees that practicing *xiejuzhidao* became in reality a useful pretext for the state and its actors to widen the scope of resource extraction in order to sustain the monarchical regime, and it would be wrong, Fang insists, to mistake such a level of state capacity for signs of transitioning toward a rational, modern government. This is Fang's critical response to Yü Ying-shih's seminal work, *Zhu Xi's Historical World*.

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1 Charles Hartman, *Structures of Governance in Song Dynasty China, 960–1279 CE* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 115–40.