Introduction

Classics and the State in Chinese History

For over two millennia after the Qin (221–206 BC), the ruling houses of successive empires in China endorsed the Confucian Classics as state orthodoxy. As the specifically defined corpus of “government documents” (guanshu) or the sages’ teachings, the Confucian Classics enjoyed an exceptional longevity, perhaps unparalleled in global history. However, the seemingly unbreakable marriage between the Confucian Classics and the imperial state also had its own episodes of uneasy relationship. Only by heeding the tension between the two, ironically enough, may we understand why they remained undivorced until the collapse of the imperial system itself. To explain the endurance of the Confucian Classics in Chinese history, this book will highlight the era of “big government” in Northern Song (960–1127) China when the tension between the two led the imperial state to create a new set of Classics. This was perhaps the most troubled phase in the ostensibly happy marriage between the Classics and the state in Chinese history.

Given their enormous standing and tenacious hold in China and beyond, the Confucian Classics in East Asia have often been compared to the Bible in the West. Yet unlike the Bible, most of the Confucian Classics, Rudolf Wagner writes, “visibly share a common focus: what is the best way to run a state.” As guide on how to “run a state,” the Confucian Classics offered a repertoire of political norms and social values for historical actors of diverse
backgrounds: emperors (native or alien), statesmen (high or low), literati (well known or obscure), literate commoners, reformers, anti-reformers, radicals, conservatives, usurpers, dissidents, loyalists, martyrs, hermits, rebels, revolutionaries, and so on. All those actors voluntarily propped up the Confucian Classics for their own purposes; and their differences kept alive the tension between the Classics and the state. In fact, the Confucian Classics could be used just as much to legitimatize the founding of a dynasty as to usurp it, as exemplified by the cycle of dynastic changes throughout Chinese history.

Regarding the longevity of the Confucian Classics in Chinese history, naive observers might hold that those documents were no more than the ideological cement of autocracy for solidifying the Grand Unity (da yitong) of imperial control. The modern classicist-historian Qian Mu (1895–1990) brushed off such naïveté by asking his students in 1970s Taiwan: “Which do you think would serve autocracy better, the Analects or the Hanfei zi?” To Qian Mu, the canny techniques of total control in the Han Feizi were obviously much closer to despotic rule than the visions of normative politics stressed in the Analects. Qian Mu’s convictions were, of course, grounded upon his solid knowledge of traditional Chinese classical learning.

During a period of more than two millennia, down to the late seventeenth century, at least 4,300 authors left over 8,300 commentaries on the Confucian Classics. The sheer number of identified authors and their works is striking, given that they are only the tip of the iceberg and do not include the numerous scholars and their products of the Great Qing philological movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A majority of these works were produced by self-supporting individuals, rather than state-sponsored academicians, who voluntarily devoted decades, if not whole lifetimes, to the mastery of their own Classics. Despite the imperial state’s repeated attempts at standardization and canonization, an increasing number of statesmen and scholars continued to engage their Classics and diversified into competing schools of classical learning. With the cumulative buildup of
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privately compiled commentaries and treatises, tens of thousands of exegetes, thinkers, and statesmen contributed to the continuous making of the Confucian Classics. Subsequently, the number of the state-sanctioned Classics grew over time, absorbing influential commentaries and new theories, from the initial five to nine to twelve to thirteen to even twenty-one.\(^7\)

In a political system that recruited government officials through the civil examinations, the canonical literacy of the Confucian Classics was, of course, a sine qua non for social elites.\(^8\) The level of mastery in classical learning could translate into political capital; forming a partnership with the state, social elites of imperial China used their knowledge of classical learning for the social reproduction of their members.\(^9\) The growing influence of the civil examinations in a post-Tang world partly accounts for the endurance of their Classics.

Yet the reliance of elites’ intellectual life on state institutions does not sufficiently explain the unabated passion of traditional exegetes. In the field of the civil examinations, rivaling schools often competed to define, rather than passively follow, the very contents of the examinations administered by the imperial court.\(^10\) The creation of the Four Books as a new set of Classics by the Neo-Confucian founders and their ultimate rise to preeminence under the Mongol Yuan (1271–1368) empire exemplify the bottom-up process by which the Chinese literati redefined the evolving body of the Confucian Classics.\(^11\) In fact, since the early Han a long line of scholars and thinkers often attempted to “correct” the Confucian Classics as they saw fit, and succeeded, though not always, in doing so. Then specifically who (in terms of prestige, wealth, power, and political orientation) were most instrumental in sustaining the long life of the Confucian Classics in Chinese history? Why were they so devoted to their Classics? What did the Classics give them? With these questions in mind, I will illuminate the interplay between the Classics, political actors, and the imperial court through a close analysis of the state-sanctioned orthodox tome of Northern Song China, an outlier in the history of Chinese classical learn-
ing that once rose to preeminence under the auspices of the imperial state but was subject to a near-total destruction in subsequent eras.

The Rituals of Zhou and State Activism

At a deeper level, this book studies the interactions between a text and thinkers who use it to develop, formulate, and promote their political visions. In China, and in some other premodern civilizations, traditional scholars of the Classics often developed their ideas with reference to a particular text (or body of texts) and expressed their social and political agenda as a commentary on it. Though often misrepresented as mere exegetes, they were not simpleminded carriers of tradition; they interpreted the Classics in various ways for their own purposes. Yet they were not arbitrary readers of the Classics; they thought with the Classics and expressed their political visions through the traditional medium of classical learning. Through these interactions, traditional thinkers could represent their plans for government as “legitimate,” and the Classics themselves were often reinterpreted, redefined, and even reinvented. By tapping into their exegetical modes of thinking, we may get closer to understanding how those traditional thinkers addressed their own “constitutional agenda,” defined as the will to grapple with “a set of concerns about the legitimate ordering of public life” in action.

This book is a study of one such case. Through close analysis of classical commentaries, I will show how one rather arcane Confucian text of dubious origins was transformed into a constitutional document of arguably the most comprehensive statist reform in imperial China—known as the New Policies (1068–1125, excluding 1086–94). In the history of Chinese classical learning, the Northern Song has generally been viewed as a period of aberration, the beginnings of a decline that lasted until the end of the Ming (1368–1644): as Qing (1644–1911) scholars sought to rekindle the spirit of Han (206 BC–AD 220) learning with the new method of evidential inquiry, they often decried Song learning as
erroneous, solipsistic, and heretical. By liberating themselves from the dry lexicographical approaches of the Han (206 BC–AD 220) and Tang (618–907) scholia, however, Song scholars enabled themselves to explore the far-reaching political implications of the Classics. As I will show, a group of reformist statesmen and thinkers in the mid-eleventh to early twelfth century redefined the relation between the Confucian Classics (ideology) and the imperial state (government) to authorize their plans for reform by focusing on one controversial text they commonly addressed.

The text in question is called the Rituals of Zhou (hereafter Zhouli), one of the Nine Confucian Classics (by the mid-eighth century AD). By the eleventh century, this classic had for more than a thousand years been attributed, rather controversially, to the Duke of Zhou (ca. eleventh century BC), the legendary lawgiver during the founding of the Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BC). Traditional scholars of the Confucian classics often referred to it as the “traces of Grand Peace” (Taiping zhi ji) or the “book of Grand Peace” (Taiping zhi shu). They believed that this document was the administrative blueprint of the Duke of Zhou’s government. Selecting from a number of existing commentaries on this controversial classic, I will elucidate the contents of mainly three connected texts: In Chapter 3, I will discuss the political thinker Li Gou’s (1009–59) “On the Zhouli as the Road to Grand Peace” (Zhouli zhi taiping zhi lun), a treatise of fifty topically arranged argumentative essays on the Zhouli written in the early 1040s. Chapters 5–8 and 11–12 cover the New Meanings of the Rituals of Zhou (Zhoulixinyi, hereafter the New Zhouli) by the reform councilor Wang Anshi (1021–86), the standard textbook imperially adopted during the New Policies era. Chapters 9–10 analyze Wang Zhaoyu’s (ca. late eleventh to early twelfth century) Detailed Explanations of the Rituals of Zhou (Zhouli xiangjie, hereafter Detailed Explanations), an early twelfth-century commentary mainly devoted to explication of Wang Anshi’s perspective on the Zhouli. Of these three texts I will focus on the New Zhouli, as it was the most important text during the New Policies era, and I will discuss the other two in relation to it.
Starting in the late 1060s, Wang Anshi and his associates carried out a set of groundbreaking reform measures, invoking the ancient ideals of moral uniformity and cultural integration, in a diversified and polarized world of more than one hundred million people (as of ca. 1100) in at least seven macro-economic regions. It was a time of vast social and economic changes that some historians have dubbed “the medieval economic revolution.” Wang Anshi’s reforms were aimed at transforming the existing structures of a rapidly growing commercialized economy through the bureaucratic organs of the state. In a nutshell, the New Policies were a comprehensive set of “state-activist” reforms in Northern Song China. By state activism I mean the systematic endeavors of the state to expand its own regulatory capacity in all areas of government activity: national security (the military, natural disaster response, risk management, foreign affairs, and so on), economic policy (revenue collection, state expenditure, market regulation, monetary policy, economic development, public works, and such), social policy (local social organization, local security, social welfare programs, government subsidy, and so forth), law enforcement, bureaucratic management, the education system, cultural projects, and so on.

As he began to enact the New Policies, Wang Anshi immediately met adamant resistance from powerful anti-reformist ministers. In the ensuing ideological struggle, Wang Anshi was compelled to legitimate his reformist agenda. In order to defend his cause, he had to fight an uphill battle as the Classics and the traditional views of the Han and Tang scholia were generally unfriendly to the idea of state activism he promoted. Riding on the tide of the recently emerging new trend of classical learning, he redefined the Classics in general and the Zhouli in particular as an overarching frame of reference for his state-activist reforms. Through the exegetical defense of the New Policies, Wang Anshi remade the Zhouli into the constitution of state activism. By so doing, he removed the fundamental tension between the Classics and state activism; mainly for this reason, I argue, his revisionist approach to the Classics later had to suffer political demise.
Wang Anshi and the Constitution of State Activism

Noting the unprecedented scale and impact of the New Policies era, twentieth-century scholarship has offered diverse definitions of its significance in Chinese history, describing it as: a precocious “modern” period in Chinese history marked by political unification, commercial expansion, urban growth, the building of a standing army, bureaucratic centralization, the rise of commoners, the introduction of a nationwide school system, and so on; the formation of a money-based “tax state” with a professional tax administration; the era of the “fiscal state” (zaisei kokka) in military tension with the formidable nomadic empires in a perpetual “wartime economy”; the peak of Tang-Song fiscal activism aimed at augmenting economic growth and achieving the equitable redistribution of wealth through rationalized state control of money and commerce in a rapidly growing private commercial economy; the struggle between the old and new elites or, put differently, between the large-scale landlord class and the small- and middle-scale landlord class; the collective attempt of the entire landlord class to exploit the peasant population, which failed due to peasant resistance; the outcome of a class conflict initiated by peasant rebellions; the state’s response to a series of fiscal crises incurred by military pressure, and the subsequent rise of protonationalism mixed with imperial ambition for territorial expansion; the burgeoning period of a state-initiated national market network; the culmination of “guwen (lit. ancient prose)” thinking about how to use the state to transform society; or the struggling climax (“the last gasp”) of Tang-model imperialism.

These studies generally recognize the significant roles played by one remarkable individual, Wang Anshi. Born into a relatively prominent family of state officials in the south, Wang Anshi grew up in various local government posts in the lower Yangzi area where his father Wang Yi (993–1038) served as magistrate and vice-prefect. Wang Anshi took the jinshi degree at the relatively young age of twenty-one in 1042 and chose to serve in local posts
around the Nanjing area until he was brought to the central court, possibly against his will, in 1060. At the court he served in some prestigious posts, but his career was soon interrupted by the death of his mother. When he returned to public service as the prefectural governor of Jiangning (in present-day Nanjing), the young ambitious emperor Shenzong (r. 1067–85) had just ascended the throne. Wang Anshi was summoned back to the court in 1069 to become the vice grand councilor in charge of general administration. With imperial support, Wang Anshi began to enact the New Policies he had planned throughout his long career: the eighteen years of his service as field administrator in local governments, six more years of experience in the central government, and the four years of retreat in his hometown. Under Wang Anshi’s leadership, the New Policies would be implemented in full force in the next few years.

Wang Anshi’s reforms included a comprehensive package of measures concerning the planning of state finance, the increase of state revenue, the creation of a rural credit system, national defense, monetary and trade policies, and education and civil service. Most of these policies, once proposed at the imperial court, caused a profound unrest among the entrenched conservative ministers. Court debates between Wang Anshi and anti-reformist ministers, including such luminaries as Ouyang Xiu (1007–72), Han Qi (1008–75), and Sima Guang (1019–86), generated full-scale constitutional disputes regarding major issues of statecraft. In fact, Wang Anshi and his opponents disagreed on the general purpose of the state itself. In their political debates, the Zhouli surfaced as a controversial classic (see Chapter 4).

Wang Anshi inaugurated the reformist era through a carefully choreographed strategy of “neutralizing political foes”: as Paul Smith has shown, having secured the unwavering support of his emperor for the reforms, he captured key institutions of government, created powerful reformist organizations, controlled remonstrance officers, and mobilized bureaucratic followers. On top of these political maneuvers, both Shenzong and Wang Anshi felt an acute need for the ideological defense of the reforms. Wang Anshi first invoked the Zhouli in 1068 on the eve of the New
Polices to authorize his reforms. His opponents accused him of having used the *Zhouli* as a pretext for making far-fetched connections to the Duke of Zhou. In need of a rationale for his state-activist policies, he decided to make the *Zhouli* paramount. In the early 1070s, as the conflict between the two parties intensified, Shenzong finally ordered Wang Anshi to compile a new imperial compendium of the Classics. In the next two years (3/1073–6/1075) at the newly created Bureau of Classical Studies (*Jingyi ju*), Wang Anshi supervised the compilation of the new commentaries on the three classics of his own choice—the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of Documents*, and the *Zhouli*—and he personally authored the commentary on the *Zhouli*. Wang Anshi sought to redefine the Classics as the constitution of state activism. During the period from 1075 to 1125, the *New Meanings of the Three Classics* (*Sanjing xinyi*; hereafter *New Three Classics*) remained standard.34 Interestingly, the ill-fated *New Three Classics* vanished afterward. Why?

The Vanished Classic and Its Implications

In the history of Chinese classical learning, the *New Three Classics* had traditionally been considered an outlier that briefly served the “illegitimate” New Policies government and was “rightly” deserted by the Chinese literati afterward. When the Qing imperial scholars in the court of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–96) looked for the *New Three Classics* in the 1770s, they noticed that all three of the commentaries had disappeared. Not a single copy was to be found in private libraries throughout the empire. The disappearance of the text itself was so complete that by the late seventeenth century even the most erudite bibliophile Zhu Yizun (1629–1709) was unable to locate it. He confirmed that the *New Meanings of the Book of Documents* (*Shangshuyi*) and the *New Meanings of the Book of Poetry* (*Shijingyi*) had been “lost” (*yi*), in his authoritative catalog *An Inquiry into Classical Commentaries* (*Jingyi kao*).35 As to Wang Anshi’s commentary on the *Zhouli*, he mentioned that it was rather “unfound” (*weijian*) than lost. The
Qing court scholars reasoned that Zhu had to do so because the *New Meanings of the Zhouli* (*Zhouli xinyi, 22 juan*), the text in question authored by Wang Anshi himself, was obviously listed in the late-Ming palace library catalog.\(^{36}\) Knowing that the Ming library catalog was based on the *Grand Compendia of the Yongle Era* (*Yongle dadian*), the Qing court scholars could retrieve its remnants preserved in this early-Ming imperial compilation and put it into the present form of the *New Zhouli* (*16 juan*).\(^{37}\)

It is intriguing that the *New Three Classics*, the standard imperial textbooks of the New Policies administration, should have been so severely condemned and destroyed. Not even a chapter of commentary, let alone a school of thought, in favor of the *New Three Classics* was ever to appear in Chinese history afterward. Were they lost because their contents were too heretical or too preposterous to allow for preservation? Or because a majority of the literati considered them a weapon fabricated by Wang Anshi “to gag the mouths of the Confucians” and to promote the Legalist doctrine of “wealth and power” in Confucian disguise?\(^{38}\) The condemnation of the New Policies and Wang Anshi in the official dynastic histories partly accounts for the suppression of the *New Three Classics*. The rise and spread of Neo-Confucianism, with its explicit emphasis on moral self-cultivation and the bottom-up reconstruction of social order, also explains a great deal about the mounting opposition to Wang Anshi in later periods.\(^{39}\) It is nonetheless strange that not a single intact copy of the *New Three Classics* is extant today. In Chinese history, even the Legalist texts such as the *Hanfeizi* and the *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shangjun shu*) have survived. Why not the *New Three Classics*?

Throughout Chinese history a large number of books have been lost due to disasters, political suppression, or intellectual neglect. Such causes do not seem to account for the loss of the *New Three Classics*. It is simply unrealistic to think that disasters selectively destroyed the *New Three Classics*, and we know of no systematic attempt by the imperial court to eradicate it during the Southern Song and Yuan periods. With the Jurchen invasion (1126), the imperial court banned the use of Wang Anshi’s etymological work, the *Theory of Characters* (*Zishuo*). However, rather
than destroy the *New Three Classics*, the emperor simply declined attempts made by examination candidates and officials to reinstate it in the 1140s and 1150s.\(^4\) With the rise of the anti-reformist ministers like Zhao Ding (1085–1147), the general direction of the imperial court gradually shifted away from the New Policies line.\(^4\) Yet Wang Anshi remained in the Imperial Temple of Confucius until the late Southern Song (1241). Up to that point Wang Anshi had not been officially villainized.

Moreover, the *New Three Classics*, though condemned and criticized, had never been neglected. Quite the contrary, after the fall of the Northern Song, the *New Three Classics* were at the center of scholarly debate for many generations to come. As to the disappeared *New Meanings of the Book of Poetry* and *New Meanings of the Book of Documents*, the modern Taiwanese scholar Cheng Yuanmin has mustered scattered clauses cited in a number of sources, mostly Southern Song classical commentaries, to prove that they influenced scholarship afterward.\(^4\) As regards the *New Zhouli*, we know that, throughout the Southern Song, at least five generations of scholars and statesmen struggled with the ghost of Wang Anshi and produced close to one hundred commentaries on the *Zhouli* (see Chapter 14). The fact that such a large number of Southern Song literati addressed the *Zhouli* confirms Wang Anshi’s abiding influence.\(^4\)

Given all these factors, we might think that most social elites during the Song-Yuan-Ming transition voluntarily swept the *New Three Classics* into the dustbin of history. Sometimes a vanished book like Aristotle’s (384–322 BC) lost chapter on “comedy” in the *Poetics* by its absence speaks a thousand words about the intellectual and social milieu that removed it. To account for the disappearance of the *New Three Classics*, we should ask further: What did Wang Anshi’s enemies and critics *hate* and *fear* most about them? I will attempt to answer this question through close analysis of what remains of the *New Zhouli*.

Of the *New Three Classics*, the *New Zhouli* particularly attracts our attention, for at least three reasons: First, unlike the other two classics, the *Zhouli* itself had traditionally been one of the most controversial texts in Chinese classical learning. Thanks
to Han and Tang classicists’ efforts, the Zhouli rose to become one of the Nine Confucian Classics by the mid-Tang. However, it could never compare with the Book of Poetry and the Book of Documents, both venerated as part of the Five Classics since the reign of Han Wudi (r. 141–87 BC). Just by putting the Zhouli on a par with the other two, Wang Anshi made a grand statement. Second, unlike the other two books, New Zhouli was authored by Wang Anshi himself. Third, although severely damaged, a good part of it has been preserved for our analysis.

Regarding the New Zhouli, traditional critics of Wang Anshi generally argued ad hominem, claiming that Wang used the Zhouli knowingly as a Confucian disguise for his pursuit of the Legalist agenda of “wealth and power.” In their view, the smart and disingenuous Wang Anshi attempted to fool the world with his illegitimate approaches to the Classics. The official histories reproduced this view, condemning the New Policies and demonizing its leading engineers. However, by using the Zhouli as an overarching frame of reference, Wang Anshi could develop “a model of programmatic policy making” for the New Policies government. To avoid making a straw man of Wang Anshi, I will examine his theory of government, “the constitution of state activism,” through close analysis of his commentary on the Zhouli in the context of historical change.

The Structure of the Zhouli and Its Place in Global History

In the corpus of the Thirteen Confucian Classics, the Zhouli is the only text that describes in detail the administrative organization of the alleged Duke of Zhou’s government. The Zhouli shows an idealized bureaucracy of an ancient political system with its hierarchically arranged listings of the so-called 360 offices, staffed with an army of as many as 93,816 officials and functionaries, divided into the Six Ministries (Offices). It also defines the specific duties and staff members of each of these offices, delineating the chain of command and lines of communication within a
huge stratified officialdom. In global historical perspective, the *Zhouli* is probably the most detailed and systematic of the ancient documents describing the archaic bureaucratic states.

On the summit of its bureaucratic structure stands the king, aided by the six ministers—namely, the premier (heaven) and the ministers of education (earth), ritual (spring), war (summer), justice (autumn), and works (winter). These offices in the *Zhouli* are systematically organized to perform the basic tasks of government, including personnel administration, fiscal management (collection of taxes and allocation of resources), education, social organization, local control and surveillance, the maintenance of the defense system, the recruitment and training of local troops, police control, law enforcement, palace administration, foreign relations, diplomatic protocols, and so on. Among the six ministers, the minister of state (grand steward) is the prime minister, and the minister of education is the second highest. The other four ministers are subordinate to the minister of state; at the same time, as heads of their ministries, they command their ministries with considerable leeway.

Each minister is directly aided by the vice ministers; together they form the headquarters of each ministry. Under the control of each minister, each of the Six Ministries forms a loose pyramidal bureaucracy, in which approximately sixty offices of subordinate ranking officials perform the assigned duties with a huge army of low-ranking officials and runners. Additionally, the *Zhouli* describes in painstaking detail the petty bureaucracy of attendants and functionaries such as eunuchs, court women, medical doctors, cooks, and servicemen.

These offices can be divided into three categories: leaders (noblemen; ministers), lieutenants (high- and middle-ranking officials), and administrative runners (low-ranking officials and functionaries). The distinct ranks of these personnel formed a clear hierarchical structure; yet the chain of command in the vertical ranks of officials is not clearly defined. The lines of horizontal communication among ranking officials are found across the Six Ministries; however, all their duties fall within the general duties of their ministers. Unlike a strictly regimented military
organization, the offices of the Zhouli are at best loosely organized and categorized into the general headings of the Six Ministries, which suggests that many of those offices were created on an ad hoc basis and rearranged through trial and error over a long period of time.

Given the numerousness of personnel in the Zhouli, it is striking that the text concerns only the officialdom of the royal domain (wangji), the area of no more than 1,000 li square directly ruled by the king. According to the dominant view, the royal domain constitutes only one hundredth (see Chapter 11) in the nine domains (jiuji) of the ancient Zhou state. The nine domains outside the royal domain, according to tradition, included roughly 1,800 regional (vassal) states and the barbarian realms. Though not explicit, the text of the Zhouli suggests that each of the regional states should replicate in their territories the bureaucratic administration of the royal domain. As shall be shown, the relation between the royal domain and the regional states constitutes one of the most complicated, yet exciting, issues in the studies of the Zhouli. Depending on perspectives, the Zhouli could inform a tightly controlled centralized administration or a decentralized network of numerous self-governing feudal states (see Chapters 12 and 14).

Controversial as it was, the Zhouli functioned as one of the most important references for the ancient prototype of state administration and bureaucratic organization in a post-Qin world. First, it provided the ancient reference for the organization of the basic government structure: from the Sui (581–618) dynasty onward, the imperial government continued to adopt the Six Ministries system, which was obviously modeled after the Six Ministries of the Zhouli. For this reason traditional statecraft thinkers and statesmen generally regarded it as the earliest archetype of bureaucratic administration in Chinese history. Even the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98) explicitly referenced the Zhouli to justify his direct emperiorship over the Six Ministries, and invoked it as the locus classicus for his rural control systems of village tax collection and household registration.48 Second, the Zhouli provided the primordial form of normative bureaucracy
for the traditional Chinese intellectuals: since “the Treatise on Hundreds of Offices” written by Ban Gu (32–92) in the *Hanshu*, the official dynastic histories all followed the basic format of the *Zhouli* in terms of describing the bureaucratic structures of their dynasties.

The Classics, Exegetes, and Thinkers

Those who invoked the *Zhouli* as a reference for political thought were undoubtedly constrained to a certain extent by its underlying assumptions. Given that it is a book of state organization, to expect them to defend any form of anarchism would be nonsense. Yet it would be equally mistaken to predefine them as defenders of “Legalism” just by linking the *Zhouli* with the pre-Qin Legalist texts. For those thinkers, the *Zhouli* was an open text for contending views of good government. To grant this would be the first step toward a “fusion of horizons,” to use Gadamer’s term, between Northern Song thinkers and ourselves as we try “to fall into conversation with” them over the *Zhouli*. Fortunately, we share with these Northern Song thinkers the full text of the original *Zhouli* script, at least as it was known in the later Han. We also share with them a large body of Han and Tang commentaries on this classic. We may further assume that they spent a significant amount of time studying the text of the *Zhouli* in the well-developed tradition of classical learning. For this reason, the first venue of our encounter with Wang Anshi should be the very content of the *Zhouli* as presented in the commentary by Zheng Xuan (127–200) and in the subcommentary by Jia Gongyan (fl. mid-seventh century).

The purported aim of Zheng Xuan’s commentary was to “embrace the great classics and encompass various schools in order to fully practice the laws of the later kings by using the *Zhouli*.” However, his commentary rarely provides more than a lexicographical survey, and Jia’s subcommentary remains faithful to Zheng Xuan’s method. These scholars seem to have believed that they ought to do no more than illuminate the sages’ intents with
philological rigor. In general they remained reticent regarding the political implications of the Classics. Often the Han and Tang commentaries seem monotonous, fastidious, even suffocating.

Wang Anshi was one of those eleventh-century Northern Song literati who, after having long navigated the existing sea lanes in the ocean of Han and Tang classical learning, decided to desert them all to find an alternative path to the ancient sages. Unlike Zheng and Jia, Wang Anshi’s main purpose was to illuminate the underlying principles of good government in the Zhouli. He achieved this purpose by finding logical sequences in the listed offices and their duties or by explicating the meanings of each character through his own etymological theory. Thinking with the Zhouli to promote his constitutional agenda, Wang Anshi paved a new path of classical learning.53

In our inquiry into his commentary on the Zhouli, we shall let the ghost of Wang Anshi defend his case in an open forum. Admittedly we have one insoluble problem for this project. Only portions of the New Zhouli have survived. Moreover, extant sources related to Wang Anshi and the New Policies are notoriously biased and incomplete.54 It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct Wang Anshi’s political thought from the extant sources.

To reconstruct Wang Anshi’s approaches to the Zhouli, we may turn to Wang Zhaoyu’s Detailed Explanations. We know close to nothing about Wang Zhaoyu except that he lived through the reign of Huizong (r. 1100–1125).55 Detailed Explanations apparently circulated among the examination candidates during the 1110s and 1120s when the New Three Classics was the standard imperial textbook at state schools throughout the empire. Mercifully, Detailed Explanations is more or less intact. In Detailed Explanations, Wang Zhaoyu overtly cites Wang Anshi’s commentary thirty-four times under the heading “New Classics (Xinjing).”56 In addition, Wang Zhaoyu also cites Wang Anshi’s words without citation, often rephrasing them. As he often “cites without citation,” Wang Zhaoyu may have included more of Wang Anshi’s original commentary than is now extant. Given contemporary views that this book was widely used by
examination candidates during Huizong’s reign, we might conjecture that it did not, at least, conflict with the state orthodoxy of the New Policies government.\(^{57}\) Just as Jia Gongyan explicates Zheng Xuan’s commentary, Wang Zhaoyu spells out the reasoning behind Wang Anshi’s original commentary. In my opinion, Wang Zhaoyu’s approach to Wang Anshi’s commentary seems a bit like Jia Gongyan’s to Zheng Xuan’s. In intellectual culture, the two Wangs seem to have replaced Zheng and Jia during Huizong’s reign.

**The Zhouli as the Constitution**

By tapping into their exegetical mode of thinking, I will argue that the Confucian Classics in general and the *Zhouli* in particular, as the authoritative documents of normative politics, functioned as the de facto “constitution” for political actors in imperial China. The term “constitution” is not widely used for analysis of the premodern Chinese government; however, if we accept the broad meaning of constitution as “the body of doctrines and practices that form the fundamental organizing principles of a political state,”\(^ {58}\) traditional Chinese governments no doubt operated on a collection of documents, statutes, and traditional practices we may call their “constitution.”\(^ {59}\)

In his study of early Ming legislation, Edward Farmer observes that “like the Roman constitution, the Chinese constitution derived from the ordinances and enactments of the emperor.”\(^ {60}\) He even claims that the codes and imperial rulings of the Ming founder formed “a body of constitutional law.”\(^ {61}\) The Ming founder’s pronouncements, though reflective of his own personal qualities, were as much grounded on the Confucian tradition, especially the Jinhua School of Neo-Confucianism and state-craft.\(^ {62}\) Therefore, even Ming legislation, which many still view as the code of a prototypical autocracy, mirrored customary practices, social values, historical precedent, as well as classical ideals in the Confucian Classics. Unlike Zhu Yuanzhang, who enacted Ming legislation through imperial rulings, Shenzong sought to
find the legitimate grounds of his government by compiling a new set of Classics. Wang Anshi’s promotion of the *Zhouli* at the emperor’s behest exemplifies how the Northern Song imperial state proactively used the Confucian Classics, rather than relying simply on imperial rulings, as the constitution of state activism.

That said, the Confucian Classics should not be considered imperial China’s equivalent of the modern Western constitution. The constitution of state activism put forward by Wang Anshi as well as Zhu Yuanzhang’s Ming legislation mainly concerned the administrative order of the imperial state, aimed at authorizing imperial powers and imposing obligations on the subjects without “conferring rights on a body of citizens.”\(^63\) Lacking an explicit “definition of rights” or “the separation of government and jurisdiction,” Wang Anshi’s constitution of state activism is best viewed as akin to what the legal philosopher Charles McIlwain calls “the medieval constitution,” as opposed to the modern.\(^64\)

The binding power of the Classics on the state in imperial China was obviously weaker than that of the modern constitution in liberal democracies today. Nonetheless, it seems true that the Confucian Classics existed as the sphere of normative politics between the elite and the imperial state in post-Qin Chinese history. Not a single “autocrat” for two millennia ever attempted to destroy the Confucian Classics, as Qin Shihuang (r. 220–210 BC) did. On the contrary, all the emperors since the early Han, including the “brutal despot” Zhu Yuanzhang, who was angered over a few provocative lines in the *Mencius*, as well as the powerful Qing “autocrats,” willingly promoted the Confucian Classics; or at least they created the façade of emulating the sage rulers of antiquity as presented in the Classics. Suffice it to say that the Classics continuously provided the grounds of political legitimacy in post-Qin empires in China.

In his study of the Changzhou school of New Text Confucianism, Benjamin Elman has argued that “the impact of charters and constitutions on modern Western political culture is analogous to the role of the Confucian Classics [in traditional politics],” and that “the ‘constitutionality’ of the imperial state was legitimated through classical political discourse.”\(^65\) David Schaberg suggests
that the *Zhouli* can be usefully called a “constitution (*politeia*),” defined by Aristotle as “the arrangement of magistracies in a state, especially of the highest of all.” Similarly, I shall employ the term “constitution” only insofar as traditional Chinese thinkers and statesmen pointed to a particular text of the Classics as an overarching frame of reference for the explicit purpose of legitimating a comprehensive set of plans for government.