

Appendix

A Translation and Introduction to the *Disquisitions on the Imperial System* (*Junxian lun* 郡縣論; ca. 1670s), by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682)

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A word about the rhetoric of the *Disquisitions on the Imperial System* is in order. The *Disquisitions*, in nine parts, may not look like theory to the uninitiated reader. For one thing, the essay, a paragon of economy, runs less than three thousand characters in length; in this regard, the *Disquisitions* offers a contrast to wordier European classics of political theory, such as the *Leviathan*. For another, much of the argumentation relies upon an understanding of history. Historical figures and institutions are mentioned with little explanation—a point for which Gu can be forgiven, as he envisioned a readership of the classically trained. Challenges aside, the appeal of the *Disquisitions* is clear. Composed in a tight parallel prose, the formal aspects of the essay reinforce the systematic nature of Gu's thinking. In addition, the essay is written in a straightforward style. Abstruse literary allusions have been omitted in favor of folk metaphors, such as the stash of gold or the equerry—a feature reminiscent of the Platonic *Dialogues*. The text is furthermore marked by its logical rigor. As with modern philosophers, Gu defines his key terms and makes use of potential objections to entertain contrary points of view. The latter no doubt had its rhetorical purposes, for the imaginary objections allow the author to furnish a more robust version of his original position.

Part I

If we understand how the feudal order (*fengjian* 封建) was transformed into that of centralized, imperial rule (*junxian* 郡縣), then we are also aware that the defects of the imperial system necessitated later changes in the system of rule. Hence, the question arises as to whether subsequent changes will lead to the re-establishment of the feudal order.

I say that this is impossible. If there were sages who would arise that could infuse the imperial system with the intent of the feudal order, then the world would be governed.

Since the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), men have claimed that the Qin imperial rulers (221–206 BC) established themselves as the sole rulers [of China] and thus perished. These men have been unaware that the

demise of the Qin dynasty had nothing to do with the death of the feudal order; this system was gone by the Qin. In fact, the waning of the feudal order began the day that the Zhou (ca. 11th century–771 BC) house went into decline, and so the death of the feudal order did not stem from the establishment of Qin rule. Actually, the waning of the feudal order was a gradual process. Even if sages arose, they would still transform it into the imperial system.

At present, the failures of the imperial system have reached a critical point, and yet no sages have come forth. Nevertheless, the old models of rule continue to be used while the commoners are increasingly impoverished by day, the Central Kingdom weaker each day, and the prospects for disorder hastened. Now, how did this situation come to pass? The defect of the feudal order was to concentrate power with those below [i.e., in local rulers] while the defect of the imperial system was to concentrate power above [i.e., in the emperor]. The sages of old, because of their impartial treatment of the world's men, invested lords with territory and divided the realm into states. Nowadays, the rulers monopolize the territory within the four seas, regarding it as '*Our* empire.' Apparently not satisfied even with this, they suspect all men and wield control over all matters, and so ordinances and official documents multiply with each day. In addition, these rulers set up the censors and establish the offices of the viceroy and circuit inspectors, imagining that in this way the governors and magistrates would not be able to "mutilate" the commoners. Yet rulers are unaware that the heads of these bureaus are merely fearful that their efforts to cover up errors are insufficient. Such heads regard being relieved of their post or replaced as good fortune; they are moreover unwilling to expend one day of effort for the benefit of the commoners. Under these circumstances, how could the commoners not be impoverished and the state not weakened? The old precedents have been followed without change for hundreds upon hundreds, and for thousands upon thousands of years. I know that the state of affairs is of the same kind as the troubles that once proved fatal, and thus the crisis deepens with each day.

If, however, the ranks of the magistrates were to be elevated and empowered to earn wealth and to govern, the appointments of the censors ended, the rewards of inheritable office set up, and the [ancient Han] model of allowing magistrates and governors to appoint their subordinates put into practice—this would be what is called "infusing the imperial system with the intent of the feudal order" and eradicating the failures of the last two thousand years. Thus, if future rulers desire to foster the prosperity of commoners and to increase the power of the state, they must employ my proposal.

Part II

Translator's note: In this section, Gu outlines his plan for reform, which contains two points of interest: first, the proposal to make the magistracy a post that can be inherited, and second, his call to return to a system that resembles the Han bureaucracy (206 BC–AD 220). Readers will notice that Gu wishes magistrates to be chosen from the local region on a temporary basis, rather than the actual county—a practice, that appears consistent with the patterns he might have observed from his own study of Han stone inscriptions. In addition, he calls for the reinstatement of many posts that date from the early imperial period: the Assistants, Recorders, Frugal Men, Libationers, and so forth. (The Director of the Granaries and Erudites, however, appear to be exceptions to the rule, as the former is clearly a Tang-dynasty post.) In addition, he calls for the practice of allowing Han magistrates to appoint local subordinates, who are given the status of dynastic officials. The call to lengthen the magistrate's terms echoes the earlier discussion of Cui Shi 崔寔 (d. AD 170), the earliest known theorist who called for modifications to the imperial system.

My proposal is as follows:

The position of those who administer counties should be corrected and made into officials of rank five, their titles rectified to reflect their position as county magistrates. For these posts, gentlemen who practice the customs within a few hundred miles should be employed. Initially, the [magistrate] will be called a probationary magistrate. After three years, if he has successfully carried out his duties, he will be made a regular magistrate. If after another three years he is successful, his parents will be conferred with the official rank befitting the magistrate's position. After another three years, the imperial seals of office will be bestowed upon him and the court's greetings conveyed. After three more years of success, he should be promoted in rank and given a raise in salary, allowed to stay in the position until death. If the magistrate requests to take leave of his position because of sickness or infirmity, his son or younger brother should be elevated as a replacement. In cases where the magistrate does not elevate his kinsmen but someone else, allow this person to serve as the replacement. If the magistrate has already been replaced or has quit his post, he should reside in the county as Libationer with a salary for the rest of his life. Those elevated by the retired magistrate should initially be made probationary magistrates. After three years of successful service, he should be made an actual magistrate according to the model outlined above.

A commandery should consist of three to four, or alternatively five to six counties. In each commandery, a governor with a term of three years should be established; censors, with terms of one year, should be dispatched to make tours of inspection, and the offices of the viceroys

and circuit inspectors should be completely abolished. Under the magistrate, one Assistant should be established and appointed by the Ministry of Civil Appointments. The Assistant should serve in his post for at least nine years before replacing a magistrate. The officials below the Assistant will be called Recorder, Guard, Erudite, Officer of the Post House, Director of the Granaries, Patroller, and Frugal Men: all of these posts should be established without omission. These men will accept orders from the magistrate, who will select them himself and report their names to the Ministry of Civil Appointments. As for the Recorder and those below him in rank, they should be chosen from among the men of the area.

With respect to crimes committed by the magistrate against the commoners: If small, exile the magistrate, but if great, execute him. If, however, the magistrate has carried out his post successfully, his household will be registered in the county and removed from the registers of his native place. None of the magistrates in the world should be removed from their positions or allowed to return to their homes. Instead, they should end their lives in the counties in which they served, and their descendants should reside there for generations. In cases where the magistrate no longer holds the position but has been removed, he should be executed if the office has been perverted by his greed. In cases where the magistrate remains in his post, he should be the steward of the county; if removed, he is an exile. Thus, if good magistrates are rewarded with hereditary posts, and bad ones beheaded or hung, what magistrate would not strive to become a good officer?

Part III

What is meant by 'living up to one's post'? I say: to reclaim wastelands, regulate open country, encourage the growth of trees, repair irrigation ditches, fortify city walls, fill granaries, establish schools, eradicate bandits, maintain a full supply of weapons—and most importantly, make the commoners take pleasure in their enterprises.

Nourishing the people is analogous to raising the livestock in a household. Nowadays, there is one person who attends to the horses and cows, another who tends to the fodder, and still another who oversees it all. In calculating how much fodder to distribute, inquiries have to be made to the master of the house, and so the livestock is more emaciated by day.

If I were to run the household, things would not be this way, as I would select a diligent equerry, who would spare no effort. I would entrust the livestock to the equerry and award him pasture, giving him more fod-

der than normally required. If the livestock fatten and multiply, I would reward him, but if not, I would whip him.

For this reason, the master of a household must be a Mr. Wu or Qiao Yao.⁷⁷ Hence, the suffering of the world is enough for one equerry to resolve but is now handled by many. This is the result of not trusting the equerry but employing overseers. Things have gotten to the point where the master even doubles the number of overseers but trusts none of them. As a result, his eyes and ears are disordered. If the love for the livestock is regularly exceeded by stinginess with regard to fodder, the livestock's offspring will dwindle. Hence, horses need just one equerry to fatten, and commoners require just one magistrate to be joyful.

Part IV

Translator's note: In this section, Gu argues for the value of inherited office. Two historical examples of hereditary seats are adduced: those of the Kongs in Qufu (Northeast China) and the Yangs in Bozhou (present-day Guizhou in the Southwest). Although most official positions had to be garnered through examination in Gu's day, the imperial system nevertheless set aside special magistracies for members of distinguished clans.

Someone might object and say: if there are no censors, then will the magistrates not be too powerful? And if sons and brothers of magistrates succeed them in office, will this not lead to a concentration of power? Is it not the case that a person from within a few hundred miles will be partial to his kinsmen and friends?

Actually, the officers most often disturbed by kinsmen and friends are those from distant areas. If the kin and friends were forced to live within the walls of a single city, they could not cause trouble even if they so wished. Since the Han, many officers have served in their native commanderies. The magistrates of Qufu [i.e., the county that was the home of Confucius and which used his descendants as magistrates] have rarely been removed for greed or cruelty. This is not because the descendants of Confucius are alone in being worthy; rather the situation in Qufu reflects the power [of hereditary office].

If a son or brother were to succeed him, a magistrate would be mindful of his enterprise, and so even in the smallest of counties what magistrate would be capable of calling up troops to rebel? Would there not be a governor above this magistrate, a governor who could raise troops from the neighboring counties to attack him? Moreover, even if the governor

77. The name of Mr. Wu was Luo 倮, and he was a person of the Qin dynasty. He was a successful husbandman. Qiao Yao 橋姚 was also a successful animal husbandman with a biography in the *Historical Records* of Sima Qian (ca. 90 BC).

wished to start a rebellion, would the magistrates of the five to six subsidiary counties forego their hereditary privileges to join the rebellion? Would they not know the example of the Yang clan of Bozhou, a clan that had passed down their posts for eight hundred years before being exterminated for rebelling?⁷⁸

Now, if it were really the case that the realm could not be governed without censors, then how could the fourteen seats and four prefectures [administered by] the southern capital be connected to the Six Imperial Ministries (i.e., Administration, Finance, Rites, War, Punishments, and Public Works). Moreover, the counties and prefectures nowadays have no permanent governors and magistrates in their official bureaus; the people are furthermore without a permanent support. This is why there is always the calamity of bandits and aliens, who arrive in one prefecture and leave it in tatters, and then go to a county and leave it in ruins. Rather than focusing on the present calamity, rulers instead worry about magistrates acting without proper authorization. This is what is referred to as not understanding matters!

Part V

All men cherish their households and are partial to their children; this is what is the normal state of things. The attitude of an official acting on behalf of the Son of Heaven or for the hundred surnames is invariably inferior to that when acting for himself. This has been the case since the Three Dynasties (i.e., high antiquity). The sages based their actions on this principle of self-interest and deployed it. They even made use of the self-interest of the world to bring completion to the impartiality (*gong* 公) of one man (i.e., the emperor); in this way, the world could be governed.

If the county magistrates could be partial to the area within a few dozen miles [of his home], the people of the county would be like his descendants, its territory like his own fields, the city walls his fences, and the granaries his vaults. If it were his own descendants, the magistrate would love them and would do no harm to them, and if it were his fields, he would always cultivate them and not abandon them, and if they were his walls and vaults, he would certainly repair them and never forsake them. Speaking from the magistrate's perspective, such acts are self-interested. But from the viewpoint of the Son of Heaven, such acts are desirable for governing the world, as with these [good governance] can be achieved.

If one day, there were unexpected changes of fortune, things would not be as dire as they were in the times of Liu Yuan (d. 310), Shi Le

78. The Yangs of Bozhou (now Zunyi 遵義 city, in Guizhou 貴州) fell from grace in 1600, when one member of the clan, Yang Yinglong 楊應龍, rebelled and was executed.

(274–333), Wang Xianzhi (fl. 873–888), and Huang Chao (d. 884)⁷⁹ all of whom managed to rampage a few hundred miles as [easily as] moving into a deserted land. Now, [if my plan had been previously adopted], [all of these bandits] would have encountered local] officials who would have served to the death and would never have fled. Such officials would have formed coalitions and alliances to resist the bandits. All this would not have been done for the Son of Heaven but on account of self-interest. It is only because of self-interest that anyone would fight for the Son of Heaven. Hence, the self-interest of the world is the impartiality of the Son of Heaven: “If impartial, the people feel joy” and “If trustworthy, the people entrust him with duties.”⁸⁰ My system of rule would come close to that of the Three Dynasties and so would easily attain the heights reached by the Han and Tang.

Part VI

There is no bigger calamity for the world than impoverishment. If however my plan is used, there would be a comfortable standard of living in five years and great prosperity in ten. Let’s use the metaphor of the horse. Nowadays, the number of horses used by the world for traveling and making deliveries through relay stations, submitting the accounts from the prefectures and counties to the capital, reporting to superiors in the bureaus and government seats, greeting high officials, relaying official documents, and meeting the demands of ordinary commoners who reside in the government bureaus amount to many millions each year. These horses must travel thousands upon thousands of miles. If however the number of horses used were decreased by sixty or seventy percent, the horses and mules from the Northwest would not be fully expended.

We can also look at this issue from the perspective of official documents. For one legal matter, it must be reported to several yamen, and the original decision overturned and the investigation restarted several times.

79. Liu was a dynastic founder of Xiongnu origin. He held a military position in present-day Shanxi and rebelled against the Jin and installed himself as the Great *Chanyu* (Xiongnu khan) but later styled himself the King of the Later Han. In AD 308, he declared himself the Han emperor, and his dynasty is known as the Han Zhao. Shi was also a dynastic founder of the Later Zhao dynasty 後趙, and Shi was of Jie 羯 extraction (the Jie were from modern Gansu and Qinghai). He controlled large portions of the North of China. Wang was a Tang subject, who led a large rebellion during the reign of Tang emperor Xizong (873–888). He was executed after his second rebellion was pacified. Huang Chao (d. 884) was the instigator of the rebellion (874–884) named for him, which brought the end of the Tang dynasty and the beginning of the chaotic Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. Huang was betrayed by his own follower Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912), who first sided with the Tang but went on to later found his own dynasty, the Later Liang.

80. An allusion to the *Analects*.

In addition, there is the use of paper for greeting a guest, sending regards on birthdays, and conveying respects and congratulations. Thus, in one year the costs of the paper expended is not under ten thousands of ten thousands. Now, if the amount of paper used was decreased by seventy or eighty percent, the bamboo of the Southeast would not be exhausted. The [savings in the] expenses for other things would be equivalent [under my plan] but cannot be calculated exhaustively. If the magistrates were made to oversee the harvesting of crops, instruct the population in planting and husbandry, then the agricultural yield, the harvest of fruits of grass and trees, the spawning of livestock, and the supply of timber would result in a surplus several times over in five years. Following this plan, one could harvest the treasures of the hills and marshes. As for mining, before the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), it was considered normal for people to be conscripted once a year. The Ming court closed the mines and did not dispatch the people because such policies incited disturbances. This situation is comparable to possessing a stash of gold. If the gold is found in a major four-way intersection, then the townspeople will gather and fight over it. If it is found in the hall or inner quarters of a household, however, then the master alone will possess it and those outside of the gates will not get to fight over it. With respect to the ore, if it is the Son of Heaven who unearths it, then it is like the gold found in a major intersection. But if the magistrate unearths the gold, this is like finding gold in the halls or inner quarters. The benefits [in my plan] will be extracted from the hills and marshes and *not* from the commoners. Hence, this is a scheme for enriching the state.

Part VII

Translator's note: Gu makes a strong case for economic decentralization. His discussion is based on the fact that magistrates did not get enough economic support from the state to pay their local staff or to manage many of their day-to-day operations. In Gu's mind, the situation should be corrected, particularly since the expansionist policies of the Ming and Qing were draining the localities of their financial resources.

With respect to the failures of regulations [regarding state finances], there is none so grave as the fact that the military grain provisions in the Eastern prefectures are used to support the troops stationed in the Western frontier. Equally problematic is the fact that the food provisions of the Southern commanderies are used for the benefit of the relay stations in the North. Now, if all of these resources were to be returned to the counties, which would be assessed in terms of their strategic importance and fiscal needs, then the counties could maintain a comfortable level and keep a surplus. The funds for official salaries in the county should be

retained by the magistrates and should exceed the normal amount given to the county. What funds in excess of this could be set as the amount to be paid to the capital.

In determining the amount of taxes, the quality of the land must above all be graded. The land should be divided into three grades of upper, middle, and lower, or into five grades. The taxes collected should be entirely entrusted to the county magistrate for collection. The amount sent to the capital will be called 'taxes' or 'tariffs.' With respect to contingency expenditures, the amount paid for normal tax expenditures can be used to defray the costs. If these funds have been completely spent by the people of the county and appear insufficient, then these funds can be supplemented from the taxes paid by other counties. This practice will be called "mutual support." Even though the Son of Heaven would not maintain a steady level of income, if these policies are implemented for ten years, there would not be a county with insufficient funds for its expenses.

Part VIII

Translator's note: Gu's discussion of local governance follows on the heels of his economic arguments. In contrast to early imperial times, when locally-appointed officials were given government salaries and awarded all the dignities of dynastic office, the local government was self-funded in late imperial China. The men who ran the local government were known as yamen, and they were often regarded by centrally-appointed officials with disdain and even barred from taking the civil service examinations. Unsupported by the state, the yamen largely made a living by extracting illegal fees. As the magistrates were outsiders and new to the jurisdiction, they often found themselves reliant upon the entrenched yamen for governance of the area. Gu's proposal would put an end to these practices with an eye to returning to the idealized situation in Han.

Great are the words of Ye Zhengze [a thinker of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)], who said, "Nowadays though the official bureaus lack a system of investiture, there is in actuality the investiture of [petty] officials." The failure of governance in the prefectures and counties are as follows: the petty officers are entrenched within their positions; fathers transfer their positions to their sons, and brothers to their younger brothers. In the cases of the most ferocious and crafty petty officers, they advance in their posts and serve as the clerks in the government bureaus, thereby seizing all of the power in the prefectures and counties. Although the officials above are fully aware that these men bring great harm to the world, they nevertheless cannot get rid of them. If, however, the officials in the prefectures and counties were to be men from within a few hundred miles, familiar with the affairs of the local commoners, and would live their last days in the place in which they served, then the positions of those above

and below would be defined and the hearts of the commoners settled. If the statutes and regulations were done away with, then the business of the officials would be simplified. If the power of the officials was more than enough to rein in the petty officers, then the (petty local) officers would be unable to dominate the bureaus and to follow their own rules. In one day, we could stop what the men of old referred to as “raising a million tigers and wolves in the midst of commoners.” The world would be happily governed. What would be better than this?

Part IX

Translator’s note: The essay returns to the issue of official recruitment. Gu’s suggestions clearly reveal a marked preference for Han models of recruitment—though with minor adjustments inspired by Tang-dynasty practices. Gu proposes to follow the Han model of selecting individuals who have been recommended on account of their virtuous reputations. To this, Gu asks that the recommended men be given a personal interview to verify their actual qualities. The essay concludes by raising a potential objection: whether Gu’s plan would encourage careerism among the educated elite. The objection reflects a widely-held view that gentlemen not employed by the state should still exert leadership on local affairs. Gu defends his position by mentioning some well-known disciples of Confucius, who either quit their posts or refused to serve.

Gentlemen should be selected for office on the following basis: In recommending men, approximate the intent of the ancient system of “selecting and elevating men from the villages and hamlets.” In examining the candidate, approximate the models of the Tang, which were based on observing the candidate’s speech, bearing, calligraphy, and outstanding or cultivated qualities. Once every other year, the county should select capable and worthy gentlemen, who would be given an interview in the capital. Those of the highest grade would be made Palace Gentlemen without a fixed number of positions; those ranked highest among the Gentlemen would be able to go out and replace the magistrates, and those ranked next highest would serve as Assistants and would be employed in commanderies near their homes.

Those ranked next would return to their original counties and be assigned to temporary positions as Recorders or Guards. With respect to establishing local schools, the men employed therein follow the orders of the magistrate and the gentlemen of the area, who would engage them. They would be referred to as teachers, rather than as officials, for their names would not be added to the Register of Officials.

For those in the capital, if they are senior officials of noble rank, they can examine and employ the candidates in conformity with the Han model

of allowing the Three Excellencies (i.e., the three most senior officials in the capital) to make appointments to their staff.

As for the gentlemen of the world who do not care to serve in office because of their principles, they can still serve as the teachers of others. Those who have scholarly ability and long to be made visible to the age can be obtained and selected for [local posts] by the county magistrate, or alternatively may be summoned and appointed as [subordinates by] the Three Excellencies. In this way, the state will not lose opportunities to employ such gentlemen.

Someone might object along the following lines: If you interview candidates once every other year, will this not [encourage gentlemen to pursue] the narrow path of just becoming degree holders or officials?

If the gentlemen capable of transforming all-under-Heaven do not wrangle for degrees or posts, would this not be a sign of the greatness of kingly rule? [Confucius's sagacious disciple] Yan Yuan did not take an official position and Min Ziqian [another disciple] left his ministerial post. Qidiao [Kai 開] was unable to muster the confidence to serve in an official capacity, and Zeng Dian [i.e., the father of the sagacious Zengzi] chose a different path [from the disciples who served].

Thus, is it really true that men will wrangle to become degree holders or officials?

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