“Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?” Why cannot we use theories of social organizations articulated by pre-modern, non-European thinkers, to explain universal political and social phenomena? Why, when we approach a historical or sociological question, do we have to fall back on Weber, Marx, et al., and disregard the penetrating insights made by pre-modern authors—Chinese, Muslim, or any other non-European? Can we, ultimately, interpret Western history through a theoretical model developed in the east?

Miranda Brown tries to show us that we can. She does so by taking us on a very thought-provoking and enjoyable tour of the history of Chinese institutions through the eyes of a seventeenth-century observer, Gu Yanwu. Against the current system of civil service examinations, so famously typical of Chinese later dynasties, Gu called for a return to the way local government officials were appointed under the Han (206 BC–AD 220). Gu idealizes a past system where promotion and demotion were rooted in the “opinions given by the village,” where “the whole life of a man was scrutinized.” According to Gu, while the contemporary seventeenth-century system of examinations favours a remote imperial center, the Han system aligned the interests of the local officials with their subordinates. Brown posits this utopian view of Han institutions in opposition to a Weberian model of state bureaucracy. While Weber sees the examination model as a rational method of selecting the most able administrators, Brown argues that Gu’s interpretation of the Han model is equally rational. The criterion for selection, i.e, the local reputations of officials, is a rational one. The difference lies in the objective of selection—while Weber promotes the interests of an increasingly efficient imperial center, Gu promotes the interests of the local population.

Brown then asks us to view Gu as a thinker who offers a universal theory on par with Weber. She puts his ideas to a critical test: does the Han evidence, from inscriptions, chronicles and so forth, support Gu’s theory? Did the Han system of selection by reputation really promote social welfare on the local level? She answers in the positive, and moves on to suggest that Gu’s ideas about local reputation have universal applicability. In particular, Gu’s model could be applied to the situation of the
early modern Islamic empires of the Ottomans and the Mughals, which experienced similar tensions between center and periphery. This move is crucial for Brown’s point: in order to take Gu seriously as a theorist, we need to be able to examine his theory against the evidence of all imperial entities, not only Chinese ones.

Reading this as an Islamic historian, the immediate reaction is that we already have our own Muslim Gu Yanwu. His name is ‘Abd al-Rahmān bin Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, and he lived in North Africa and Egypt in the later Middle Ages (1332–1406). In a work known as the Muqaddima, or “The Introduction to History,” he presents an encyclopaedic synthesis of the methodological and cultural knowledge necessary for a historian to pursue his craft. Within that work, he offers a cyclical model of dynastic progression, in which tribal solidarity has a key role in the building of new empires. It is the social solidarity of the tribe, borne out of the common hardship of making a living directly from the land, which naturally makes it more powerful than the people of the cities. The tribes of the desert conquer the cities and establish their own dynasty, but as they do so, they adopt the lifestyle of the urban classes, and lose the social cohesion that brought them to power. After a few generations they are replaced by a new dynasty coming from the desert.

I say that Ibn Khaldun is the “Muslim Gu” because his work could be similarly used for the benefit of social theory. In fact, Ibn Khaldun’s articulation of the central role of tribal solidarity in social and historical change has inspired Western historians since the early nineteenth century. Gellner and Toynbee, and many other social scientists have “practically adopted Ibn Khaldun as one of their own, as a modern, or even post-modern thinker.”¹ Unlike almost any other author of the Arabic-Islamic tradition, Ibn Khaldun has almost become “an intellectual household name” in modern Western culture.² Even more than Gu, Ibn Khaldun seems to offer a universal theoretical model that could be used for all empires, not only Islamic ones. While Gu’s work was specifically a program of reform in a particular historical context of early modern China, Ibn Khaldun did seem to entertain what Brown calls here “the universalist pretensions of nineteenth-century theorists as Hegel and Marx.”

Let me give a very recent example for the acquired stature of Ibn Khaldun in modern sociology from a book suggestively entitled Malthus, Darwin, Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Ibn Khaldun: On Human Species Sur-

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It is written by Walter Wallace, a professor of sociology and a leading authority on theory of sociology, and the subject matter of the book—which is of less relevance to our purpose here—is the forecasting and preparation for possible extinction of the human race. What is interesting, of course, is the lumping together of Ibn Khaldun with the luminaries of Western social science. In his introduction, Wallace explicitly rejects any kind of contextualization: for comprehending and making empirically descriptive, explanatory and predictive use of theories, “the only important thing is the extent to which the theories make empirical sense to readers and users in their times and places, not to the authors in theirs.” It simply does not matter, Wallace says, who wrote the theories in question. But, he has to admit, “it will surely be noticed, however, that all but one of the classical theories examined here were based on observations made mainly on just a few Western European societies.” The one exception is Ibn Khaldun, and there’s nothing about China. “Nevertheless, the theories discussed here are among the classical Western foundations of all the social sciences.”

But, for Wallace and for so many others before him, Ibn Khaldun is a fig leaf, with his name more important than the actual substance of his works. When Wallace actually discusses Ibn Khaldun, towards the end of the book, the medieval Muslim scholar is always measured against the modern luminaries: His concept of tribal solidarity anticipates Durkheim’s social solidarity, Marx’s class consciousness and Weber’s Protestant ethic—except that it is based on kinship (p. 139). For Wallace, Ibn Khaldun’s one contribution to sociology is the hypothesis that the natural habitat is a major influence on all human socio-cultural phenomena (Wallace is clearly unaware that Ibn Khaldun is here following Hippocrates, sometimes verbatim). More importantly, for Wallace, Ibn Khaldun is unique in that he proposes a human species survival mechanism based on military conquest—that is, one population’s forceful and violent effort to incorporate another population’s habitat into its own. For anyone familiar with Ibn Khaldun, it is clear that Wallace pretty much misunderstands most of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas. Moreover, in the end it is perhaps no surprise that the contribution of the Muslim thinker comes down to brute military conquest: crude Orientalism in the guise of Universalist social theory.

The history of the use of Ibn Khaldun by social scientists does not bode well at all to Brown’s reclamation of Gu as fellow theorist. The first encounter of Western scholarship with Ibn Khaldun was in the mid-nineteenth century, and his cyclical theory of tribal solidarity was applied

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4. Ibid., 1 (italics in the original).
5. Ibid., 2.
to the emergence of Islam in Arabia. It was through Ibn Khaldun that Ernest Renan established the view of Islam as a fanatical faith borne in the desert, leaving a nomadic and anarchic footprint on Islamic history. Similarly, Caussin de Perceval’s history of the Arabs during the time of Muhammad, which appeared as early as 1847, relied heavily on Ibn Khaldun in order to depict Islam as an essentially political instrument, not a spiritual one, that empowered the tribes of the desert. By the way, this is the only mention of Ibn Khaldun in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*; a pity, because it is a vivid example of Europeans moulding their gaze of the Orient with reference to an indigenous historical model.

More recently, twentieth-century anthropology has not fared much better in its application of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas, which have become a focus of an Orientalist view of Islam. Brown finds Gu’s ideas to correspond to the evidence from the Han dynasty, almost two millennia earlier. Anthropologists have found modern Muslim societies to conform quite closely to the late medieval model, as put so clearly by Ernest Gellner in his *Muslim Society* (1981): “And is it not significant that when social anthropologists burrow in the micro-structures of Muslim societies, they generally come back with a picture very compatible with that of Ibn Khaldun?” Yet, as Varisco shows, Gellner reads Ibn Khaldun to espouse a vision of the survival of the fittest, with wolves fighting sheepdogs, far removed from the morality that so permeates Ibn Khaldun’s work (take, for example, Ibn Khaldun’s profound dislike of the luxurious life of the cities). Moreover, for Gellner the Khaldunian distinctions between the townsmen and tribesmen, which he claims to have observed in his fieldwork in Morocco, are pervasive to all Muslim societies, past and present. Varisco is ruthless yet spot on in describing this vision of Muslim society as an essentialized philosophical dead-end, which completely removes Ibn Khaldun out of his medieval context.

I am not at all suggesting that Brown’s discussion of Gu is essentializing Chinese history. In fact, for me it has been an excellent and engaging introduction to the development of Chinese bureaucracy. I am worried, however, that she is taking Gu out of his historical context, and transforming him into a modern social scientist, something which he clearly did not intend to be. Are Gu’s suggestions for reform really social science? Brown seems to pick the elements that fit with the view of Gu as a social scientist, and the non-scientific elements are relegated to the background. Gu’s expectation that candidates would be ranked according

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to their physical bearing and calligraphy skills is a minor modification to the Han model; his acceptance of heredity and lineage in selecting an official explained away as an extension of the principle of aligning local officials with their subjects.

Transforming Gu into a theorist, like transforming Ibn Khaldun into one, runs the risk of creating an anachronistic “myth.” Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Ibn Khaldun has been removed from his medieval historical context by historians of political thought and sociologists, who hailed his as the precursor of modern notions, denying his cultural specificity.9 But an actual reading of the Muqaddima—in its entirety—shows that his thought is much more religious and moral than sociological, and that it was grounded in the principles previously devised by Sunni Sharia jurists. Modern readers ignore the theological elements, as much as they ignore Ibn Khaldun’s fascination with magic, his reliance on the principles of astrology, and his strong Sufism, all of which do not fit with the image of Ibn Khaldun as the founder of sociology.10 The danger in most modern applications of Ibn Khaldun’s theory of tribal solidarity is that “it is no longer Ibn Khaldun’s theory as it occurs in Ibn Khaldun’s text, but is rather the modern theory under the rubric of Ibn Khaldun’s name.”11

Gu articulates very nicely some of the benefits of decentralized empire; but do we really need him for a critique of Weber? In Islamic studies, the answer is a definite no. Weber’s influence on Orientalism has been limited to his discussion of Islamic law in Economy and Society, which has been then elaborated by Joseph Schacht in the 1950s. Even here, this vision of Islamic law as an irrational and inapplicable religious law as been subject to endless attacks, culminating in Wael Hallaq’s recent terminal rebuttal—which, incidentally, heavily relies on Foucault.12 Weber, Durkheim and Marx never really made it in the study of Islam, which has been predominantly preoccupied with the idiosyncrasy of Islam, with its peculiar essence. The difference between the two fields—Chinese studies and Islamic studies—could not be greater: for us, the gaze of the universal theorists, be they Foucault, Marx or Weber, has the potential to liberate us from colonialist assumptions of difference.

Ultimately, Brown does not return the gaze. She does not go on to apply Gu for European history, only for an interesting comparison with Ottoman and Mughal imperial structures. This makes sense: Gu was a product of early modern Chinese imperial society, which seemed to share quite a lot in common with early modern Islamic empires. His call for

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11. Azmeh, Ibn Khaldun, 162.
reform, and in particular his dissatisfaction with imperial centralization, has parallels in seventeenth-century Ottoman history. Some Ottoman reformers were using Ibn Khaldun to call for a return to a golden age of non-bureaucratic social solidarity, a vision reminiscent of Gu’s return to the age of the Han. Baki Tezcan argues that the urge to curb the power of the imperial center was behind the frequent depositions of seventeenth-century sultans, and makes an explicit comparison with the dethronement of the English king at around the same time.\textsuperscript{13} The juxtaposition of the English and the Ottoman is startling and effective, advancing both Ottoman history as well as a British one.

Gu Yangwu and Ibn Khaldun offer an interesting comparison in their own right. They were both very keen observers of the political conditions of their times, and offered a reformist reading that glorified a mythical, foundational distant past—the age of the Prophet or the rule of the Han. In that, they were akin to many other reformers. But what seems to unite them is a sense of respect for the local, the provincial, and the rural. Fromherz recently notes that Ibn Khaldun was so unique because he dared to go beyond Greek political philosophy, as well as his own urban upbringing, in order to see the tribal civilization as morally superior to that of the cities.\textsuperscript{14} Here, I think, lies the similarity with Gu’s decentralization program, as well as with post-modern anthropologists, who rejected Western views of linear progress to modernity and urbanism. I agree with Brown that reading Gu, like reading Ibn Khaldun, provides “resources for critical thought.” But he needs to be read in context. To take a final leaf from the chequered history of the reception of Ibn Khaldun: “The problem arises not when Ibn Khaldun’s ideas are used to enlighten and compare with some aspect of modern concern, but rather when those ideas, and Ibn Khaldun himself, are expected to be modern in themselves.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} Baki Tezcan, \textit{The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{14} Fromherz, \textit{Ibn Khaldun}, 129.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 158.