On the Possibilities of Ideographic Analysis: Gu Yanwu’s *Disquisitions* Applied to Mughal History

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Miranda Brown’s “Returning the Gaze: An Experiment in Reviving Gu Yanwu (1613–1682)” offers the intriguing possibility of not only “provincializing Europe” but also providing an important analytical perspective through which a comparative history of pre-modern states might be attempted. It is precisely because Gu Yanwu’s work does not have the universalist ambitions of modern European theorists that his intervention into one of the primary sites of tension between empires and their subjects—the often vexed relationship between a centralizing imperial core and the administrative periphery resistant to such integration—may be investigated. Three aspects of Gu Yanwu’s proposed reforms offer rich possibilities for thinking about some of the persistent problems that have plagued the study of medieval and early modern states: first, Gu Yanwu’s interest in harnessing the familial and similar affective ties as the model for successful state building; second, Gu Yanwu’s emphasis on proof of a shared normative code of ethical behavior as the most important evaluative criteria for imperial recruitment; and lastly Gu Yanwu’s attempts to mediate the utopian emphasis on such internalized restraints of individual officers with pragmatic structural mechanisms of control within an administrative system.¹ These elements capture both the ambivalence towards the depersonalized authority of new bureaucratic states and the yearning for more meaningful political association that haunts both early modern and modern communities.

In the commentary that follows I will explore the possibilities that Gu Yanwu’s theories might hold for my own field, early modern South Asia, and attempt to make them speak to the larger question of state formation in a comparative perspective. In doing so, I will interrogate the ways in which the legacy of Weberian models, in particular, have created a false choice between purportedly ideographic and nomothetic models of historical analysis. That is between models focused on explaining the historical

¹. All references to Gu Yanwu’s *The Disquisitions on the Imperial System* are to the translated text provided by Miranda Brown in this journal. Miranda Brown, “Returning the Gaze: An Experiment in Reviving Gu Yanwu (1613–1682),” *Fragments* 1 (2011): 41–77. Cited as *Disquisitions*, followed by the page number.
particulars of a given event or phenomenon, versus those that abstract, law-like rules of analysis that can serve as universal models of analysis. This is despite the fact that Weber’s work was an attempt to create a middle ground between the two.  

Unlike Weber, Gu Yanwu’s text benefits from its location in the early modern period and reflects an engagement with the complex historical factors at play at that time. By thinking through the contexts that drove Gu Yanwu’s seemingly ideographic analysis and tracing their effects in other parts of the early modern world, one can begin to create a methodology that is sensitive to the individual contexts of specific historical circumstances, yet has the flexibility to be applied to other places and times in a way that makes an engaged comparative historical analysis possible. In this commentary I will focus specifically on Gu Yanwu’s emphasis on the utility of patrimonial ties for creating effective political bonds, his assumptions about the normative values that govern such ties, and the pragmatic assessment criteria with which he hoped to check the possibility of nepotism or rebellion in a system governed by patrimonial linkages.  

Gu Yanwu’s emphasis on kin ties as the essential building block of both political and social networks is striking. Unlike modern European theorists such as Max Weber, whose teleological and idealized categories saw the “patrimonial” forms of rule and social structure as archaic forms in a rapidly modernizing and bureaucratizing world that were prone to abuse by an entrenched elite, Gu Yanwu viewed kinship bonds as essential motivators for individual administrators to strive towards important professional goals.  

If the fruits of an individual post—status and material wealth—could be seen as the patrimonial inheritance of a particular family, rather than the short-term salary or office of a low-level administrator, Gu Yanwu reasoned that provincial administrators would strive to secure their claims to such benefits, not least because of the high cost

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2. For a detailed discussion on Weber’s location within the debates about ideographic and nomothetic approaches, see Ulf Strohmayer’s analysis of these ideas within the context of German intellectual history. Most importantly, Strohmayer’s assessment that positions within these debates constituted the creation of a false duality that masked an internal consistency of analysis is important in understanding the centrality of timeless analytical categories, such as Weber’s *idealtyp*, and their eventual failures in resolving the tensions between these dualistic categories. Ulf Strohmayer, “The Displaced, Deferred, or Was it Abandoned Middle: Another Look at the Idiographic-Nomothetic Distinction in the German Social Sciences,” *Review: A Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center* 20(3–4) (Summer/Fall 1997): 279–344.

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of failure. As Miranda Brown points out, Gu Yanwu also built into his proposed system safeguards to evaluate the performance of the magistrate every three years to check any tendency towards corruption. But beyond such periodic checks, however, Gu Yanwu argued that excessive layers of monitoring squandered resources and manpower without ensuring the welfare of the governed. The established bureaucracy of his period, Gu Yanwu argued, placed greater emphasis on bureaucratic procedure and protocol than the actual goals of good governance. Therefore, Gu Yanwu argued that it was better to pick candidates whose reputation for ethical behavior mirrored those traits valued by the subjects entrusted to him. It was the subjectivity inherent in this selection process that ensured that the only candidates likely to emerge from this process would be those who demonstrated a proven ability to strive towards the public good.

In seeing such patrimonial self-interest as a positive factor rather than a drawback, Gu Yanwu departed from political theorists of his own times. Even today political theorists are more inclined to see the possible nepotism of patrimonial systems as well as their tendency towards decentralization and fragmentation as weaknesses. But why did Gu Yanwu approach this question as an issue of reforming more impersonal mechanisms of bureaucratic control to be more sensitive to local needs, or as he phrased it: “infusing the imperial system with the intent of the feudal order”? Certainly, Brown’s discussion of the terms *fengjian* and *junxian* illuminates Gu Yanwu’s historical analysis of the causes of imperial dysfunction, but Gu Yanwu’s discussion of the varying roles of magistrates and subordinate officers in local governance also points to keen interest in identifying the appropriate social categories from which a suitable candidate could emerge. Like many political theorists of the early modern period, Gu Yanwu appears to be addressing a concern about the tensions generated by the upwardly mobile provincial gentry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were not always fully incorporated into the political systems of emerging states and empire of this period. Such local elites presented a set of perplexing challenges: on the one hand their local knowledge of resources, politics, and other conditions made them ideal candidates from state recruitment, yet often such groups lacked the aristocratic ties and access to patronage—or the appropriate social and cultural skills—to be considered by the courtly elite of their respective areas as worthy of recruitment or promotion. Studies about such groups can be found in a variety of contexts, yet few scholars have attempted a larger comparative analysis of this phenomenon around the early mod-

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ern world, although it appears to be a key element in the successes and failures of the administrative systems of the period.\textsuperscript{8}

This disconnect between rural elites and the Mughal state emerged as one of the pressing issues of the early modern period in South Asia, as groups such as \textit{zamindars} (intermediaries in rural taxation, often chieftains) and the prosperous segments of the peasantry were never fully absorbed into the new state. The administrative reforms undertaken by the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) in South Asia aimed to create a centralized bureaucracy in which the division of powers in the hands of a \textit{diwan} (revenue minister), \textit{Mir Bakshi} (Head of Army and Imperial Household), \textit{Sadr} (Minister of Charitable Grants), and \textit{Qazi} (Chief Judge) allowed for checks and balances within a complex bureaucracy, with each senior officer accountable to the emperor. Large numbers of news writers at every level of government kept the authorities apprised of local-level events and ensured a large degree of information gathering.\textsuperscript{9} Unlike the Qing rulers, however, the Mughals were not inheritors of an old bureaucratic legacy, nor could they draw on a pre-existing system of civil exams, recruitment, and norms of service. Mastery over administrative, military, and courtly skills were frequently acquired by young men within the contexts of their own family’s traditions of service and upon recruitment into the imperial service. Families with pre-existing familiarity with Persian, the new court language, administrative skills, or military experience were likely to do better in the new \textit{mansabdari} system. Particularly in the military, the persistence of familial and patronage ties shaped patterns of recruitment and promotion.\textsuperscript{10}

The rural elite, whether from established \textit{zamindari} families, local hereditary officials, or the emerging layer of prosperous peasants who benefitted from the waxing economy of the period, were only fitfully

\textsuperscript{8} Most studies have focused on the centrality of rural gentry in tax collection; however, their location in an emerging global economy, as well as their fraught relations with the state are rarely studied in a comparative perspective. See, for example, Satish Chandra, “Social and Attitudinal Change in Medieval India: Thirteenth to Seventeenth Century,” \textit{Indian Historical Review} 36(1) (June 2009): 23–31; Guculu Tuluveli, “State and Classes in the Ottoman Empire: Local Notables in a Historical Perspective,” \textit{Journal of Mediterranean Studies} 15(1) (2005): 121–47; and Eishi Yamamoto, “Tax Farming by the Gentry: Reorganization of the Tax Collection System in the Early Qing,” \textit{Memoirs of the Research Department of the Tokyo Bunko} 57 (1999): 61–89. More recently a more comparative focus on the tax reforms in France and the Ottoman Empire has been analyzed through a comparative perspective, but the analytical focus is on the fiscal regimes of the state, rather than the opportunities for mobility created for rural gentry. See Eliana Balla and Noel D. Johnson, “Fiscal Crisis and Institutional Change in the Ottoman Empire and France,” \textit{Journal of Economic History} 69(3) (September 2009): 809–45.


\textsuperscript{10} Richards, \textit{Mughal Empire}, 22–23, 59–63.
incorporated to the system. The state sought to limit the exercise of their powers, particularly over revenue, by insisting that local zamindars, village chiefs, and revenue intermediaries could only preserve their traditional rights by securing those rights through payments of bonds and fees. The state reserved the right to remove those found wanting from such positions, although replacement candidates were frequently from the same lineage. Except for the few whose resources or social contacts permitted them to make the jump from the constraints of such local positions to the more promising careers available to the central state officers (mansabdars), the increased powers of the reformed state under Akbar offered much narrower horizons than the period prior to these reforms, when free-wheeling military entrepreneurs could conceivably have envisioned the possibility of much greater autonomy, status, and material gain.\(^\text{11}\)

For those individuals who were successful in joining the new administrative system of the Mughals, demonstrated skill in military or administrative matters could be parlayed into prosperity not only for the individual officer, but also for his kinsmen and clients. Yet this new-found success was premised on a dependency on the continued retention, promotion, and recruitment of kinsmen into the mansabdari system. The majority of officers received cash salaries, and only the top tier was paid through the mechanisms of jagirs, which conferred on the jagir holder the right to collect revenue from specific territories but did not confer rights to the land. In this sense the Mughal nobility were not a landed rural aristocracy, such as those found in Europe, but a service elite whose interests were closely tied to preserving ties with the state and the emperor.\(^\text{12}\) To some degree, it is with this group of elite officers rather than the rural gentry that the Mughals entered into a relationship that had several elements that Gu Yanwu had proposed. Mughal mansabdars, particularly those in the ranks of jagir holders, enjoyed a good deal of autonomy in conducting their official duties. Although layers of oversight and surveillance ensured compliance and fidelity, scholars have convincingly argued that such loyalty and service were also the products of a deeply internalized code of honor and loyalty to the emperor that bound official and emperor into a much closer affective bond than the more abstract and material contracts between employee and state. Not surprisingly, the deployment

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of a patrimonial discourse was central to the mutually sustaining relationship between the emperor and his officers.13

While the mansabdari system, from one perspective, appears to be a clear-cut system of hierarchical ranks in which chains of command were clearly established and promotion and demotion depended on the demonstrated merit of officers, access to positions in this system were inevitably also a matter of ties to the royal family and demonstrated loyalty to the emperor. Using a Weberian analysis, Stephen Blake famously deemed this arrangement a “patrimonial-bureaucratic” empire, melding together two well-known models from Max Weber’s work.14 This view has, until recently, dominated the scholarly understanding of this empire.15 Interestingly, neither of the two eminent historians of the Mughals associated with this Weberian analysis, Stephen Blake and John F. Richards, adopted Weber’s well known negative evaluations of “Oriental patrimonialisms.” Weber, famously, had argued that a growing monetized economy had a very different impact on Eastern states than Western ones—rather than weakening “traditional” social formations, the new money economy strengthened it as the political elite found new ways to tax and profit from these circumstances.16 Indeed, Richards represented the Mughal state, at least in its early years, as a dynamic, adaptable, and flexible political and fiscal system, one that frequently relied on private capital and emerging market systems to preserve and extend its authority. For Richards, if Mughal power weakened during and after the rule of Aurangzeb, (r. 1658–1707), then it was largely due to the failure of a Mughal elite to continue to model this enterprising behavior and harness the energies of an emerging rural gentry strengthened by a buoyant agrarian economy. The economic and military capacity of zamindars and peasants grew precisely at a period when the emperor and the elite turned their attention to the failed attempt to conquer and hold peninsular India and the series of succession crises that followed Aurangzeb’s death.17 What is salient to both major studies of the Mughals—that of Richards and Blake—is the importance of patrimonial forms of authority, their persistence in the face of administrative reforms, and their remarkable adaptability to political and economic changes, all of which are only partially explained by Weberian

15. Richards, Mughal Empire, 77. For a critique of this structural view, see Farhat Hasan, State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, 1572–1730 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3–5.
17. Richards, Mughal Empire, 291–97.
models, which is perhaps why Weberian terms function less as an analytical paradigm and more as useful tools of classification in both works.\(^{18}\)

If we apply Gu Yanwu’s precept of “infusing the imperial with the spirit of the feudal,” to the Mughal context, we find new ways of examining some of the dilemmas that faced Mughal officials and emperors. What John F. Richards memorably described as the “norms of comportment” for the Mughal official elite can also be seen as a code of behavioral ideals that cast the relationship between emperor and official as a mutually sustaining one that ensured the well being of the empire’s subjects, but crucially reinforced the elite status of the \textit{mansabdar}s, particular those with long familial ties to the court.\(^{19}\) But Gu Yanwu’s assumption that a common set of normative codes could inform selection and recruitment appears not to have been feasible in the Mughal domain. The rising prosperity of the host of subordinate service classes, particularly those with links to merchant families, \textit{zamindars}, and prosperous peasants in theory could be harnessed and bent to the needs of the \textit{mansabdar}i system, but in practice this was not often the case. While in some cases these newly powerful groups were able to join the ranks of elite state officials, there appears to have been an uneven incorporation of these groups into the officer corps. Their status as a parvenu elite is commented on in many texts.\(^ {20}\) Moreover, it would seem that the normative values of the \textit{mansabdar} elite were themselves undergoing significant change, as devotion to the emperor appeared to be replaced by a desire to seek autonomy in arenas of cultural and aesthetic expression, and occasionally in the political sphere as well.\(^ {21}\)

Moreover, the goals of the upwardly mobile rural elite were not always attuned to the needs of the peasantry or urban poor. Even when such groups were successfully incorporated into Mughal rule, they used their newfound status to their own ends.\(^ {22}\) The political order as well as religious

\(^{18}\) This is clearly the case for Richards who only mentions the Weberian classification in passing, cited above. For Blake, although Weber provides a useful tool for analyzing the structural forms of power, the problematic assumptions underlying the Weberian notions of urban forms, social groups, and markets, particularly in Asia, are noted. See his \textit{Shahjahanabad: The Sovereign City in Mughal India, 1639–1739} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, reprint, 2002), xiv–xv.


\(^{22}\) See for example, the fine grained contrasts in the behavior of Mughal nobility, local \textit{zamindars}, and ascendant groups such as merchant and peasant castes in Muzaffar Alam’s \textit{The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Panjab 1707–1748} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986, reprint 1993).
systems strained to ease the tensions created by the competing needs of each group. The responsiveness to local needs that Gu Yanwu identifies as the constitutive principle of good governance thus was under tremendous pressure. The surveillance mechanisms of the Mughal state continued in good form, with news writers from remote areas continuing to inform the Mughal court of details of local events, but the court no longer had the capacity—indeed, at times, the will—to act on this information.23

Although it would seem that this is where one may assume that Gu Yanwu’s utility as an analytical or methodological tool fades for the Mughal case, it is precisely this impasse that makes Gu Yanwu’s observations useful points of departure for new ways of thinking about Mughal success and decline. Why did an empire so sensitive to local needs, and contexts, and capable of responding to these factors in a dynamic way, lose the ability or desire to do so by the close of the seventeenth century? Clearly, it had less to do with an inability to penetrate the local order; the surveillance mechanisms of the state continued to provide the empire with a great minutia of information about local conditions. But how was this information processed and acted upon? Did alternative players, particularly provincial officers or local zamindars and peasant groups, become better able to respond to these local needs, or adapt them to their own ends, than the centralized state? Was the rupture between state and periphery also one of the kinds of normative values, as some scholars have suggested? Moreover, does the tension generated between centralized state and administrative periphery, to some degree created by the social mobility unleashed by global economic trends, play out differently in other parts of the early modern world, and if so, why?

Of course, making Gu Yanwu’s approach work for early modern South Asia or other historical contexts involves a fair degree of contextualization, both in terms of situating Gu Yanwu in a framework of global historical trends, and adapting his categories of thought to establish linkages with one’s own area of interest. Yet, a similar amount of modification and labor is intended when one applies more widely-used theoretical models. The recent revival of Weberian and Neo-Weberian models in history and historical sociology is an excellent point in case. It is no longer possible to use theorists like Weber, even Foucault, without some sense of the historical and social contexts in which their arguments were first made. The wave of post-modern, post-structural, and post-Marxist critiques have rendered the uncritical use of such models highly problematic. It is no wonder, then, that we find Weber’s original postulates re-framed by Third Wave Sociologists and even historians by fresh insights gleaned

23. Note the documentation of events in the news reports of the court, versus the reduced ability to compel local officials to act on this information, discussed in Alam’s work. Alam, Crisis of Empire, 136–37.
from feminist interventions on the history of families, or post-colonial theory. Yet, such re-working inevitably elide the problems created by the application of conceptual tools forged by modernity onto pre-modern concepts.\textsuperscript{24} Perhaps the greatest benefit of “reversing the gaze” of this analytical trajectory that Gu Yanwu offers then, is not only the application of non-Western paradigms to a more global history, but also the questions that pre-modern actors themselves applied to the historical contexts in which they found themselves. Laying bare the forms of their analyses as well as the historical events that triggered their questions, offers a rich method for a truly comparative and global history.

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\textsuperscript{24} A good example of this Weberian revival and modification (through gender analysis) is Julia Adams’ recent study of the patrimonial state. Note in particular her emphasis on the need to “reconstruct” Weber. Julia Adams, \textit{The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe} (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 202.
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