Abstract: In his influential *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty noted the asymmetry that exists between European theory and non-Western history. Whereas Europe is presumed to furnish "absolute theoretical insights," non-Western histories are consigned to supplying empirical facts that flesh out a European theoretical skeleton. For Chakrabarty, such asymmetry is unavoidable, as non-Western thinkers of the past are unable to provide resources for "critical thought" and thus are "dead." In this paper, I will ask whether it is indeed a foregone conclusion that the theorists of the non-Western past are dead. By teasing out the implications of *The Disquisitions on the Imperial System* by Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) for the study of the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), I demonstrate that it is not only possible but also productive to engage the theoretical traditions of the non-Western past.

The inspiration for this essay came from a chance encounter. Several years ago, my efforts to investigate the ancient Chinese bureaucracy brought me face to face with a thinker of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682). In an influential essay written in the 1670s, *The Disquisitions on the Imperial System* (*Junxian lun* 郡縣論), Gu offered an analysis and program of reform for the imperial system, which had been in place since the third century BC.¹ One proposal in particular caught my attention. “Gentlemen should be selected for office on the following basis,” Gu declared. “The recommendation system should be used so as to approximate the intent of the ancient system of ‘selecting and elevating men from the villages and hamlets.’”² With this, Gu was referring specifically to the Han system of recruitment (206 BC–AD 220).³ In Han, officials were appointed on the pretext of their *reputations* for exemplary sanctity, rather than on the basis of an examination that tested either knowledge of moral principles or literary ability. True, Gu added a few modifications based on the Tang-dynasty model (AD 618–907)—specifically, an interview

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¹ For the dates of the *Disquisition on the Imperial System*, see Thomas Carl Bartlett, “Ku Yen-wu’s Response to ‘The Demise of Human Society,’” 100. For an insightful and detailed analysis of Gu Yanwu’s thought, see John Delury, “Despotism Above and Below.”


where candidates were to be ranked according to their physical bearing, calligraphy, character, and literary skills. Modifications notwithstanding, his utopian description retained the broad outlines of the Han system. Judging from the *Disquisitions*, this older institution, which relied on reputational mechanisms, was to replace the civil service exams, which were created long after the Han and which had by Gu’s time represented the most common path to office.⁴

Having come to the essay with a Weberian perspective, I was puzzled by the fact that Gu Yanwu thought the reputational mechanisms of Han superior to the civil service exam. Why would he prefer the older system, a system seen by most scholars as being “irrational”? Granted, Weber did not see the civil service exam of Gu’s time as a model of objectivity;⁵ the exam also had a section on the Neo-Confucian canon, as well as a policy section (which was less heavily weighted in the final scoring). Still, the exam, which was highly rigorous, seemed a better choice than a system of selection that measured a candidate’s local reputation. Graded anonymously, the exam tested candidates on a wide range of subjects, ensuring that the officials chosen were highly educated.⁶ In comparison, the Han system of selection seems primitive; candidates were recommended by officials or local notables for appointments or promotions based on their local reputations. Lacking what Weber would call hard or fast criterion for selection, this earlier system, which assessed “buzz,” relied upon what modern scholars would term subjective traits, such as a reputation for moral character. As Michael Nylan puts it, such a system was not only ill equipped to identify “efficient” administrators, but also prone to being manipulated. Not surprisingly, most historians of China, who are of a Weberian frame of mind, see the Han system of recruitment as a failure. As Ho Ping-ti sums it up, the Han system was simply a “tool by which the powerful clans could perpetuate themselves.”⁷

Intrigued by the discrepancy between the views of Gu Yanwu and Weber, I toyed with the idea of writing an essay that would test Gu’s views on recruitment. However tantalizing, the idea was soon abandoned for a more conventional project. Along with a sociological collaborator, I decided to explore the Han bureaucracy by engaging better-known theorists,

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particularly Max Weber and Edward Shils. Yet I have wondered about our choice of interlocutors; neither of us ever questioned whether it was appropriate to frame our discussion of China in terms of a larger dialogue with Western social theory. Instead, we presumed that even theorists who knew little or nothing of the Han would be useful. Admittedly, we did not have a choice in the matter; both of us knew that no mainstream journal would be interested in an explicit discussion of the Han evidence in light of Gu’s ideas. Besides, questions could be raised as to whether Gu counted as a theorist. A major phonologist, poet, historian, and political theorist, Gu is regarded as an acute observer of local and political conditions. In addition, he represents the finest example of the “Han school”—a tradition of scholarship that eschewed metaphysical speculation for rigorous, philological analysis. Yet for all their admiration, historians rarely evaluate Gu’s ideas about empire, even though such ideas are couched in broad, general terms and draw from a wealth of historical data.

Of course, I am not the first to wonder why historians choose not to engage figures such as Gu Yanwu. Notably, Dipesh Chakrabarty comments upon the asymmetrical relationship between European theory and non-Western history. Whereas Europe is presumed to furnish “absolute theoretical insights,” non-Western histories, Chakrabarty points out, are consigned to supplying empirical facts that flesh out a European theoretical skeleton. To be sure, Chakrabarty’s remarks were intended for a specific context, modern Indian history. Still, his observations capture the predicament of historians of the non-Western world. A historian of France can comfortably write of the growth of the state while ignorant of the Chinese experience or its traditions of political theory. The same, however, cannot be said of historians of China. Few of us, in fact, refrain from invoking key terms such as ‘bureaucracy’ or appealing to the giants of Western social theory. Indeed, this persistent asymmetry has prompted Chakrabarty to wonder, “What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?”

For Chakrabarty, the asymmetry is unavoidable, as there are no alternatives to Western social theory. “The so-called European tradition,” he writes, “is the only one alive in the social science tradition.” By this, Chakrabarty means that we can argue passionately with Marx and Weber “without feeling any need to historicize them or to place them in their

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8. See Xie Yu and Dong Muda, “Tian he di.”
European intellectual contexts.” Such a choice, however, does not exist with non-Western thinkers of the past, a category in which Chakrabarty would include Gu Yanwu. Commenting on the situation in his field, he notes, “One result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region.” Consigned to history, such thinkers are unable to provide resources for critical thought, and so should be considered “dead.”

But is it a foregone conclusion that the traditions of the non-Western past are necessarily dead? To put it somewhat differently, might the historian now revive the forgotten traditions of the past in order to develop new and possibly improved theoretical scripts? Before laying out a roadmap of my argument, it is worth clarifying my use of the term ‘theorist.” While it is true that Gu Yanwu never entertained the universalist pretensions of nineteenth-century theorists as Hegel and Marx, it is worth noting that theory need not be universal in its aims. Thomas Kuhn, for example, has produced theories designed to explain specific historic moments and places. All the same, his ideas have been appropriated and used to explain phenomena far removed from the original context of the theorist’s discussion. In the same way, Gu’s arguments exhibit what might be called ‘transposability.’ Framed in general terms, Gu’s arguments about empire lent themselves to wide application. To cite one notable example, the Korean scholar Chŏng Yag-yong 丁若鏞 (1762–1836), assumed that the ideas in the Disquisitions could explain historical patterns beyond the Qing; in his view, the Japanese case also provided evidence for the central arguments of the Disquisitions.

By evaluating Gu’s theory of official selection from the Disquisitions, this paper argues that pre-Eurocentric traditions should be revived because they provide resources for critical thought. The first part elaborates my understanding of the Gu hypothesis, showing that Gu’s preference for the Han can be explained by his diagnosis of the failures of the imperial system: the absence of incentives for officials to promote social welfare. As Gu hints in other works, recruitment systems that used reputations as their primary criterion advanced the goal of social welfare, for they aligned the interests of administrators with those of local communities. In the second part, I move from elaborating the Gu hypothesis to demon-

13. For Kuhn’s own understanding of the modern sociological arrangements necessary for paradigms and paradigm shifts, see Structure of the Scientific Revolution, 176–79. Obviously, the term paradigm shift is now applied to cultural phenomenon far broader than the context of the history of science.
stratifying its explanatory power. Investigating one such system of selection, I propose that Han sources support Gu’s claims; the emphasis placed on local acclaim provided administrators with incentives to engage in acts of local responsiveness. Consideration of the evidence thus suggests the need for a larger reevaluation of official selection. More generally, it reveals how engagement with non-Western thinkers can furnish the stuff with which to build new theoretical scripts.

Elaborating the Gu Hypothesis

Before the merits of Gu Yanwu’s arguments about official selection can be assessed, we will have to explain such arguments. As we will see, Gu’s preference should be seen as rational in light of his larger analytic goals, which he sums up as “infusing the imperial with the spirit of the feudal.” In more concrete terms, this means that reputation-based selection would incentivize officials to act as good shepherds of the population. Surely, some readers will object to such a narrow examination of Gu. A full range of reforms is presented in the Disquisitions, as well as Gu’s famous encyclopedia, Knowledge Gained Daily (Rizhi lu 日知錄). Since a full exegesis of the Disquisitions is impractical, I confine my discussion to explaining Gu’s advocacy of selecting officials on the basis of their reputations but also provide an annotated translation of the Disquisitions, inviting readers to form their own impressions of the text. (See Appendix, A Translation of the Disquisitions.) Through the methods of inquiry outlined above, it will be revealed that Gu’s position on official recruitment can be reconciled with his twin emphases on local welfare and the principle of alignment.

Gu Yanwu’s framework of analysis is best understood in terms of a contrast between the feudal and imperial. Naturally, the translation of fengjian 封建 as ‘feudal’ is imperfect. By fengjian, Gu was not referring to a system of socio-economic organization constituted by personal ties of obligation, protection, and obedience between free men and lords.15 Instead, like most other Chinese thinkers, he used the term to capture systems of government marked by little centralization.16 As he points out in the Disquisitions, the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 11th century–771 BC) represented the paradigmatic case of feudal governance. After the conquest of the Shang dynasty, the early Zhou kings did not choose to rule their realm directly. Instead, these sagacious kings supposedly divided their realm between their brothers and their brothers’ descendants.

15. On this point, I follow F. L. Ganshof, Feudalism, xv–xviii; however, Ganshof notes variations in the way historians define feudalism. And Elizabeth Brown (see “Tyranny of a Construct”) has argued that feudalism is no longer a useful historical category.

16. Prasenjit Duara, Rescuing History from the Nation, 153.
allowing such lords to administer much of the territory without central interference.\textsuperscript{17}

In contrast, the term that I have translated as ‘imperial,’ or \textit{junxian} 郡縣, referred to forms of governance characterized by high degrees of centralization and little local autonomy. As most scholars opt for a more literal rendering, ‘prefectural’ or ‘commandery’ system, some justification for my translation is merited. In fairness, \textit{junxian} derives its name from the classic organization of the Qin (221–206 BC), which has been traditionally seen as a tyrannical dynasty. Following the unification of China in 221 BC, the Qin court purportedly abolished the autonomous states, establishing in their place commanderies (\textit{jun} 郡) and subsidiary counties (\textit{xian} 縣), which were headed by court-appointed governors and magistrates serving in rotation.\textsuperscript{18} Though the notion of the imperial system was synonymous with Qin organization, it should not be confused with the latter, since the organization of the empire evolved and became more complex over time. As there were no commanderies in the Qing, Gu naturally did not regard the commanderies and counties as an essential feature of the imperial system.\textsuperscript{19} Instead, he focused on the ‘rule of avoidance’ (\textit{huibi} 回避) and the rotation system. The former was a policy in effect from the Qin dynasty, which prohibited centrally-appointed officials from serving in their native areas;\textsuperscript{20} the latter was a practice of moving officials through different posts around the empire. In the classical tradition, both of these policies were controversial; as historian Hsiao Kung-ch’üan notes, they were associated with the idea that the interests of the dynastic court were “divergent and to some extent incompatible” with those of its subjects, and that local autonomy or power was inimical to “dynastic security.”\textsuperscript{21}

It is important to note that while Gu Yanwu contrasted the imperial with the feudal, he did not see a stark choice between the two. For one thing, no historical system of rule was entirely feudal or imperial. As he points out in \textit{Knowledge Gained Daily}, most dynasties actually contained elements of both. The ‘feudal’ Zhou, for example, saw a process whereby

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Gu Yanwu, \textit{Tinglin shi wenji}, “Junxian lun,” 1/6a.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Hans Bielenstein, \textit{The Bureaucracy of Han Times}, 105–07. Gu believed that the origins of the \textit{junxian} system go back farther to the Warring States period; see Gu Yanwu, \textit{Rizhi lu}, 968–74.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Charles Hucker, \textit{A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China}, 70–96.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Michael Loewe, “The Structure and Practice of Government,” 278. Also see Yan Geng-wang, \textit{Zhongguo difang xingzheng zhidu shi}, 347. For archaeological evidence that the law of avoidance was enforced during the Han, see Loewe, \textit{The Men who Governed China}, 47. For further comments about the aims of the law of avoidance in late imperial times, see Shigeta Atsushi, “The Origin and Structure of Gentry Rule: State and Society in China,” 351; Thomas Metzeger, \textit{The Internal Organization of Ch’ing Bureaucracy}, 37.
\end{itemize}
autonomous states were gradually replaced with centrally-administered counties.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, the early Han consisted of independent feudatories and court-administered commanderies.\textsuperscript{23} The feudal and imperial thus should be seen on a continuous scale: with states characterized by more local autonomy on one side, and those with greater centralization, on the other. For another thing, Gu argued that neither the feudal nor the imperial were perfect. Granted, he followed most thinkers in acknowledging that ‘feudal’ governance encouraged rulers to identify with the interests of local people. Yet he warned that too much of the feudal was a bad thing; the devolution of power tended to produce unstable situations, such as long periods of interstate war. And while the imperial system provided political unity and stability, such an arrangement presented the danger of autocracy. “Nowadays, the rulers monopolize the territory between the four seas,” Gu wrote, “regarding it as Our empire.” Worse still, Gu associated contemporary incarnations of the imperial system with the weakening of security and a declining standard of living for the population ("the commoners are increasingly impoverished by day").\textsuperscript{24}

Having explained Gu’s basic categories, we are ready to consider the goals of his analysis, or what he called “infusing the imperial with the spirit of the feudal.” Of course, we must ask what this meant in practical terms. Admittedly, some ambiguity exists; Gu intimates at points that his solution will benefit everyone. At the beginning of the \textit{Disquisitions}, he claims that his proposals will “foster the prosperity of the commoners and increase the power of the state.” Gu then proceeds to claim that his economic plan is “a scheme for enriching the state.” A closer reading, however, reveals that Gu generally downplays state power, focusing instead on the importance of providing social welfare to the agrarian population. The third section of the nine-part \textit{Disquisitions} serves as a case in point. There, Gu emphasizes that his reforms will promote the “happiness of the commoners,” not once mentioning their ramifications for the ruler. Indeed, the priority on local welfare is evident from his definition of the ideal administrator. Such an administrator is not described as a loyal dynastic servant, but rather one who “reclaims wastelands, regulates open country, encourages the growth of trees, repairs irrigation ditches, fortifies city walls, fills granaries, establishes schools, eradicates bandits, maintains a full supply of weapons—and most importantly, makes the commoners take pleasure in their enterprises.”\textsuperscript{25}

While we might dismiss the emphasis in the \textit{Disquisitions} on social welfare as a bit of “Confucian” flourish, I would argue that such an emphasis

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Rizhi lu jishi} 33/968.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Michael Loewe, “The Former Han Dynasty,” 126.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Tinglin shi wenji}, “Junxian lun,” 1/6b.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Tinglin shi wenji}, “Junxian lun,” 3/7b–8a.
\end{itemize}
reveals the dissimilar goals and analytic parameters of Weber and Gu. For Weber, institutions were to be evaluated in terms of their efficiency. Insofar as this system of recruitment did little to sharply delineate and circumscribe the role of officials, it was inefficient. In contrast, Gu opposed the myriad of measures adopted by the rulers of late imperial China to define and limit the scope of an official’s authority.26 “Rather than focusing on the present calamity,” he complains, “rulers instead worry about magistrates acting without proper authorization; this is what is referred to as not understanding matters!” The diverging aims of Weber and Gu are also evident from Gu’s calls to abolish the censorate, the state organ responsible for prosecuting officials who overstepped their circumscribed roles or committed procedural violations.27 Magistrates instead, he opined, should be given a freer hand to improve the population’s standard of living without regard to official procedure.28

In addition, Gu’s focus on social welfare sets him apart from interpretations of empires, which have been largely inspired by Shils. As Shils is less familiar to readers than Weber, it is worth describing the salient features of this framework of analysis before contrasting it with Gu’s. For Shils, efficiency does not represent the analytic point of departure; states aspire not to be more efficient; they seek rather to integrate the periphery through peaceful means. From this perspective, negotiation and local compromise are not to be understood as signs of a failed system, but rather an effective strategy. The more room for local negotiation, the less resistance to the center; conversely, the more efficiently and rigidly central directives are implemented, the more the center is vulnerable to unrest.29 While Gu no doubt appreciated the value of stability, his analysis departs from that of Shils in its emphasis on local welfare. Gu highlighted the pitfalls of too much local autonomy. Such arrangements, Gu wrote, contained the roots of local exploitation. For Gu, the yamen—the local underclass of petty officers responsible for running the daily operations of the state—provides one important case in point. In Gu’s view, the yamen presented an obstacle to local welfare because they had too much autonomy from the capital.30 The yamen inherited (or purchased) their

26. In this connection, I would include the analyses of S. N. Eisenstadt, The Political Systems of Empire, which looks at the development of institutions from the perspective of factors that promote or constrain the ruler’s control over “free resources.”
29. For interpretations that are influenced by Shils, see Gary Hamilton, “Heaven is High,” 162; Vivienne Shue, The Reach of the State, 100; Sidney Tarrow, Between Center and Periphery; Karen Barkey, Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective. For the original formulation, see Edward Shils, Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology.
30. For a more nuanced view of the yamen, see Bradley W. Reed, Talons and Teeth.
posts, and so were not subject to vetting or dismissal by the central government.\textsuperscript{31} “Although the officials above are fully aware that the yamen harm all under Heaven,” Gu complained, “the senior officials are unable to get rid of them.” For Gu, the solution was simple: increase not only the power of the magistrate, but also the presence of the state. Allow the magistrate to appoint local men as dynastic officials and make anyone with even quasi-governmental powers accountable to the dynasty.\textsuperscript{32} In other words, there was to be less, not more, local negotiation.\textsuperscript{33}

So far we have discussed Gu’s analytic goals, but we have yet to say something about how institutions, such as the system of official recruitment, could make administrators more locally responsive. For Gu, the answer can be framed in terms of the principle of alignment: the better the institution aligns the interests of the official with those of the local community, the more locally responsive his administration would be. With this explicit appeal to self-interest, Gu departed from the dominant trend of Chinese thought, as exemplified by the two thinkers whose work was most influential in Gu’s day: Zhu Xi (also known as Chu Hsi 朱熹 [1130–1200]) and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). Both Zhu and Wang emphasized the importance of transcending selfish or partial (\textit{si 私}) impulses for achieving a well-ordered state. Countering the commonplace view, Gu declared, “Self-interested conduct represents the normal state of things. . . . The sages based their actions on this principle and deployed it.”\textsuperscript{34}

Indeed, the principle of alignment emerges as a dominant theme in the \textit{Disquisitions}, and it is most explicit in Gu Yanwu’s discussion of the hereditary magistracy. Heredity, however, was not intended by Gu to be an alternative to the recommendation system. Instead, heredity was to be used alongside reputational criterion; magistrates would be chosen from a pool of candidates based on their reputations and assigned to areas outside of their own home areas. Heredity was only to come into play once the magistrate had completed his probationary period. At this time, the magistrate and his clan would be made permanent residents of the juris-

\textsuperscript{31} Philip Kuhn, \textit{Origins of the Modern Chinese State}, 22–23. For gentry and official disapproval of the yamen, see Pierre-Étienne Will, \textit{Bureaucracy and Famine}, 89; John R. Watt, \textit{The District Magistrate in Late Imperial China}, 232. For the rise of the yamen in the middle period, see Brian McKnight, \textit{Village and Bureaucracy}, 13, 20–37.

\textsuperscript{32} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Tinglin shi wenji}, “Junxian lun,” 2/7a–7b; 8/10b–11a.


\textsuperscript{34} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Tinglin wenji}, “Junxian lun,” 5/9a.
diction, and the magistrate would be given the option to transfer his post to his heir or protégé of choice. In this way, the fortunes of the magistrate and his progeny would be tied to those of the community. Insofar as the magistrate identified his interests with those of the patriline, he would protect the privileges of his heirs. And inasmuch as the magistrate saw the welfare of his descendants as dependent on local prosperity, he would strive to promote local interests. As Gu writes, “If the county magistrates could be partial to the area within a hundred leagues [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.”

Though less explicit, the same principle of alignment runs through Gu’s discussion of systems of selection that privileged good reputations. As Gu points out in Knowledge Gained Daily, the ancient system pegged the careers of officials to their reputations. Or, as he says, “a man’s promotion and demotion within the official ranks was rooted in the opinions given by the village”—by this, I take him to refer to the area that the official governed, as well as to his local area. The same point is reiterated with slight variation elsewhere, where Gu even claims that the emphasis on reputations would prevent official malfeasance. “With the [Han] system of village selection,” he writes, “the whole life of a man was scrutinized, and if there were but a taint in the unsullied opinion of the area, the man would never be employed.”

Far from being an irrational stance, Gu’s position on reputational criteria was consistent both with his diagnosis of the ills of the imperial system and his larger analytic goals. As we have seen above, Gu’s primary critique of the imperial system was that it failed to provide social welfare. Though Gu pays lip service to the decentralized or feudal forms of governance, interestingly he opposes moves to return to a system of governance marked by more local autonomy. (If anything, Gu is in favor of more central control and less local compromise). Instead, Gu’s solution to the problem of social welfare is to reform institutions, particularly the recruitment system. Instead of seeking to insulate administrators from local influence, Gu argued that the system of recruitment should align the interests of the administrator with those of his constituents, in effect giving the administrator a personal stake in the welfare of the community.

36. Gu Yanwu, Rizhi lu jishi 13/597–98; for a discussion of the emphasis on governing and instructing by reputation, see John Delury, “Despotism Above and Below,” 304–09; 310–16. Delury points out that Gu praised the Han for governing “by means of reputation.”
Through such a strategy of alignment, the imperial state could become more ‘feudal’ or locally responsive in character.

Documenting the Gu Hypothesis

Having elaborated Gu Yanwu’s views, we are now ready to ask whether his hypothesis has any merits. In other words, did reputational selection foster local responsiveness in administrators by aligning their interests with those of their local constituents? In order to assess the value of the Gu hypothesis, I will return to the Han case. Naturally, questions may be raised as to whether the Han provides a test of the Gu hypothesis, as Gu’s arguments, though framed in general terms, were in part inspired by the Han case. But it is worth pointing out that there is nothing unusual about pitting a theorist against one of his paradigmatic cases; many of Weber’s hypotheses have been tested against cases with which he was familiar.37 Besides, while Gu was familiar with Han sources, he provided no evidence from the Han. What follows below is a preliminary examination of the Han evidence. As we see, our sources suggest that the Gu hypothesis has explanatory merit. Insofar as the Han system made career advancement dependent on the esteem of their constituents, the use of reputations as a chief criterion for selection and promotion offered incentives to officials in exchange for local responsiveness.

Before going any further, it is necessary to introduce the Later Han dynasty; such background is necessary for evaluating the merits of Gu’s arguments. Arising in the wake of the collapse of the Qin unifiers, the Han dynasty survived for more than four centuries and represents the first empire of long-term stability in China. Scholars commonly divide the Han into two periods, the Former Han (206 BC–AD 9) and Later Han (AD 25–220), also called the Western and Eastern Han respectively.

Several features of the Han system of rule deserve mention, as they bear on our discussion below. The single term “official” (li 吏), which was used for the 130,000 men in the service, may give the impression that the composition of Han officialdom was homogeneous, but there was an essential distinction between commissioned and junior officers. The former group, which included magistrates, represented the top four percent of officials. These commissioned officials received their appointments in the

37. For revisions, refutations, and defenses of Weberian theory from the perspective of the Chinese case, see, for example, Robert Marsh, “Weber’s Misunderstanding of Traditional Chinese Law”; Philip Huang, Civil Justice in China. My own Politics of Mourning revisits Weber’s theory of patrimonialism and refutes his assessment of the Chinese bureaucracy with sources such as the Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing 孝經), a source of which Weber was clearly aware.
capital and were subject to the rule of avoidance (discussed above).\textsuperscript{38} The latter, the vast majority of the men in service, were appointed by commissioned officials as junior staff and served in their home jurisdictions, or under ministers in the capital.\textsuperscript{39} Though sometimes referred to as sub-bureaucrats, these junior officers were not the precursors of the yamen of late imperial China. In contrast to yamen, who were of lowly status, junior officers of Han came from elite clans. In addition, such junior officers were actually considered full officials, paid government salaries, and eligible for commissioned posts. Indeed, as Gu Yanwu himself notes, most commissioned officials began their careers as local appointees.\textsuperscript{40}

In addition, the Han was distinguished by its system of recruitment, which used a virtuous reputation as the primary criterion. At least two points bear mention in this regard. First, although the origins of selecting officials for their reputations can be traced to the mid-Former Han, the Later Han represents the heyday of such a system of selection; my discussion thus draws primarily from Later Han sources. Second, the Han system should also be seen as a system of promotion, as well as for selection. Each year, about two hundred appointed or former officers—about two men for every commandery—would be nominated by the governor as “Filial and Incorrupt.”\textsuperscript{41} The nominees would be sent to the capital and serve as Cadet Gentlemen for several years on a probationary basis before being sent to various commissioned posts around the empire.

With such an introduction, we return to the Gu hypothesis, which I would argue is best evaluated by addressing two smaller issues: first, what evidence exists that suggests that the focus on reputations aligned the interests of the administrator with those of local society, and second, whether the effects of such alignment were socially beneficial.

\textsuperscript{38} De Crespigny, \textit{Biographical Dictionary of China}, 1232.  
\textsuperscript{39} Liao Boyuan, \textit{Jiandu yu zhidu}, 3.  
\textsuperscript{40} Gu Yanwu, \textit{Rizhi lu jishi}, 8/379; cf. Liao, \textit{Jiandu yu zhidu}, 25; for similar observations, see Hsing, \textit{Qin Hanshi lungao}, 162.  
\textsuperscript{41} De Crespigny, “Recruitment Revisited.” For the earliest calls and the establishment of the regular system, see Yan, \textit{Zhongguo difang xingzheng zhidu shi}, 82; 317. For figures of the number of Filial and Incorrupt, see Huang Liuzhu, “Handai de xuan lian zhidu,” 27. For the role played by Emperor Wu in introducing the system of nomination (particularly, of the Filial and Incorrupt), see Lai Huaming, “Handai chajuzhi gailun,” 93. Also see Mou Jinxin, “Handai chaju zhong de xiaolian he chalian zhi fen.” On these points, see Loewe, \textit{Men Who Governed China}, 121–28. For strong evidence that the system of nominating men as “Filial and Incorrupt” had not yet supplanted the older practice of allowing junior officers to move up through the ranks gradually on the basis of merit (gong 功) at the end of the Former Han period, see Liao Boyuan, \textit{Jiandu yu zhidu}, 42. For discussion of moves by emperors to increase the number of “Filial and Incorrupt” nominees in the Later Han, see Bielenstein, \textit{The Bureaucracy of Han Times}, 134–35.
The alignment of interests is clear in the case of junior officials, as their local standing had a direct impact on their career prospects. In Han, the “Filial and Incorrupt” nominations were made by the governor in consultation with the Bureau of Merit, which was staffed exclusively by local notables.\textsuperscript{42} In some cases, however, local notables, who were not in the Bureau of Merit, could make recommendations directly to the governor. A memorandum forwarded to a governor about a thirteen-year-old clerk named Cheng Wei 程未 testifies to this phenomenon. Interestingly, the author, literatus Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132/33–192), does not mention Cheng’s technical skills as a qualification for office—his mastery of reading and writing or his knowledge of legal and administrative matters. His track record as a junior official appears to have been irrelevant here. Instead, Cai emphasized Cheng’s reputation for personal sanctity. This emphasis is seen by the space given to describing Cheng’s “outstanding filial conduct” while in mourning for his great-uncle. According to Cai, Cheng was so moved with grief, he became distracted and emaciated. “Whenever the name of his uncle fell upon his ears,” Cai wrote, “Cheng’s eyes would respond with tears.” At least two points about the memorandum are noteworthy. To begin with, Cai was not serving in the jurisdiction in which Cheng Wei lived and worked. Although Cai had no official capacity in the jurisdiction, he was nevertheless a native of the place; so his opinion mattered inasmuch as it reflected the view of a local notable. More importantly, Cai went to great lengths to verify Cheng’s sanctity. Besides devising various ruses that put the sincerity of the boy’s grief to the test, Cai interviewed eyewitnesses from the area. These eyewitness accounts were critical for making the case, as they helped Cai argue that Cheng’s reputation was actually the “unsullied opinion of the hamlet.”\textsuperscript{43}

The Han focus on reputations appears to have aligned the interests of commissioned officials with those of local people. To be sure, the process used to evaluate the commissioned official was not the same as that for junior officers. Subject to the rule of avoidance, the commissioned official did not serve in his home area, and so the opinion of the people of his native place was irrelevant. Yet the commissioned official could not be indifferent to local buzz, since his constituents could influence his standing with the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. For a start, constituents could compose songs of praise (or censure). The biography of a second-century governor, for example, claims that the “officers and commoners” of his commandery sang: “Staunch and resolved is Zhu Ji of Nanyang/The officers are fearful of his might but the people cherish his kindness.”\textsuperscript{44} Judging from the fact that scores of songs are recorded in the histories (which drew heavily from

\textsuperscript{42.} De Crespigny, “Recruitment Revisited.”
\textsuperscript{43.} Cai Yong, Cai Zhonglang ji [wai] 8.4a–5a.
\textsuperscript{44.} Fan Ye, Hou Hanshu 43/31.1459.
official dossiers), superiors clearly noticed expressions of local esteem and incorporated them into performance evaluations. In the second century, local officers and powerful commoners commissioned stone inscriptions to extol the achievements of living officials, or ‘memorials of merit’ (gongde bei 功德碑).

Such memorials were once found alongside roads, in front of temples and tombs, and on the faces of bridges and sides of mountains. Conspicuous, they were designed to be seen, sung, and memorized by members of the population and travelers. In a smaller number of cases, the locals would honor commissioned officials by building shrines and temples and offering worship during the official’s lifetime.

Our sources provide concrete examples where the “opinions given by the village” had a tangible effect on the career prospects of the commissioned official. In some cases, a good local reputation presented a mitigating factor where a career was in jeopardy. Zong Jun 宗均 (d. 76), who held a position equivalent to a governor, provides a case in point:

In the first year of the “Forever Peaceful” reign period (58 AD), Zong was transferred to the post of Chancellor of Donghai commandery, and he resided in this commandery for five years. He was punished for a crime and relieved of his post. A guest in Yingchuan commandery, Zong accepted students, but the officers and people of Donghai longed for his kindness and transformative influence. So, they composed a song about him, and those who went to the imperial palace begging for his return numbered in the several thousands. In the seventh year of the “Forever Peaceful” reign period (64), Emperor Ming (r. 58–76) honored him with an appointment to the Secretariat on account of his facility with governance.

As the excerpt reveals, the chronicler saw a close connection between Zong’s standing in Donghai and his eventual rehabilitation. Here, local support appears to have been more than a pretext to promote someone favored by superiors. As his prosecution suggests, Zong had in fact run afoul of his superiors; hence, the dramatic expression of local acclaim presented a mitigating factor in Zong’s favor.

Shows of local support not only mitigated the effects of demotions, but they also played a role in facilitating promotions within the commissioned ranks. Let us consider the case of two brothers from the second century AD: Dong Hui 董恢 (fl. 177) and Dong Yi 董翊. The elder had been a magistrate, and his administration had been well received in the county. According to his biography, “The officials composed for him a song of

45. Loewe, The Government of the Qin and Han Empires, 117.
46. Brown, “Han Steles,” 191; for the identity of stele donors, see Xie and Dong, “Tian he di.”
48. Xie and Dong, “Tian he di.”
49. Fan Ye, Hou Hanshu 31.1413.
praise, and so this elder Dong was nominated as ‘Being of Exceptional Quality’ in the province of Qing and promoted to Governor of Danyang.” The younger, who also became a county magistrate, was similarly a success; credited with having a “transformative influence” over the population, this Dong also won local acclaim. According to the biographer, “The officers erected a stele to him while he was alive, and so he became famous.” Dong was raised up [for another nomination] but encountered a death in the family and quit his post in haste to return home, only to be later nominated as an “Abundant Talent.” While the younger Dong did not answer his summons and thus was not appointed in the end, the nomination undoubtedly would have translated into a promotion had it been accepted.50

The case of Ren Yan 任延 (AD 5–68), a governor of Jiuzhen, provides one final example. The History of the Later Han relates his career in the following way:

Ren Yan oversaw the affairs in Jiuzhen for four years before being summoned to visit [the imperial capital of] Luoyang; however, he was detained on account of an illness and thus demoted to Magistrate of Suiyang. The officers and men of Jiuzhen established a shrine for Ren while he was alive. He was then honored with a promotion as Governor of Wuwei, and the Emperor gave him a private audience and admonished him as such, “Because of your excellent handling of affairs, you have been promoted in office; be careful not to lose your good reputation.”51

This example brings together a number of strands, namely, the connection between local shrines, reputations, and career prospects. As before, we see the same sequence of events: an official is commemorated, his reputation is enhanced, and he receives a nomination or promotion. In this case, the connections are still clearer, for the chronicler’s discussion suggests that the establishment of the shrine not only enhanced Ren’s reputation, but also mitigated the effects of his demotion. The very fact that the emperor commented upon the man’s reputation suggests an explicit connection between proof of local standing and the promotion.

We have seen how the Han system made officials dependent upon their constituents for acclaim. Insofar as the commissioned officer wished to advance, he would be mindful of local interests, and so it is easy to see how the focus on reputations contributed to the alignment of local and official interests. This, however, brings us to the second part of the Gu hypothesis, namely, whether such an alignment was necessarily good for local society. Certainly, not everyone in local society had an equal hand in the “village judgments” seen in song and stone. Our sources do allude to commoners (min 民) and the hundred surnames (baixing 百姓); yet these

50. Fan, Hou Han Shu 76.2482. For an analogous case, see 86.2851.
51. Fan, Hou Han Shu 76.2462; for further examples, see Hou Han Shu 65.2139.
could have referred also to wealthy or educated landholders who did not hold office. Moreover, poor peasants, the overwhelming majority of the population, did not have the means to commission stone monuments, which were expensive. And while songs were free to produce, we should be wary of attributing these to the rank and file. Some of them contain classical allusions, which suggests that the authors of songs were literate.\(^{52}\)

For all of these reasons, the “judgments of the village” seem to be none other than the opinions of the wealthy and locally powerful, rather than the voice of a peasant subaltern.\(^{53}\)

Indeed, by putting so much emphasis on reputations, the Han system, it could be argued, did precisely what Gu Yanwu wanted to avoid: such a system might have encouraged the commissioned official to collude with local elites. An ambitious magistrate, for instance, might falsify census records for the purpose of minimizing the tax or corvée obligations of the local elite, or alternatively, he could shield them from prosecution. In return for such “help,” the magistrate’s cronies could compose songs, construct shrines, and commission stone inscriptions.

Though collusion was inevitable, there are reasons to think that the Han system actually encouraged the imperial administrator to promote the social welfare of the entire community. Our sources indicate initiatives to construct bridges, irrigation ducts, temples, and roads.\(^{54}\) The case of Li Xi 李翕, a governor of a frontier commandery, serves as a case in point. Li had been extolled in a series of inscriptions for his road building; the most famous of these inscriptions, which dates to AD 171,\(^{55}\) records Li’s efforts to widen a narrow road over a gorge.\(^{56}\) This road—one of the earliest projects involving primitive explosives—required more than technical ingenuity on the part of Li. In fact, contemporary records suggest that considerable public funds and corvée labor had to be procured. As the disastrous Xiongnu wars some forty years before had left the imperial coffers empty, officials could face opposition at court for expensive or risky projects.\(^{57}\)

Aside from the potential for political fallout, the project was complicated by the need for local coordination. As the inscription reveals, Li relied upon local officers to recruit and supervise as many as several

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53. For this critique of the Han system, see Ch’ien Mu, *Traditional Government in Imperial China*, 33.
thousand laborers from the area.\textsuperscript{58} In short, the road project represented a major effort—and one, I would argue, worthy of commemoration.

In addition, other evidence suggests that the Han system, with its focus on outstanding reputations, was robust enough to ferret out blatant examples of local collusion. True, reputational mechanisms privileged moral character over test results; at the same time, the process by which the virtuous was identified was hardly as arbitrary as modern detractors imply. As we saw with the case of Cheng Wei, the process of nomination itself required documentation. What is more, Han rulers used a guarantee system. A senior official was to be punished in the event that his nominee was deemed unworthy.\textsuperscript{59} As a result, senior officials went to lengths to verify the reputations of potential candidates. They would interview the wives of men in mourning and ask indelicate questions about sexual activity.\textsuperscript{60} And such senior officials would respond to reports about potential candidates by spying on them to see whether the rumors of exemplary piety were merited.\textsuperscript{61} Besides shaping the behavior of senior officials, the documentary requirement undoubtedly influenced local boosters. While there was little to prevent local cronies from extolling the official in an inscription, a monument containing nothing more than vague praise was unlikely to impress censors, who were on the lookout for signs of collusion.\textsuperscript{62} The \textit{Han Protocols} (\textit{Hanyi} 漢儀) of the second century instructed censors to remove governors who were too intimate with local magnates.\textsuperscript{63} Given the situation, an ambitious official was better served by an inscription containing proof of the official’s ‘impartiality.’

Indeed, Han memorials of merit clearly evince an awareness of the need for tangible proof of local responsiveness, as they focus on specifics, particularly public works projects. The stone inscription (ca. AD 113) dedicated to a commissioned officer stationed in present-day Sichuan provides a case in point:

The Yangdou road used to ascend in a southern direction and descended from the high mountain. It entered a deep valley that was dangerous, steep, wind ing, and distant. Because of this, the hundred surnames suffered adversity. In

\textsuperscript{58} Harrist, \textit{Landscape of Words}, 50.
\textsuperscript{59} Miranda Brown, \textit{Politics of Mourning}, 29.
\textsuperscript{60} Fan Ye, \textit{Hou Hanshu} 66.2160.
\textsuperscript{61} For another case of an investigation, one where the candidate did not survive the vetting process, see Fan Ye, \textit{Hou Hanshu} 56.2160. For an official who became notorious for faulty recommendations, see Nylan, “Confucian Piety and Individualism,” 16.
\textsuperscript{62} For the system of surveillance, see Bielenstein, \textit{Bureaucracy of Han Times}, 91. Traditional wisdom has generally emphasized the weakness of the monitoring capacity of the imperial state. In a recent article, Hou Xudong has argued that the Han system of surveillance was far more powerful than previously believed. On this point, see his “Chuanshe shiyong yu Han diguo de richang tongzhi.”
\textsuperscript{63} De Crespigny, “Inspection and Surveillance Officials,” 49.
the sixth year of the “Forever New” [AD 112] reign period, the Commandant of Qingyi, one Zhao Menglin of Nan’an, modified the road. There were no robbers from this road to the border of the big river to the even marsh, and the distance of the road was almost twenty leagues. Once the peril was eliminated, those on horseback, carrying loads on both shoulders, and the old or weak were able to cross. All travelers and members of the myriad surnames are indebted to the gentleman. Thus, his name will be transmitted without end.64

The description of the road found here is typical of memorials of merit. While later memorials tend to be longer and more elaborate, they too devote much space to describing specific public works. Almost all of the surviving 47 memorials—undoubtedly, a fraction of the original corpus—extol the contributions of the official to local society. Such memorials call attention to the official’s efforts to recruit men of merit, to bring order to society by suppressing bandits and hostile aliens, and by improving economic conditions. More strikingly, twenty eight (61%) were commissioned in response to a single event. Of these, thirteen commemorate the building of bridges or roads, five remember repairs to temples, and four recall water projects.65

While brief, our examination of the Han case is suggestive, since our sources reveal that the use of reputational criteria most likely influenced the conduct of officials. So, from the perspective of social welfare, the Han system made sense. At the very least, such a criterion made officials more sensitive to their standing with their local constituents. And indeed, some evidence suggests that reputational mechanisms encouraged officials to distinguish themselves through good acts: By sponsoring public works projects that could furnish irrefutable proof of ‘impartial’ concern for local people. No doubt, the Han case stands to be tested against other instances where reputation was an important selection criterion: particularly those that existed in the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a period that enjoys richer documentation than the Han. As with the Han, scholars tend to take a dim view of later incarnations of this selection system, which are usually depicted as a less “rational” or “efficient” precursor to the exam system.66 If indeed the Gu hypothesis holds for this period, the recurrence of reputational mechanisms will appear less as a bizarre anomaly as much as a strategy for “infusing the imperial with the spirit of the feudal.”

64. Hong Kuo, *Lishi* 4:2b–3a; for another case that suggests a strong connection between memorials of merit and specific public works projects, see Fan Ye, *Hou Hanshu* 24/862; cf. Ban Gu, *Dongguan Hanji* 12.10a–10b.


Conclusion and Discussion

With this exploration of Gu Yanwu, I have tried to make a case for taking non-Western social theorists seriously. Certainly, I would agree that there is nothing wrong with putting figures such as Gu Yanwu into their historical contexts. All theorists, including Western social theorists, can be considered primary sources. At the same time, I would hasten to point out that there is more than one way to read a non-Western theorist. It is not only possible to engage Gu as if he were Weber or Shils, but also highly productive to do so. Gu’s analysis of official selection—which points to the connection between the alignment of interests and social welfare—better illuminates the rationale for the Han system than Weber or Shils. Indeed, the Han case suggests that Gu’s framework may be used to develop new perspectives with which to study empires.

A skeptic may wonder whether Gu Yanwu is a singular figure in the premodern world. While I cannot speak for other civilizations, I am confident that Gu is not the outlier for China; Gu in fact belonged to a long and sophisticated tradition of political theory, which stretched as far back as the second century AD. In A Disquisition on Governance (Zhenglun 政論), the official Cui Shi 崔寔 (d. AD 170) inaugurated the debate by criticizing the imperial system for undercutting the ability of magistrates to broker local interests. Like Gu, Cui proposed reforms, in particular, extending the tenures of officeholders to allow them to develop ties with their constituents.67 The debate continued through the middle period, though the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. The leading literati of the Tang dynasty (618–907), such as Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), tended to defend the imperial system, arguing that centralized rule was the only way to ensure peace and prosperity for the realm. In contrast, Song-dynasty (960–1279) statesmen, such as Zhu Xi sided with Cui Shi, calling for reforms that would foster greater local responsiveness on the part of officials. The debate went into high gear in the Qing (1644–1911). Drawing upon a rich set of historical data and administrative experience, Gu’s interlocutors weighed a range of factors that affected the ability of states to provide social welfare. They deliberated suspending the rule of avoidance, changing the surveillance system, and altering the contents of the civil service examination. Perhaps most interesting were the conversations about the use of historical evidence in policy debates, conversations that hint of useful methodological resources. Some thinkers claimed that appeals to history were inadmissible; the past, they argued, provided no guarantee of the future, since the efficacy of institutions of the past owed much to conditions specific to those times. The debate continued right

67. Yan, Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Lichao wen 46.7a; cf. Patricia Ebrey, “Estate and Family Management in the Later Han,” 178.
up until the 1911 revolution, where thinkers such as Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) infused the discussion with new ideas about parliamentary democracy. 68

Our discussion thus far has been concerned with the contemporary relevance of Gu Yanwu and other Chinese thinkers, but it remains to say a word about whether such thinkers can illuminate the world outside of China. In other words, can Gu and other Chinese theorists of empire be of use for understanding societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Though this is a question that cannot be answered definitively at this juncture, it is worth pointing out that, before the twentieth century, thinkers in Korea and Japan had assumed that this was the case. In a classic study, The Meiji Restoration and Imperial Thought (1939), Japanese historian Asai Kiyoshi 淺井清, proved that Japanese scholars of the Tokugawa and Meiji periods debated the relative merits of the imperial and feudal. For such Japanese scholars, such debates were not only germane to China, but they were also relevant for understanding the forces of historical change within Japan. 69 More astonishingly still, Asai argued that the framework of the feudal and imperial could be used to account for the Meiji restoration, which he argued could be characterized as a move away from the feudal arrangement of the Tokugawa (1603–1868) to the more centralized institutions of the imperial system. 70

I would also argue that there are reasons to think that the framework of feudal and imperial can be used to analyze the world outside of East Asia. This is because many of the same structural tensions can be found in other empires. The avoidance policy—a policy that in effect made the imperial representative a colonial administrator—was not unique to the world within the Chinese cultural sphere. In the fifteenth century, the Ottomans adopted a similar policy: At the provincial and district level, the Ottoman court appointed governor-generals and sanjaks governors who were not natives to the area. 71 The ‘avoidance’ rule was observed until the seventeenth century, when the Ottoman court allowed local notables to be appointed on account of their ‘honesty and capability’ or to purchase


69. For Tokugawa-era debates, see Asai Kiyoyoshi, Meiji Ishin to gunken shisō, 9–14. Asai even cites Satō Issai 佐藤一齋 (1772–1859), who describes both Japan and the ‘various states of the Western seas’ as feudal realms. Asai traces this framework to ancient China and to thinkers such as Liu Zongyuan; see 1–10.

70. For a summary of the larger arguments, see Asai, Meiji Ishin to gunken shisō, “Preface,” 105–300.

gubernatorial positions in their local areas. In addition, we find a rotation system in other premodern empires. Ottoman governors, like their Chinese counterparts, served in rotation. The Mughals similarly offer a point of comparison. They too introduced a system of rotation into the sub-continent, whereby administrators were moved through posts on a regular basis. As in China, such policies were designed to prevent administrators from forming attachments to local communities and undermining dynastic prerogatives. Such parallels raise a host of questions, including how such regimes managed to find a balance between the feudal and imperial. In other words, what mechanisms existed to balance the extractive tendencies of empires with the need to maintain legitimacy? And most importantly, to what extent does the alignment of interests enhance the imperial state’s ability to provide social welfare?

The issue of Gu Yanwu’s relevance for current scholarship ultimately bears on the larger problem of how non-Western history should be studied. If indeed Gu and other non-Western theorists provide the resources for critical thought, this suggests that other civilizations contain similar theoretical resources; and this in turn raises the issue whether historians should content themselves with doing “European history,” as Chakrabarty would say. While legitimate reasons may exist for sticking with a European script, the choice should be made for reasons other than the lack of alternatives. In fairness, Chakrabarty is quick to point out the virtues of Western social theory: “The everyday paradox of third-world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of ‘us,’ eminently useful in understanding our societies.” Perhaps more importantly, the European tradition is varied enough to provide the critical resources to confront and transcend its own limitations. With its social theory, Chakrabarty writes, Europe furnishes us with the abstract and universal framework necessary for producing critical readings of social injustices. At the same time, the European tradition also contains a hermeneutic strain that concerns itself with the “diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging.” In Chakrabarty’s view, it is this tradition that can serve as a powerful corrective to the more totalizing tendencies of European social theory. By simultaneously deploying the universal and hermeneutical perspectives, he writes, the historian can

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73. Colin Imber, Ottoman Empire, 192, 214.
74. Richard Eaton, A Social History of the Deccan, 158.
75. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 29.
“provincialize” Europe by confronting the parochial assumptions behind the universalist claims of social theory.\textsuperscript{76}

Chakrabarty undoubtedly makes an eloquent case for the continued use of Western social theory; yet I would propose that the historian should go beyond using European critical resources. Naturally, Chakrabarty is right to say that provincializing Europe should not be a project of shunning European thought. Much in fact is to be learned from Weber or Shils. But we also stand to lose much by limiting ourselves to European thinkers, however rich and varied they may be. As my discussion of Gu Yanwu reveals, other analytic choices exist—ones that offer the tools and perspectives that may help us better explain our sources. As a result, I would challenge historians to do more than hold in permanent tension the hermeneutic and theoretical perspectives found in the European tradition. Instead, I would also encourage opening a dialogue between different traditions of social theory—for example, to alternate between the perspectives of Weber, Shils, Gu, and others. European thought is indeed a gift to us all, as Chakrabarty says, but this does not mean that we should look askance at the offerings of others.

\textsuperscript{76} Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 42, 254–55.
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)

MIRANDA BROWN

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 reinstitution 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 magis-
trate, 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, Direc-
tor 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 com-
moners: 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 band-
dits, 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 house-
hold. 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. 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, and he was a person of the Qin dynasty. He was a successful husbandman. Qiao Yao 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 (gōng 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

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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)\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{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.

\textbf{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.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{80}. An allusion to the \textit{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 [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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