

Bao Shichen: An Early Nineteenth-Century Chinese Agrarian Reformer

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Prefatory note to the Agrarian Studies Program:

I was greatly flattered to receive an invitation from Jim Scott to present to this exalted group, and could not refuse. I'm also a bit embarrassed, however, because I'm not working on anything these days that falls significantly within your arena of interest. I am studying in general a reformist scholar of the early nineteenth century, named Bao Shichen. The contexts in which I have tended to view him (and around which I organized panels for the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meetings in 2007 and 2009) have been (1) the broader reformist currents of his era, spawned by a deepening sense of dynastic crisis after ca. 1800, and (2) an enduring Qing political "counter discourse" beginning in the mid-seventeenth century and continuing down to, and likely through, the Republican Revolution of 1911. Neither of these rubrics are directly concerned with "agrarian studies." Bao did, however, have quite a bit to say in passing about agriculture, village life, and especially local rural governance. In this paper I have tried to draw together some of this material, but I fear it is as yet none too neat.

In my defense, I would add that previously in my career I have done a fair amount of work on what legitimately *is* agrarian history, and indeed have taught courses on that subject (students are less interested in such offerings now than they used to be, in my observation). Among my relevant earlier writings I would identify Part Two of my 2001 book *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China*, nearly the entirety of my 2007 book *Crimson Rain: Seven Centuries of Violence in a Chinese County*, and, perhaps most apt of all, my chapter "Social Stability and Social Change" in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 9: Early Ch'ing*. I would be more than happy to have our discussions today expand beyond the present paper to include that body of work.

The turn of the nineteenth century was a moment of manifest crisis for the Great Qing, the sprawling early modern empire that occupied the land mass we now know as "China." The Qing had just emerged from over a hundred years of physical and demographic expansion, and (if, as I do, one accepts the conclusions of the new

historiography), economic prosperity and average standards of living unrivaled either in the long history of imperial China or in most of contemporaneous Europe.¹ Now, however, at the start of the personal rule of the Jiaqing emperor (1799-1820) – and several decades before the onset of the serious Western challenge – politically-conscious individuals from the emperor on down shared a very deep anxiety about the fate of the realm.

The Qianlong emperor had just died, bringing to an end not merely his own glorious rule of more than sixty years, but also the nearly century and a half of leadership by three emperors (Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong) acknowledged by all to be among the most effective chief executives in the two millennia of imperial history. The final two decades of Qianlong's rule, however, had witnessed systematic corruption in both the civil and military bureaucracies, which in turn had left great debts, collapsed official morale, systematic neglect of public works and grain reserves, and a newly visible and worsening popular immiseration. Sectarians calling themselves “White Lotus” were in rebellion in the Han River valley and its surrounding regions, where government campaigns of suppression remained both ineffective (if not counter-productive) and crippling draining on Qing treasuries. The largely Muslim northwest frontier, and enclaves of indigenous populations throughout the highlands of the interior, also threatened to break away from what had seemed until recently secure Qing control. The three areas of special bureaucratic oversight – the Yellow River dike maintenance system, the Grand Canal and the associated Grain Tribute Administration, and the government salt monopoly – were all showing evidence of growing dysfunctionality. Concerns about food supply also deepened, as we shall see. In response to all of this, calls for dramatic reform appeared with gathering frequency from sources both within and without the

¹ Fang Xing, “Lun Qingdai Jiangnan nongmin de xiaofei” (Peasant consumption in Qing Jiangnan), *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu* 3 (1996), 91-98; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

administration.² Here in this paper, we will consider the proposals, and especially those touching on agricultural practice, of one of the most influential reformist writers of this very troubled era, Bao Shichen (1775-1855).

Bao Shichen and his “Shuichu” (1801)

Within the frequently bitchy Qing bureaucratic culture, having “the smell of the vegetable garden” about him was a deprecating way to refer to an *arriviste* scholar-official of humble family origins. Bao Shichen, however, wore this as a mark of the highest pride. The son of a low-ranking officer in the Chinese Green Standard Army, Bao had accompanied his father to Taiwan in the suppression of the Lin Shuangwen rebellion. When his father took ill, Shichen brought him home to their rustic native place in Anhui province, where he supported him in his final years on the proceeds of his own market gardening. When his father died, Shichen was able to utilize paternal connections to gain positions on the staffs of various field commanders engaged in the White Lotus campaigns in the northwest. His impressive, largely self-acquired education was sufficient to gain him the second (provincial) level civil service degree, but he sat no fewer than thirteen times for the highest degree without success. Until friends intervened to gain him a nominal county magistracy late in life, he never held a formal official post. And yet he was clearly among the most influential reformers and policy analysts of his day.

Today, apart from his formidable reputation as a calligrapher, Bao is known in China primarily as an anti-foreign saber-rattler in the years leading up to the Opium War of 1839-42.³ In English-language scholarship, however, he is probably better known for his

² The most comprehensive account of this is Susan Mann Jones and Philip A. Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion,” in John K. Fairbank, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 10, Late Ch’ing, 1800-1911, Part I, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, 107-62. See also Suzuki Chūsei, *Shinchō chūkishi kenkyū* (A study of the mid-Qing period), Toyohashi: Aichi University, 1952.

³ For example, Chen Wenyu, “Aiguo youren, lichang gaige de Bao Shichen” (The extraordinary patriot and reform leader Bao Shichen), *Anhui shixue* 1994.1, 48-49; “Bao Shichen,” in *Zhongguo lidai shi zhishi shouce* (Handbook of intellectual figures in Chinese history), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980, 116-17.

(largely behind-the-scenes) input into the reforms of the 1820s and 1830s in the Grain Tribute Administration and in the Liang-Huai Salt Administration. Since both of these sets of reforms may be seen as “privatization” -- turning over operations formerly accomplished by governmental or quasi-governmental personnel to non-governmental commercial franchisees -- Bao has come to be seen by some recent scholars as an economic “liberal.”⁴ My own reading of him, expressed to some extent below but more fully in other writings, is somewhat skeptical of this characterization.

The *Shuichu* is an astonishingly audacious text, written when Bao was only 26 years old, compiled from a series of lectures he delivered to his pupil at the time, a bright young son of a sub-prefect for whom he was serving as household tutor.⁵ The meaning of the title is somewhat ambiguous, depending on just how you understand the two characters of which it composed. It has been translated by one well-informed American scholar as “On Wealth,” which is plausible in light of its contents.⁶ I, however, prefer to read it as “Advice to the Prince,” putting it within a genre of bold political writing (including works by Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi) addressed to some idealized future ruler, the present ruler and society being held unready to receive its recommendations.

And it is bold indeed. The work opens with a declaration that the Qing empire faces immediate collapse unless honest and courageous ministers speak up frankly about what

⁴ The strongest advocate of this position is the Harvard-trained Taiwanese scholar Lin Manhoung. See her “Two Social Theories Revealed,” and, more recently and fully, *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808-1856*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. On the reform of the Grain Tribute Administration, see Bao Shichen, “Haiyun shiyi” (Ten proposals regarding use of the sea route) (1825), in Bao, *Quanji*, 81-85; Zhang Yan, “Bao Shichen yu jindai qianye de ‘haiyun nanco’ gaige” (Bao Shichen and the ‘sea route’ reforms on the eve of modernity), *Jindaishi yanjiu* 2000.1, 129-53, and Jane Kate Leonard, *Controlling from Afar*. On the Salt Administration reforms, see Thomas A. Metzger, “T’ao Chu’s Reform of the Huaipei Salt Monopoly,” *Papers on China* 16 (December 1962), 1-39.

⁵ I have written at some length about this text; see Rowe, “Hidden Transcripts: Bao Shichen’s *Advice to the Prince*,” forthcoming in *T’oung Pao*. There is very little other scholarship in any language on this. One recent exception is Shi Liye, “Bao Shichen ‘Shouchu’ chutan” (A preliminary discussion of Bao Shichen’s *Shuochu*,” *Anhui daxue xuebao* (Philosophy and Social Science Edition), 1997.6, 67-70.

⁶ Judith Whitbeck, “From *K’uo-chang* to *Ching-shih*: Kung Tzu-chen and the Redirection of Literati Commitment in Early Nineteenth Century China,” in Institute of Modern History, comp., *Jindai Zhongguo jingshi sixiang yantaohui lunwen ji* (Proceedings of the Conference on Statecraft in Modern China), Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1984, 323-40.

is wrong and what must be done. One low-ranking but widely respected capital official – Hong Liangji (on whom more below) – had in fact done precisely this, very publically, some two year before, and suffered, first, a sentence of death, and then, when the Jiaqing emperor implicitly acknowledged the basic truth of Hong’s assertions, a commuted sentence of banishment to the northwest frontier.⁷

Like Hong, Bao argues that corruption infects every single office in the empire, and that this has contributed both to the widespread immiseration of the rural population and the tremendously costly ongoing current rebellion. He differs completely from Hong, however, in his solution for this: whereas Hong (somewhat unworkably, it would seem) had demanded a complete housecleaning, cashiering and prosecuting nearly all officials in the current bureaucracy, Bao instead proposes a blanket amnesty for past misdeeds, coupled with a newly rigorous set of regulations on official expenditures and a much-tightened screening and reviewing process for personnel selection. Arguing that the basic cause of administrative dysfunction and governmental predation at the moment is that each office in the bureaucracy is cripplingly in debt to its superior office (the legacy of two decades of “squeeze” of subordinates for bribes and gifts), Bao radically proposes that all such intra-governmental debts, as well as most debts to the government by private taxpayers, be wiped off the books in order to make a fresh start.

The bulk of Bao’s text is made up of what may be seen as a revised Qing “constitution,” a wholly rethought outline of the entire central and field administration, with detailed entries on the rank, duties, salaries, and budgets of each post. While much of Bao’s new structure replicates current practice, with some modifications suggested by his thorough study of the governance of past dynasties, he offers a limited number of quite remarkable changes. Although little in this document or in Bao’s writings more generally suggest that was “anti-Manchu” or opposed in any knee-jerk nativist way to the

⁷ Susan Mann Jones, “Hung Liang-chi (1746-1809): The Perception and Articulation of Political Problems in Late Eighteenth Century China,” Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1971; David S. Nivison, “Hoshen and His Accusers: Ideology and Political Behavior in the Eighteenth Century,” in Nivison and Arthur S. Wright, eds., *Confucianism in Action*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959, 209-243.

current conquest dynasty – his stated and clearly genuine goal throughout is to bolster state power and state financial health (*guofu*), which he considers a prerequisite for social stability and popular well-being – several of his administrative reforms cut at the very heart of Manchu power. He pointedly omits from his list of offices, for example, the Grand Council (*junjichu*), the all-powerful and largely all-Manchu advisory group to the throne, replacing this with a fully bureaucratized post of Chancellor (*chengxiang*) resurrected from the practice of the early Ming. He restructures the empire's high military command, subordinating the leaders of the Eight Banners – the very engine of the Qing conquest – to a bureaucratized commander-in-chief (*tidu*), presumably with no necessary ties to the pre-conquest tribal leadership of the northeast. And he advises the discontinuation of the principle of ethnic dyarchy (pairing up each Han Chinese official with a Manchu or Mongol in an adjacent or superior post); Bao argues that this would better allow the selection of the best possible man for each job, but it would also, as would have been clear to all, eliminate the affirmative-action policy that kept the bureaucracy staffed with officials of lesser competence but greater affective loyalty to the ruling house.

Perhaps the boldest of Bao's revisions to the unwritten Qing constitution, however, had little to do with racial politics: the abolition of the posts of provincial governor (*xunfu*) and regional governor-general (*zongdu*). This move in effect reversed the trend of the preceding centuries which had accreted ever more posts and authority at this middle level of the field administration. It also, whether coincidentally or not is uncertain, followed the argument of the mid-seventeenth century reformer Gu Yanwu that excessive supervision at this level emasculated the administrative powers of county officials (who were presumed to be better in touch with the needs of the locality and its people), and

instead empowered sub-bureaucratic clerks, giving them great latitude for predation in the name of enforcing regulations of provincial authority.⁸

There is much more in Bao Shichen's tract, some of which we will examine below. In all, respectfully phrased as it was, it was an incendiary document. And Bao, it is clear, did not share the taste for martyrdom of Hong Liangji, who had now, in exile, become a hero of reformers throughout the empire. So he hid it away in his house, noting that "the times were not ready to accept it." At the same time, he invited interested scholars and officials to come and examine it in manuscript form, and it is clear from Bao's correspondence that a great many of these, including figures of major policy-making authority, did just that.⁹ Unpublished in its own day, and remaining so despite the publication of his collected works under Bao's own editorship in 1844, and republication by his heirs in the 1860s and 80s, the bulk of the *Shuichu* saw publication only more than a century after it was written, in 1906, at the hands of the Shanghai anti-Qing radical clique known as the "National Essence" movement, led by Liu Shipai and Zhang Binglin, who were dedicated to resurrecting such Han Chinese heirlooms from centuries of suppression by their racial oppressors. Several smaller sections of Bao's original 1801 text, however, a set of four smaller essays on local administration and political economy, he did feel innocuous enough to include in his 1844 complete works. Our discussion below is based on the larger, long-unpublished parent work, but even more on these essays.

Population and agricultural production

⁸ For a wonderful recent explication of Gu Yanwu's thinking on this issue, see John Patrick Delury, "Despotism Above and Below: Gu Yanwu's *Record of Daily Learning* on Power, Money, and Mores," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2007. At the time Bao wrote the *Shuichu* he had read only a small portion of Gu's works; when he subsequently read more, he noted with great pleasure the similarity of their views. See Bao,

⁹ See Zheng Dahua, "Bao Shichen yu Jia-Dao nianjian de xuefeng quanbian" (Bao Shichen and the transformation of scholarly trends in the Jiaqing and Daoguang eras), *Anhui shixue* 2006.4.

Very clearly, Bao's revised state structure would be an enormously expensive proposition, most especially at the local level (see below). He argued emphatically that the Qing polity, following his reforms, could comfortably afford this expense. And it could do so while at the same time considerably reducing the land tax, to relieve the distress of the farmers and to, in his view, more properly accord with the priorities of a proper agriculture-first political economy. He presented detailed means by which his reformed imperial administration – significant spending cuts in certain areas and new taxes on commerce and other economic areas – would be able to afford these reforms. I have analyzed Bao's fiscal accounting elsewhere, and we do not need to rehearse it here.¹⁰

What is relevant to our current interests, however, is Bao's absolute conviction that the productive capacity of the Qing agrarian economy is much greater than assumed by others, and his supreme confidence that, following his formulas, this economy can quickly be brought back to good health. "People regularly say that the population is growing daily, while new land can no longer be found, so popular immiseration is the inevitable result," Bao argues, in unstated reference to the dire demographic predictions of "China's Malthus," Hong Liangji. "But they have not worked this out mathematically."¹¹ He was right. Hong's arguments, which have served as the basic point of reference for such influential historical demographers of China as Ping-ti Ho, do not include much in the way of quantification.¹² Bao was very different. Indeed, he

¹⁰ Rowe, "Hidden Transcripts."

¹¹ *Shuichu*, 188.

¹² The classic text is Ping-ti Ho, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1968*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1969. Only recently have scholars such as James Lee and Li Bozhong begun to doubt Ho's argument that the turn of the nineteenth century saw the population/land ratio begin to turn more adverse, and find there the beginnings of contemporary China's population "problem." As Sui-wai Cheung has recently pointed out, Hong Liangji "did not...provide any data to support his hypothesis" of a looming population crisis; Cheung, *The Price of Rice: Market Integration in Eighteenth-Century China*, Bellingham WA: Western Washington University Press, 2008, 75-76. For selections from Hong's 1793 population essays, translated by K.C. Liu (Liu Guangjing), see Wm.Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufano, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Volume Two, 2nd edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 174-75.

seems to have an intense infatuation with numbers, to a degree not remotely matched by even the most sophisticated economic analysts of the preceding “high Qing” century.¹³

In the main text of his *Shuichu*, Bao proceeds by pointing out that, by statute, one *li* (a unit of distance, roughly equivalent to a kilometer) is defined as 360 paces (*bu* = 5 *chi*, or Chinese feet) or 180 *jiang* in official feet (1 *jiang* = 5 paces).¹⁴ A *mou* (a unit of acreage) is 240 paces in area, or 77.4 feet squared (*qi jiang qi ci si cun*). Accordingly, one square *li* equals 530 *mou* of land; 100 *li* squared equals 53,000 *mou*; and a thousand *li* squared equals 53 million *mou*. Official statistics claim the breadth of the country today, from Tingzhou (Manchuria) in the east to Dunhuang (Gansu province) in the west, to be several tens of thousands of *li*. Altogether then, Bao concludes, the *neidi* (the “inner land,” often translated as “China proper”), or that area between the Great Wall to the north, the Jiayu Pass (Gansu) to the west, the seacoast to the east, and the borderlands to the southwest – that is, the region directly subject by the throne to land tax and corvée levies -- comprises 3600 *li* squared, or some 6,868,800,000 *mou*. Granting that forty percent of this is made up of mountains, water, towns, and villages, that leaves altogether some 4,121,280,000 *mou* of arable farmland.

Since the empire has been free from military devastation for many years, the population has accordingly grown during this prosperous era (*shengshi*) to more than 700 million. If we exclude from this persons who are artisans, merchants, soldiers, and other non-farmers, we still have a average of 5 *mou* of arable land per farmer. In an average year, one *mou* of land will yield 2.5 catties (*dan*) of unhusked grain (*gu*), or 12.5 catties per farmer. If we allow for the small percentage of arable land that is set aside for

¹³ My most secure point of reference is the long-serving mid-Qing provincial governor Chen Hongmou, who was greatly admired both in his own day and in Bao’s as a trenchant political economist and an expert on agrarian improvement and provisioning. Chen uses numerical calculation very sparingly, and never on the systematic and aggregating scale that Bao does, some half-century later. (See my *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China*, Stanford, 2001, esp. Part Two.) I am not yet ready to attempt an argument regarding the degree of Bao’s distinctiveness in his own day, or to suggest what may have inspired this new attractiveness of quantification.

¹⁴ *Shuichu*, 188-89.

sericulture rather than grain production, we still have an annual grain yield of 12 catties per farmer. The average farm family consumes about 7 catties of grain per year. Even setting aside the chaff which is fed to chickens and pigs, then, this is only about two-thirds of what each farmer can produce.

Now, a healthy adult male is capable of cultivating 20 *mou* of land; the elderly and infirm can assist him, and offer him the benefit of their experience. Bao calculates that such healthy adult males comprise about 30 percent (6 out of 20) of the empire's total population. If one of these six is employed in one of the other legitimate non-farming occupations (*sanmin*), and the other five (that is, one-quarter of the empire's total population) devote themselves to agriculture, their labor alone will be sufficient to reclaim and cultivate every plot of arable land in the empire, allowing all other necessary occupations still to be staffed. Beyond the food he produces himself, the farmer needs other items such as salt, iron, candles, and cooking oil, but his surplus grain production will be quite sufficient to exchange for these. Adult males in the agrarian household farm and gather fuel; adult women produce cloth and cook; the elderly are kept warm and well fed; children study diligently. If, after the present rebellion is suppressed and good officials put in place, all this can be brought into being. The people will be happy with their lives, the country will become rich, and the ruler will be well respected.

Words are easy, Bao recognizes, and bringing this ideal into reality will take some time. He thus lays out in some detail the incremental progress that may be expected after one, two, five, and seven years. At that point, his ideal agrarian world should have been put fully into being.

In one of the supplementary essays to the *Shuichu*, entitled "Nongzheng" (Agricultural administration), Bao marshalls all he knows about actual farming practice to flesh out his vision of empire-wide sustainable agriculture. He states his credentials:

I grew up in an area that was rustic and remote. We had only coarse food to eat. In my youth, I personally grew vegetables. In more recent years, I have traveled widely, observing how officials carry out their duties. I have gone thousands of *li* from east to west, all the time enquiring about local practices and getting a sense of what works and what does not in each locality, comparing older and newer techniques, and those in this locality with those in use in other distant places.

The major content of this long essay is in effect an agricultural handbook (*nongshu*), the 26-year-old Bao's precocious take on a genre that had already had, at least since the expansion of commercial publishing in the late Ming, a substantial history. There are seven major sections. The first, on crop selection, runs through various grains, beans, and other staple crops, explaining for each their appearance, their various sub-strains, their proper growing season, their hardihood and yields, their uses as food, and specific techniques for their cultivation. The second section, on land utilization, is divided into sub-sections on paddy, irrigated fields, and dry fields, listing which specific crops are best suited for each; it argues that all land that can be converted to high-yielding paddy ought to be, but outlines conditions under which this may not be feasible. There follow sections on planting, labor allocation during the growing season, sericulture, arboriculture, and animal husbandry.

Bao's predilection for numerical calculation is much in evidence here as well. For example, he opens his section on aquaculture with the well-known passage from the Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*: "Fish swim all around their habitat, an untold number of thousands of *li*." He then calculates how many times the fish flap their tailfins in order to move: an average of between 18 and 36 flaps before shifting direction. Each flap, he speculates, propels the fish between 2 inches and 1 foot. In laying out a fish pond, the farmer wants to place in the middle nine islands, at irregular intervals. However, he

needs to carefully calculate the placement and distance between them, so as to allow the fish to move in accordance with their natural inclination (*yuxing*), and therefore develop to the fullest and fattest possible extent.¹⁵

But the “Nongzheng” is not merely a how-to book, nor in fact is it addressed directly to farmers themselves. Rather, it is an impassioned tract intended, as its title suggests, for *administrators*, arguing for greater empathy with the rural population’s precarious existence and for much more personal knowledge of, and involvement with, agricultural practice on the part of imperial officials. This starts with the ruler himself. Opening his essay with well-known passages from the *Analects* and *Mencius* on the imperative for government to respect the demands of the agrarian calendar, Bao then rather conventionally contrasts the “government by fundamentals” (*benzheng*) of the former kings (*xianwang*) with the careless disdain for agrarian practice of recent rulers. This loss of imperial interest has led directly to popular waste and extravagance, inefficient farming techniques, disregard of the rites, and, as seen today, the growing flight out of settled agrarian households into “vagrancy” (*yumin*). Imperial indifference to agriculture has been paralleled by that of local officials and literati, most of whom have no understanding at all of how to farm, or of how tough farm life is, preferring to devote themselves to intellectual dalliance with metaphysical issues (*xingming*). Agricultural expertise, as presented in this treatise, “can no longer be left simply to the common people themselves” (*bu yiwei xiaomin zhi zhi*).

Farming *is* brutally difficult, Bao insists, and the people are genuinely immiserated. In his central section on labor allocation (*zuoli*), Bao carefully lays out this case:

Farmers tending to their work, except for New Year’s and other ritual observances and exercising familial obligations, spend all their time planting and weeding when the weather allows, and spinning and weaving

¹⁵ “Nongzheng,” 208.

when it rains. Their backs are sunburnt red from weeding; they wade barefoot through manure-soaked paddy while ploughing. They work very long days, well into the night. Those who work the hardest, and have their own land to till, realize from their own labors no more than 14-15 copper cash per year. You can imagine how much less those who are tenants, or are not fully able-bodied, are able to realize. If on top of that they suffer exploitation or fraud on the part of county tax clerks, their annual earnings may be reduced to virtually nil. If they also suffer (climate-induced) dislocations or bad harvests, it can take many generations for them to recover, if at all.¹⁶

Bao's essay proposes three basic things that officials can do to alleviate popular plight. The first is to reduce agrarian taxes. He argues that:

The farmers are greatly overtaxed. The land itself is subject to a semi-annual assessment. The labor service levy is added to this, with 90% of the farmers being conscripted and sent out of their home community. Plus there are various public and private fees imposed by local officials, multiplying several-fold the basic tax rate. Then there are meltage and commutation fees (*haozhe*), which fall more heavily on the poor than on the gentry or wealthy, because the latter pay in bulk with fewer expenses of collection. When it comes to the (corrupt and dysfunctional) Grain Tribute, those with wealth and influence are even better able to escape their fair share of the burden. It is no wonder that tax resistance and rebellion has arisen.¹⁷

¹⁶ "Nongzheng," 186-87.

¹⁷ "Nongzheng," 163.

In the main text of the *Shuichu*, as noted above, Bao offers a concrete scheme for effectively shifting the state's fiscal burden (and he *is* deeply concerned for state fiscal solvency) from agriculture to the commercial sector; his plan calls for lowering the land tax by ten million taels (ounces of uncoined silver specie) per year.¹⁸

The second task of the official (and also the literati-landlord) is to instruct. He must make the effort to be intimately aware of local practices (*tufeng*), but at the same time not necessarily take them to be the most efficient use of resources. Lands should all be put to their most productive use (*yindi zhili*); potential paddy should never be left as dry fields. Indication that local practices are less than optimal are that commodity prices seem out of whack: grain cheap but firewood expensive, for example, or livestock abundant but clothing scarce. In these situations, the scholar-official's superior depth of knowledge and comparative experience of local practices elsewhere must be called into play, to relieve popular immiseration (*minkun*) and in the process strengthen the "lifeblood of the nation" (*guomei*).¹⁹

Finally, and most originally, Bao outlines a scheme by means of which the state sector at the local level can directly jump-start agricultural development. Let's presume, he says, that we have a large and densely populated county, with some 50,000 farm households. Each household pays taxes twice a year, and those payments each include an assessment of one man-day of labor. That amounts to 100,000 workdays per year. Now, three workdays are generally enough to bring under cultivation one *mou* of fallow wasteland, so this modest levy is capable of contributing over 30,000 *mou* of new farmland to the county. Alternatively, if wasteland is not a problem locally, or after it has in this way turned into arable, each assessed workday may be used (on public land?) to yield an additional .2 catties of grain, amounting to 20,000 catties county-wide. Bao reiterates that corvée assessments must be made with absolute respect for the annual

¹⁸ *Shuichu*, 182.

¹⁹ Bao's seemingly precocious use of proto-nationalist language is an issue I have dealt with elsewhere, and am still pondering.

work schedule of the private farm households. But, this being done, he has presented the local official with two very practical ways to increase the productive assets of the community as a whole.²⁰

Reconstructing the rural community

In the *Shuichu* Bao Shichen paid detailed attention to county governance, advancing several striking ideas. He argued, first, that private secretaries to the magistrate (*muyou*) – posts such as those he himself served in for most of his career – be made illegal, since he blamed this institution for facilitating the systemic corruption of the entire bureaucracy over the past two decades. Second, he argued that the proliferating structure of clerks and other subbureaucrats at the county level be regularized, with their appointments made and their performance monitored annually by the central administration, and their salaries paid out of central state treasuries. Third, he authorized the creation of a substantial county-level militia, to be trained by the magistrate and be carried on state payrolls. Though some of these suggestions were not completely new with Bao, altogether they constituted an entirely new vision of local governance, with very high fiscal costs that he was prepared to find ways to pay.²¹

Radical as were his proposed innovations to county administration, his ideas about reconstituting local-level *social* leadership were yet more outlandish. As a first step, he insisted that the government practice of offering gentry and brevet official ranks for sale (*juanna*) be completely eliminated; this ran counter to the pragmatic advice of many eighteenth-century “statecraft” officials, as well as to the fact that the government had long been deeply dependent for revenue on such sales. Men currently holding purchased ranks would have their honors revoked, although they might still be eligible for the entirely new types of local honors that Bao prescribed.

²⁰ “Nongzheng,” 187.

²¹ These proposals are discussed and analyzed in Rowe, “Hidden Transcripts.”

There were essentially two such honors, both awarded by the local magistrate directly. The first, which Bao called “*gongshi*” (graduate), was reserved for youths of exceptional filiality and obedience (*xiaodi*), and for local elders who had displayed a history of paternalistic family leadership and of community mediation. Males of all walks of life, merchants and artisans included, might qualify. But the second honorific title, *shengyuan* (licentiate), was reserved for those who actively worked in the fields (*litian*), and in doing so had demonstrated a record of avoiding tax resistance, feuding, or litigation -- they were essentially model farmers. Strikingly, neither of these ranks, normally associated with the Chinese “literati,” demanded classical education or even literacy as a prerequisite. Bao did, however, separately prescribe a system of literary examinations, with his own idiosyncratic curriculum (see below), to meet the needs of official recruitment. These exams began at the county level, and his *gongshi* and *shengyuan* were eligible to sit for them, but others might as well. Local social leadership and education for bureaucratic recruitment were matters to be severed from each other altogether.²²

The cornerstone of Bao’s local community reforms was a revived *baojia* system, the hoary concept of regimenting households into nested decimal units primarily for purposes of mutual public security.²³ Bao of course was hardly alone among late imperial policy writers in fixing upon this system, which habitually fell into a dead letter (or worse),²⁴ as a focus of reform efforts, but his ideas were much more far-reaching than most. Bao prescribed four levels of regimentation: a ten-household “*jia*,” a ten-*jia* unit known as the “*li*,” a ten-*li* “*bao*,” and a ten-*bao* “*xiang*.” As much as possible, these decimal units should follow the natural terrain, and reflect natural residence communities; lower-level units would be numbered, but larger ones would be named. Each level would be headed by a community leader or leaders selected through some negotiated process involving

²² *Shuichu*, 135-36; Bao, “Shuo xuezheng shiyi” (Essay on educational administration), in *Quanji* (1997), 282-85. See also Liu Guangjing, 998-99.

²³ Bao, “Shuo baojia shiyi” (Essay on *baojia*), *Quanji* (1997), 271-82.

²⁴ Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960, Chapter 3.

both popular election (*jumin xuanju*) and appointment by the magistrate, who would assiduously check local archives on the candidate's past behavior, and broadly interview residents in the affected district during his annual tours. Bao does not say whether holders of literati degrees were eligible for such positions (in existing Qing statute they were not), but he does disqualify merchants or artisans or their descendents – not an unusual position for a reformer with a strong agrarian bias, but striking in a man like Bao so often identified as a commercial-leaning economic liberal.

Bao would have his *baojia* headmen engage in the usual public security, conflict resolution, and community ritual leadership tasks, and also in the somewhat more ambitious -- but common to the Qing statecraft tradition -- project of aiding the magistrate in drawing up detailed local maps. Echoing a particularly utopian effort of the mid-eighteenth century, he hoped to use his system in a campaign of local behavioral modification, the headmen drawing up annual lists of customs in their jurisdictions to be either encouraged or expunged (*quanjie gaoshi*) during the following year; households who performed exceptionally well or poorly in meeting these expectations would have their names posted on the headman's door, with the least compliant threatened with expulsion from the community.²⁵ Far the most original aspect of Bao's *baojia* proposal, however, and in my opinion the aspect that marks it as a product of Bao's new, economically-straitened times, is its projected use as an instrument of economic redistribution.

Bao offers considerable detail on the posting of door placards (*menpai*) to be displayed by households registered in his *baojia* system, even offering a handy model to be copied. The placards bear what might be seen as “class labels,” identifying the household as belonging to one or another income grade, based on the amount of cultivated acreage per family member, modified by the number of draft animals owned

²⁵ The eighteenth-century effort referred to came in Shaanxi in 1744-45, under the rubric “*xingli chubi*” (promote the functional and expunge the dysfunctional); see Rowe, *Saving the World*, 356-62, and Will, “Annual Audits.”

and other factors. The basic categories are “upper household” (*shanghu*), “middling household” (*zonghu*), and “lower household” (*xiahu*), but there were also categories for the extremely wealthy, “well-off household” (*raohu*) and “rich household” (*fuhu*), and others for the extremely poor, “poor household” (*pinhu*) and “indigent household” (*qionghu*), the latter comprising those with no land, no livelihood, and no family to support them. Better-off households will be required to keep grain in storage according to their rank: three years worth for *fuhu*, two years for *raohu*, one year for *shanghu*, and a half year for *zhonghu*. Grain beyond this amount should be sold off by the household, to keep an adequate supply on the local market.

Redistribution in normal times proceeds along ties of kinship. The local *baojia* headman is ordered to track down any wealthy relatives of indigent households, and persuade (not command) them to help out their poor relations. Those who do so will have the characters “righteous household” (*yihu*) stamped on their *menpai*, along with their class label. (Analogies to post-Mao “civilized household” (*wenming hu*) labels seem inescapable.) Those who fail to comply will be stigmatized by the label “unneighborly” (*buyou*), and if this appears several years in succession will face expulsion from the group. In times of dearth the redistribution process takes on a greater degree of compulsion, and reaches beyond kinship. In the eleventh month of a bad year, the magistrate will issue official letters (*zhichao*) to the poorest families, authorizing them to approach their wealthier neighbors and demand loans of grain, in specified quantities, for a maximum of three months, to be repaid with only token interest.

Bao then extends this to a higher level. Once the *baojia* system has been fully implemented in a county, with calculations made of the aggregate well-being of all its households, the county itself can be classified as a “wealthy county” (*raoxian*), an “upper,” “middle,” or “lower” county, or a “barren county” (*jixian*). The prefect, then, can impose redistribution in times of need on the magistrates involved, just as the magistrates do within their counties, and the *baojia* headmen within their tithings. Bao

calls his system “encouraging assessment and extension of relief” (*quanpai yanggei*, or *paigei* for short). It amounts, it seems to me, to almost a planned economy scheme for rural society at the local level.

Property, commerce, and maritime trade

Although the basic issue of this paper is Bao Shichen’s ideas on agrarian reform, we need to set this in the context of his overall views on the Qing economy, which is what he himself did. Bao acknowledges that he lives in a multi-sectoral economy – signified by the phrase “*simin*” (the four branches of popular livelihood) – and recognizes that merchants and artisans make invaluable contributions, but he insists that agriculture represents the true productive wealth (*shengcai*) of the empire. The task of official policy should thus be to lead people as much as possible back into farming, rather than making it unprofitable, as recent misguided tax policies have done. In a lengthy disquisition on the salt monopoly (foreshadowing his successfully-adopted policy recommendations regarding the Liang-Huai salt gabelle in the 1820s and 30s), Bao argues that salt represents “wealth bequeathed by Heaven” (*tiandi zhi cang*) to all humanity, and consequently belongs to no single private individual (*fei minjia siye*); it should be managed by the state in the collective interest. He then extends this reasoning to other natural resources (copper, lead, timber) which have less commonly in the past been state monopolies.²⁶ At least at this early point in his life, Bao seems to have a less worked-out concept of private property than that held by many Qing policy-makers of the eighteenth century.²⁷ (Nor is his by any stretch of the imagination a “liberal” position.) Much later, however, he exalts private ownership of agricultural land “by the people” (*minyou zhi*) as

²⁶ *Shuichu*, 184-86.

²⁷ Compare the views of Chen Hongmou, as presented in my *Saving the World*, 188-92. See also Madeleine Zelin, Jonathan K. Ocko, and Robert Gardella, eds., *Contract and Property in Early Modern China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, *passim*.

a principle grounded in natural “propriety” (*yi*).²⁸ Whether this represents an evolution of his thinking over time or, as I rather suspect, a difference in his views regarding land and other resources, I have yet to determine.

Private entrepreneurs and merchants do have a legitimate role to play in trade in such Heavenly-bequeathed resources, but only under contract from the state, acting as steward for the public interest. And Bao is quite emphatic that specific *managerial decisions* are often best made by profit-minded businessmen, in accordance with market principles, rather than by government fiat. It is after all state micromanagement of the salt administration – telling merchants precisely how much salt they can sell, where they can sell it, and the routes by which they must transport it there – that has led to that would-be pillar of state finance’s fall from profitability.

An even more striking illiberalism – a radical protectionism -- emerges in Bao’s discussion of foreign trade. He allows the need for some officially-regulated intercultural exchange with central Asia. However, all overseas trade (*chuyang maoyi*), as well as all maritime navigation to Southeast Asia and beyond (*dongnan kaiyang*), is to be absolutely prohibited. All “foreign devil merchants” (*gewai yanghang guizi*) are to be immediately expelled from the empire. Foreign-made textiles are prohibited to Qing subjects, as are infernal foreign contrivances such as cuckoo clocks (*ziming zhongbiao*), bicycles (?) (*zixingche*), mechanical men (?) (*zixingren*), and all products of foreign ingenuity using steam or mechanical power. (So much for technology transfer!) Qing subjects found in possession of such novelties will be summarily beheaded.²⁹ This, recall, is 1801. Bao’s strident anti-foreignism thus long predates the Opium War, though, as we’ll see, his attitude toward foreign trade in general would actually soften by that time.

Tobacco, alcohol, and opium (1820)

²⁸ Bao, preface to “Qimin sishu” (Four works for the people), in *Bao Shichen quanji* (1997), 159.

²⁹ *Shuichu*, 141.

Bao's programmatic recommendations for rural reform in his utopian tract of 1801, though clearly read by some of his friends, went unpublished and unimplemented. Some two decades later, now in the final year of the Jiaqing emperor's troubled reign, Bao returned to the general subject of agrarian policy in an extended essay innocuously titled "Random notes from the year 1820" (*Gengchen zazhu*).³⁰ He begins with the familiar classical injunctions for the benevolent ruler to pay personal attention to agricultural practice and to respect the dictates of the agrarian calendar, then sums up the Qing empire's record on provisioning. Over the 170 years of the regime's history, he notes, it has nourished the people (*tiyang shengxi*) remarkably well. During this entire era, the southeast has been nearly totally free from military disruptions, and those in the northwest – the White Lotus – have now been pacified and not proven devastating to productivity in the long run. Floods and droughts have been relatively mild and managed with reasonable effectiveness. And yet, when the occasional regional poor harvest occurs, we see impoverished refugees spilling out into adjacent regions. Why is this?

Bao returns to the arguments of Hong Liangji (again uncited) on the Malthusian trap: "There are those who say that it is because the population is growing every day, and the productive capacity of the land cannot keep pace with food supply needs." And again he dismisses this: "These are only the words of petty Confucian scholars (*xiaoru*) who do not comprehend the contemporary situation and the way things actually work." As in 1801, Bao will simply not entertain arguments for the systemic hopelessness of the situation, and the inevitable failure of policy reform. "Now, the empire's land supports the empire's population. This is a given. If the population grows, that simply means there are more producers (*shengzhe*). This is the very basis of wealth -- why should poverty and immiseration be the result?" Bao concedes that by this date there is not much unreclaimed farmland remaining in the realm, but the real problem is that human work capacities (*lizuo*) are not being harnessed most efficiently. In the northwest, land

³⁰ Bao, "Gengchen zazhu," part two, in *Quanji* (1997 ed.), 209-213.

that could easily be made more productive by irrigation remains dry; in the southeast, people flee even the most productive farmland to waste their energies in commercial or artisanal pursuits. Bao cites several examples to show that land and labor utilization in past times was more effectively utilized than it is today. And the reason, he repeats, is the disinterest of literati in or out of government office regarding agricultural life, and their unwillingness to personally lead the people into better practices.

This brings Bao to his main point: the dissipation of potentially productive resources on the three evils of tobacco, alcohol, and opium. The first two are familiar complaints from elite critics over previous generations, though Bao gives them a numerical spin of his own. Tobacco, he notes, was at first only imported to China (charmingly, he refers to the place of origin as “Tan-ba-gu guo,” or, literally, “Tobaccoland”), but by the sixteenth century it was cultivated domestically. Whereas several decades ago only 20-30% of the population used it, today it is ubiquitous throughout the empire and used by both men and women. He calculates that each user spends no less than 7 or 8 copper cash on tobacco per day; for a large household of ten members, then, this adds up to several dozen taels per year. Then there is the otherwise productive grain land that has been turned to tobacco. To say nothing of the nightsoil requirements, which Bao estimates at six times the amount per unit of land required to fertilize rice paddy, and four times the amount required for dry fields planted in grain. In terms of labor costs, a comparable plot of land planted in tobacco requires 50 man-days (much of this devoted to defense against insects) versus 8-9 man-days for rice paddy, or 12-13 for cotton or dry-field grains. Thus, tobacco is six times more costly in labor than rice. And this doesn’t even count the labor involved in post-harvest processing. Moreover – and here is the typical elite complaint – farmers who use tobacco lose as much as 20% of their labor time sitting in the fields enjoying a smoke!

Bao notes that tobacco is not currently a prohibited substance, and argues (typically for him) that any attempt to ban it immediately would be unenforceable and therefore

mistaken. He suggests instead a three-year program. Tobacco already planted will be allowed to be harvested and sold, but no more may be planted next year; this protects the farmers. Sale of tobacco will be allowed for two more years, until this year's crop has cleared the commercial supply channels; this protects the merchants. Consumption of tobacco will be allowed for three more years, and after that banned.

Alcohol, says Bao, was consumed in antiquity only for ritual or medicinal purposes, but now, in a wealthy prefecture such as Suzhou, it is ubiquitous. This prefecture is about 170 *li* squared; if we subtract the 40 *li* that are occupied by mountains, rivers, towns, and historical landmarks, we are left with 130 *li* squared of farmland. This computes to a total of 9.1 million *mou* of fields. Agricultural practice here is highly developed, so that each *mou* yields, in a good year, 3 catties of rice or 1.2 catties of wheat, and even in a poor year 2 catties of rice or .5 to .7 catties of wheat. This year, for example, the prefecture's total yield was over 22 million catties of rice. It is a densely populated prefecture, and its people (4-5 million adult males and an uncounted number of women and children) consume an annual total of 14-15 million catties of rice. Another 700,000 catties go to tax payment, leaving a projected annual surplus of 5-6 million catties. Half of this surplus is purchased by merchants from Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Anhui for inter-provincial export, but the other half goes to alcohol production.

Bao then calculates the amount of grain (rice, sorghum, wheat, or millet) needed to distill decent wine, and compares the average daily consumption of a Suzhou adult male of wine versus grain. He concludes that the average Suzhou male consumes 7 or 8 times the amount of rice, and roughly twice the amount of lesser grains, in the form of alcohol that he eats as food. The waste of the empire's food supply, in this one prefecture alone, is astounding. There are existing bans on private distillation of alcohol, which should be strengthened, as they were in past times. Bao does not say here, but it appears that, since he does not propose a prohibition on alcohol consumption, that production would be left as a monopoly of certain government-licensed distillers.

This brings him to the crux of his concern, which is opium. Whereas tobacco and alcohol are dissipations of “primary wealth” (*benfu*) – that is, production inputs such as labor, land, and fertilizer – opium is a waste of “secondary wealth” (*mofu*), or money. Opium is produced and imported by foreign barbarians (*waiyi*), and it kills our people. Although there are strict prohibitions against it, in recent years its use has expanded tremendously, in all parts of the empire. In the city of Suzhou alone there are more than 100,000 users, and the price of opium per ounce is quadruple that of silver. Assuming each user consumes about .1 tael worth of opium per day, that yields a total of 10,000 taels of silver expended on opium per day, or 3 to 4 million taels per year, in this one city alone! In cities throughout the empire (Bao seems to consider opium use largely an urban phenomenon) it adds up to 100 million taels per year. The cost of this is largely borne by “poor working households” (*pinku gongzuo zhi jia*), and the profits all go to foreign barbarians.

The state / nation (*guojia*) collects each year on the salt monopoly and customs revenues combined (that is, the major sources of government revenue other than the land tax) no more than 40 million taels. So the amount of silver sent out to foreign barbarians is more than double that collected in taxes. Since silver is our primary medium of wholesale exchange, and domestic silver mining is insignificant, the stangulation of our domestic currency markets in recent years is totally due to this. It is a case of “*xuzhong shiwai*” – China is emptied out of real wealth, which is exported to enrich foreigners.

Opium use has multiplied in spite of repeated bans. Because it is addictive, it is nearly impossible to get users to quit. But because it is not produced domestically (Bao notes that efforts to cultivate it in Zhejiang and Yunnan have so far failed), the effective way to curtail opium use and trade is to cut it off at its root, the maritime trade. Indeed, “the entirety of foreign imports (*yanghuo*) are things for which our country (*neidi*) has no use.” Even though the revenue from maritime customs yields us some 2 million taels per year, sacrificing this pittance in order to save the 100 million per year dissipated on

opium is a small price to pay – it is a true example of a policy of “storing wealth among the people” (*cangfu yumin*).

Some will protest, Bao adds, that unilaterally suppressing the opium trade risks foreign war. I would suggest that there is no foreign threat without domestic collaborators (*neijian*). Of the foreign barbarians, the English are far the strongest, and yet their population does not amount to 1 percent of that of China (*Zhonghua*). Our merchants and coastal defense officials have been complicit in their crimes, and overly fearful of their power. What the British want from us most of all is tea and rhubarb. They can have this, paying for it with foreign copper (*yangtong*). (Note that Bao has by this time relaxed his view on banning all foreign trade, but also that he wants silver to be removed from the arena of foreign exchange altogether. On this more below.) Any traitorous Chinese (*Hanjian*) or foreign merchant who defies the ban on opium will be put to death. “If the foreign trade is managed the way I have laid out, things will be made right, the price of rice will return to the stable price that it ought to be, and grain supply will be plentiful throughout the land.”³¹

Money, the farmer, and the nation

The evolution of Bao Shichen’s political economic thought in the first several decades of the nineteenth century included, among other things, a growing recognition that agrarian problems were inseparable from questions of currency management, and an ever intensifying emphasis on national strength, autonomy, and financial security. In the preface to his collected works, published in 1844, he made this point strongly, tying the government’s responsibility for sound monetary policy to the rapid agricultural

³¹ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu,” 213.

commercialization the empire had seen over the course of his lifetime.³² But already by 1820, at the outset of his “Random Notes,” he couched the problem of dissipation of agricultural resources in terms of monetary issues. Noting that the empire operates on a bi-metallic currency system, with commoners (*xiaomin*) make all their economic transactions in copper cash while merchants deal in silver, Bao observes that when silver is in short supply its value relative to copper will rise, and commodity prices expressed in copper will be inflated, squeezing the consumer. Moreover, when rural households pay their taxes, they are assessed in silver but pay in copper cash, so that when copper is cheap relative to silver they are required to pay more cash, effectively raising their tax burden. Thus, Bao concludes, even though money is only a secondary repository of wealth (*mofu*) it determines the worth of grain, the basic repository of wealth (*benfu*). Only if the basic and the secondary are in proper accord can the farmer survive the occasional poor harvest, and popular provisioning be assured.³³

This was in fact a prescient analysis of a pattern that would greatly worsen over the course of the Daoguang reign (1820-1850), the era of the so-called “Daoguang depression.” The Qing Empire’s continuing attempt to maintain by non-commandist means stability in its money markets, that is, a par conversion rate of 1000 copper cash to one ounce (tael) of silver had never been more than partially successful. In much of the eighteenth century, copper coin was “expensive,” and rates of 700:1 or 800:1 were the norm. This changed again in the late 1780s, after which rates of over 1000:1 became common, and indeed escalated rapidly over the nineteenth century. In the province of Shanxi, for example, exchange rates went from 730:1 in 1758 to as high as 1800:1 by 1846. Bao himself noted, in his one tenure as a local magistrate late in life, that exchange

³² Bao, preface to “Qimin sishu” (Four works for the people), in *Bao Shichen quanji* (1997), 160.

³³ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu,” 208-209. Even in the case of tobacco, Bao argues that one of its evils is that since it is inevitably sold for cash, usually debased cash, it contributes in its own way to the breakdown of the coinage system.

rates in rural Jiangxi province were between 1600:1 and 1630:1, but it was not unusual to have local tax clerks demand payment at rates as high as 2000:1.³⁴

Most scholars view this as a function of the growing scarcity of silver and of a shift in the Qing empire's balance of payments in its foreign trade: the empire's inability to offset via commodity exports its mushrooming imports of foreign opium. From the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, China with its booming silver-based commercial economy, had been the world's greatest recipient of silver inflows, and as late as the first decade of the nineteenth century it still experienced an estimated net inflow of some 28 million silver dollars. At that point, however, this was dramatically reversed. The total *outflow* of silver between 1808 and 1856 has been estimated at 384 million dollars, an annual average of 8 million per year. At its most severe, in the late 1840s and early 50s, the average annual drain exceeded 17 million dollars.

This disruption of the currency system, further aggravated by hoarding of silver by domestic investors, was one of the major causes of the depression. A crisis of credit caused the collapse of many native banks. Increased costs and deflated prices contributed to (already) declining production by manufacturers, decreased hiring, and rising unemployment. Prices paid to rural producers also fell, and farmers experienced the familiar "price scissors" between income and needed expenditures. The real tax burden grew rapidly for smallholders who paid in the depreciated copper coin, and many lost their land. There was thus a significant widening of the income gap between rich and poor, giving rise to a wave of tax and rent resistance movements, and other forms of civil unrest. The Qing state itself suffered declining tax revenues – the annual silver outflow was equivalent to one quarter each year's land tax assessment -- and rising real costs of maintenance led to progressive infrastructural decay, as well as an inability to alleviate popular distress via the traditional mechanisms of relief distributions and hiring for works projects. The real income of state officials at all levels, leading to demoralization and

³⁴ Hu Po'an, "Bao Zhenbo xiansheng nianpu" (Chronological biography of Bao Shichen), in Bao, *Bao Shichen quanji*, Hefei: Anhui guji chubanshe (1991), 237.

increased corruption. Military funding fell, and military efficacy plummeted – just at the moment when that would be most needed to combat new threats both domestic and foreign.³⁵

Bao Shichen himself was one of the most influential contemporary analysts of this situation, and his reading of it has had a major impact on modern scholarship. One of the remedies he proposed was severely restricting the use of silver, which, he pointed out, had only supplanted copper coin as the dominant monetary medium in the empire after the fifteenth century. He proposed reassessing, and in all but a few cases collecting, the land tax directly in copper, to avoid imposing unfavorable conversion rates on farmers.³⁶ But since he knew copper supplies to be inadequate to the monetary needs of his day, he also approved, though not without considerable caution, the introduction of paper currency, denominated in copper cash, to be issued by the Qing throne.³⁷

If sensitively handled, Bao argued, fiduciary money issued by the Qing state could be used to ameliorate the cash shortages of farmers, to control the import of opium and more generally the content of the foreign trade, and, most centrally, to assert full sovereignty of the state or nation (*guojia*) over its monetary system, driving out of circulation not only imported Mexican silver dollars but also bills of exchange issued by native and, increasingly, foreign banks. A paper currency issued by the Qing throne and negotiable

³⁵ The most sustained analysis of this is Peng Zeyi, “Yapien zhanzheng hou shinianjian yingui qianjian bodong xia Zhongguo jingji yu jieji guanxi” (The Chinese economy and class relations in the post-Opium War decade under the impact of rising silver:copper exchange rates), in Peng, *Shijiu shiji houbanqi de Zhongguo caizheng yu jingji* (Government finance and the economy in late nineteenth-century China), Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1983, 24-71. See also Lin, *China Upside Down*, which disagrees with the emphasis placed by Peng and by most Qing contemporaries on the role of opium imports on currency exchange rates. So too does Richard von Glahn, “Foreign Silver Coins in the Market Culture of Nineteenth-Century China,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 4.1 (2007), 61-62. Lin and von Glahn offer differing explanations of the true cause of the Qing’s “silver famine,” however, Lin emphasizing the cutback in world production during the Latin American revolutions, and von Glahn instead pointing to the short-term withdrawal of the United States from its position as major supplier of silver to the Qing.

³⁶ See for example Bao, “Yinhuang xiaobu shou” (A modest remedy for the silver famine) (1839), in *Quanji*, 228-30.

³⁷ See my “Money, Economy, and Polity in the Daoguang-era Paper Money Debates,” unpublished paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, April 2007. Here again, my analysis differs substantially from that in Lin, *China Upside Down*.

in “China” (*Zhongguo* or *Zhonghua*) alone would constitute for the first time a true national currency (*guobao*).³⁸

Concluding remarks

Throughout his long career, Bao Shichen consistently adopted an “agriculture first” (*zhongnong*) approach, which was hardly unusual within the spectrum of late imperial political economic thought, but based on his personal history he was also “farmer first,” which was a bit more distinctive. Depictions of him as a precocious economic “liberal” seem to me overreaching, for at least two reasons: he was very far from laissez-faire (consider, for example, his redistributionist policies at the local level), and he was overridingly concerned with the state’s fiscal health (*guofu*).

In my study of Chen Hongmou (1696-1771), a similarly practical-minded thinker of the preceding century, I tentatively labeled Chen’s thought not “liberal” but rather “physiocratic,” which I understood to mean a simultaneous deep commitment to agricultural productivity *and* to the maximization of unfettered domestic commercial circulation (*liutong*) of farm products. Bao shares with Chen a deep-seated (and minority) optimism about the possibilities for agricultural development under the tutelage of an official class personally savvy about agricultural practice. He seems also committed to domestic commercial circulation, but with no means the zeal of Chen Hongmou. Bao further differs from Chen – and, if I may, sounds more “modern” than his predecessor -- in his passion for argument by quantification, and, in an era of progressing deterioration of the imperial state and growing foreign threat, his far deeper concern for national

³⁸ On the use of the terms “Zhongguo” and “Zhonghua” see Gang Zhao, “Reinventing China: Imperial Qing Ideology and the Rise of Modern Chinese National Identity in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Modern China* 32.1 (January 2006), 3-30. Zhao argues that these terms, in ancient times referring only to the Han Chinese heartland, were first applied by reformist Chinese literati to the entire vastly larger Qing empire only in the early nineteenth century.

strength and national sovereignty (*liquan*). I am tempted, with all due hesitancy, to label him an “agrarian nationalist.”