

THE WOBBLING PIVOT

CHINA
SINCE 1800



PAMELA
KYLE CROSSLEY

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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*Frank Dikotter,
School of Oriental and African Studies,
University of London,
and the University of Hong Kong*

For my teachers

Lillian M. Li

and

Jonathan D. Spence

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CHINA
SINCE 1800

An Interpretive History

PAMELA
KYLE CROSSLEY

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK HAS put the pieces of Chinese history since roughly 1800 into a shape that makes sense to me. Nevertheless, I have attempted at every step to supply the reader sufficient pieces that he or she may rearrange them if the need to create a more sensible shape is felt. In scope and in content, this book can do no more than complement the dozen or so excellent books on modern China already in circulation. For a wealth of colorful detail or lengthy biographical digression, superb alternatives may be found. For incisive analysis and theoretical sophistication, there are also a handful of monographs that do what this book will not do. But for a narrative of scope and color sufficient to engage the reader of any level of knowledge about China, combined with a thematic orientation that I hope will interest specialists in the field, this book may, at present, stand alone.

This book has been strongly influenced by very recent scholarship in Chinese, most of which has not been cited in the book because of our assumption that the overwhelming majority of readers would be best served by being directed to works in English. Fortunately, all but the most current Chinese scholarship is reflected in the most recent works by historians and others writing in English. For that reason, I have attempted to include the most recent studies on the relevant subjects. Otherwise, I have included works chosen for their enduring impact, unique coverage, past points of view of which we should be reminded or best synthesis of complex subjects. Very many superb works have not been included, either because of my length considerations for the manuscript or because they are specialized to the degree that professionals will necessarily know them already and general readers will be unlikely to have a direct need of them. I regret that the printed medium imposes this rigidity upon us.

Some proper names and terms in the book have retained familiar forms, in contradiction of the rules of contemporary *pinyin* transliteration and of logic (for example, making English plurals of Chinese words or using mistaken English transmogrifications that have subsequently taken on a life of their own). These include but are not limited to: Canton (Guangzhou, not Guangdong), Howqua, Yangtze, Taipings, Yung Wing, Panthays, Boxers, KMT, Chiang Kaishek, Soong May-ling, Peking University, Jimmy Yen, Hu Shih, and so on. In addition, foreign treaties and events related to

foreign relations retain whatever English name they assumed at the time: Treaty of Nanking, Convention of Peking, Tientsin Massacre, Rape of Nanking, Shanghai Communiqué, and so on.

It is impossible to name all the people who have influenced the generalities and particulars of this narrative. They are teachers, friends, colleagues, students, visiting research scholars, editors and the superb manuscript reviewers recruited by Wiley-Blackwell. I must thank Jon Taylor and Patrick Francis for early research assistance, Christopher Wheeler and Tessa Harvey for having encouraged the project and Tom Bates for seeing it through production. Naturally, I claim all errors of fact and ask the reader to delay judgment on errors of interpretation.

Pamela Crossley
Norwich, Vermont

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Prelude

THE WORK OF classical Chinese philosophy, the *Zhongyong* – frequently cited in English as *The Doctrine of the Mean* – is a long meditation on the constancy of true virtue in times of change and temptation. In the interpretations of Chinese philosophers, the key to constancy was the ability of the man of perfect morality to allow unconsidered sincerity to guide his every action. Early political commentators in China considered *The Mean* as the ability of the sovereign to keep the state and the society balanced through all manner of turmoil, through the power of his virtue. In 1947, Ezra Pound first published his translation of the classic as “The Unwobbling Pivot.” The title captures a persisting historical impression of an impartial and omnipresent state, oriented toward the unchanging fixtures of the material and the metaphysical world – the Pole Star, the *dao*, the ideal of benevolent government. What is striking to the historian is not any peculiarity of Pound’s famous translation, but the precise contrast between the persisting ideal of unwobbling virtue in the person of the political leader and the reality of wobbling policy on the part of the state.

Inconstancy, flexibility, and a measure of cynicism have historically been the ingredients of government survival in China. In response to imbalances in the relationship between the state and the community, Chinese governance has swung between strategic and ideological imperatives for centralization at one extreme, and economic and social imperatives for decentralization at the other. Inside these cycles has been another set of epicycles, between initiative and power concentration at the center, and initiative and relative independence in the localities. All countries have periods of relative tranquility and of unrest. What is striking about the Chinese case is the constitutional opposition of perpetual resistance – peaceful or violent – between the localities and the center, a single process producing both stability and instability. Modern states in China, like their counterparts everywhere else, have several times in the past hundred years attempted to dismantle the complex self-sufficiency of the localities. Yet contemporary China finds itself again dependent upon a compact that strongly resembles the traditional one – in quality if not yet in magnitude – between center and locality, between state and society. In the historical pattern, it has been impossible to change Chinese government substantially from the center; instead, rebel kingdoms and regional insurgencies have tested their growth against the restraining power of the

center, and sometimes won. How well such an ecology of power can support the needs of a modern state, or even a superpower, is a question raised with increasing urgency by observers within and without China. It is the ability to allow the pivot to wobble but not fall that has been the political art of the state in China for the last four hundred years and probably more, with a single dramatic exception in the later twentieth century.

Before about 1500 imperial government around the world was premised on a surface tension between coherent, resilient, complex local organization and a central authority of limited but precise reach. The key to stability lay partly in the ratios of size and wealth between the center and the locality. Hypertrophy at the local level could generate rebel states or policy imbalances that would allow concentrations of wealth, influence and military power in certain regions, fracturing the integrity of the realm. All this was true in China as well, and the Song empire may in some ways have represented a practical optimum in the ratios between center and locality, at least between 1000 and 1200. The Song economy was marked by agricultural productivity, burgeoning trade, and the ability to sustain a military force that not only fought two northern empires to a standstill, but remained the last Eurasian empire to resist the Mongols before the Song collapse in 1279. During the Mongol period, cultural and political China was reunited for the first time in three centuries, and the borders governed from China expanded to a size that approximates the size of the People's Republic of China. But the Mongol approach to government was to keep the center small – very small, in comparison to the Song – and to distribute peacekeeping and judicial functions to the provinces, particularly to aristocrats and professional bureaucrats tied to the capital in various ways.

The basic ratios of government size and income of the Ming and Qing periods approximated the scale of Yuan government much more than that of Song. Reliance upon the ability of the locality to feed itself, protect itself, and resolve its own internal conflicts was fundamental to government practice. In the early fourteenth century the Ming Yongle emperor experimented with massive court projects (including the Zheng He voyages and the building the Forbidden City in Beijing), but these were exceptions to the basic pattern of the era. The thinness of the government layer in the Ming period and vitality of both rural and urban organizations left the imperial order suspended in a delicate balance that could be easily disturbed. Unlike the Song, the Ming government was not good at transferring rapidly increasing local wealth to itself and its organs of adjudication, control, and defense. The Ming dynastic order collapsed not due to invasion by an overwhelming foreign force, but as a result of the explosion of organized regional opposition and even more organized nascent imperial orders at the borders. In the middle seventeenth century, the Qing conquest empire undertook to govern China on largely the Ming pattern, but diminished the depth of government even more by stretching a government apparatus the size and cost of the Ming over a territory that grew to be nearly twice as big, and within a century and a half became twice as populous.

The Qing balance between center and periphery was even more delicate than the Ming, partly by design: The Qing found that a light and highly delegated political apparatus suited the exigencies of the conquests that continued in south China, Yunnan, Mongolia, Turkestan and Tibet. Stability was the zone of balance between the threat of government terror, at one end, and the threat of popular violence at the

other. It was a mechanism governed by popular tolerance, despite the claims of imperial omnipotence. From the Han period on, imperial edicts and imperially-approved social philosophy – usually called “Confucian” in English-language scholarship – had manufactured the image of a unified government apparatus under the guidance of morally-cultivated rulers and officials. Yet even in those days the Han government was flexed not only by popular resistance but by organized protests among its officials and scholars waiting to become officials. Many historians in the twentieth century have dismantled the illusion of government from the center legitimated by fulfillment of an ideal of “benevolent government,” seeing in it a refusal to acknowledge local autonomy and the state’s persisting need to negotiate with it. The history itself suggests something more: That the dependence of the small state on the huge society had the elements of a constitution, observed in not only policy but in legislation and ideology. It generated instability through state terror and frequently insuperable local disorder, but also stability through locally-shaped economic and trade patterns and a state economy that, for long periods of time, rested relatively comfortably on the shoulders of farmers and tradesmen.

When the outward conquest was completed in the eighteenth century the process of inward conquest continued, with some parts of the empire enduring sporadic revolts or secessionist movements and the occasional rise of rebel kingdoms. These episodes of local hypertrophy were generally met not by intensified centralization or thickening of the government on the ground, but by further delegation of power to perceived agents of order in the localities. The pattern resembled some earlier dynamics in Chinese history (particularly the Tang), in medieval Europe, and, in many ways, in the Russian and Ottoman empires of the eighteenth century. It was a strong contrast to other empires, such as France and England, which were increasing the size and wealth of government in rough parallel to the growing wealth of the society as a whole. As a trend it was a contrast to the life of the Qing court and the style of central Qing rule, which in its cultural and structural aspects showed a strong kinship with nearly all other early modern Eurasian rulerships. These elements of Qing emperorship aside, the scale and the grasp of Qing government over its territories was on a divergent trajectory from many other early modern empires.

In the ensuing two centuries, the space and the regional economic and environmental diversity that the sequential governments in China have attempted to control remained about the same as the under-governed mid-Qing. The precarious balance between center and locality was fatally disrupted by a confluence of many disparate factors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Economic and cultural influences spread with a speed and volume not possible in earlier centuries. International currency became a set of standardized materials and practices, challenging the techniques used locally by old governments to adjust trade and taxation. Imperialism resulted in the further restriction of income for the state and a swelling of the wealth of merchant communities at Canton and Shanghai, beyond the ability of any government to restrain. Opium became the basis of a potent and coherent network of trade and management that battled the organizational strategies of all governments globally. Such influences affected many other societies, though the Qing may have been particularly ill-prepared to mitigate them. They faced peculiar obstructions, including Japan – a neighbor that adjusted quickly and aggressively to global changes, and at every point from the later nineteenth century to 1945 fused its industrialization,

wealth accumulation and military aggrandizement to the inability of a government in China to re-center itself and gain traction. When the Qing empire died of the effects of dismemberment from within and without, virtually no fiscal or political space that could support a new government could be found. Attempts to reunite the country by military exertion never penetrated beyond an alliance of intact regional autonomies. For more than three decades China and its bordering regions suffered from absence of normative government or protection from brutal foreign invasion. In 1949 one military displaced another, but under the leadership of a generation intent upon establishing a government of sufficient size and depth to reverse the effects of decades of local hypertrophy. The project for large government mutated, for various reasons, into a project for totalizing the relationship between the individual and the state. The result was the novelty of a hypertrophied center, resembling nothing that had happened previously in Chinese history. The reversal failed spectacularly, at immense cost to individuals and to eastern Eurasia generally. The nature of the failure, as well as its magnitude, illuminates the history of stable and productive interdependency of state and locality in China, and clarifies the dynamics of the aftermath of the failed experiment. Though the Chinese political systems have not conformed to a European understanding of representative government, they have been based on principles of popular tolerance. The present government may be swinging back toward the center of the arc, for much the same reasons that earlier orders based in China did so.

Further reading

Ezra Pound saw the secret of the classic as the message that “absolute sincerity under heaven can effect any change.” Mathews’s definition of the title’s meaning is “without inclination to either side and admitting no change.” Pound’s quotation on *The Unwobbling Pivot* is from *Confucius*, p. 95. The characterization of Pound’s title “The Unwobbling Pivot” is from Wendy Stollard Flory’s “Confucius against Confusion: Ezra Pound and the Catholic Chaplain at Pisa,” p. 155. Pound’s translation and commentaries have been revisited in the recent study by Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism* (2005); see especially pp. 42–4 where Feng speculates on the technical reasons for Pound omitting the last seven chapters of the *Zhongyong*. The title “The Wobbling Pivot” has been used once before, in 1972, by J. Z. Smith in an article on the illusion of chaos in some systems of religious thought – a parallel to the discussion here of apparent chaos in Chinese society and politics.

For an introduction to the theoretical issues of overall wobbling of the modern state in China, see Chen and Benton, *Moral Economy and the Chinese Revolution* (1986); Shue, *The Reach of the State* (1988); Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (2002); and Thornton, *Disciplining the State* (2007).

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Timeline

1796–1820	Jiaqing reign period	1875–1908	Guangxu reign period
1796–1804	White Lotus Rebellion	1882	Chinese legally excluded from residing in the USA
1813	Eight Trigrams Rebellion	1885	Qing naval defeat by France, establishment of Indochina colony
1821–50	Daoguang reign period	1895	Treaty of Shimonoseki, Japan receives Taiwan
1824–6	Grand Canal Crisis	1898	Hundred Days Reforms suppressed
1839–42	Opium War ending in Treaty of Nanking, Britain receives Hongkong	1900–1	Boxers at Beijing
1850–64	Taiping rebellion	1905	Sun Yatsen founds League of Alliances at Tokyo
1853–64	Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, capital at Nanjing	1908	Deaths of the Guangxu emperor and Xiaoqin
1851–61	Xianfeng reign period	1909–12	Xuantong reign period
1855–72	Muslim revolt in Yunnan, Panthay sultanate at Dali	1911	Nationalist uprising at Wuhan, provisional republican government
1856–8	Arrow War, Second Opium War	1912	Qing emperor abdicates to republican rule
1860	Allied sack of Beijing, Peking Conventions, Allies join war against Taipings	1913–16	Yuan Shikai in power
1862–74	Tongzhi reign period	1913	Assassination of Song Jiaoren
1867–77	Yakub Beg in control of Kashgar		
1868	Burlingame Treaty with USA		
1870	Tientsin Massacre		

1913–25	Sun Yatsen in south China, where Nationalist Party rules	1950–3	Korean War
1915	Twenty-One Demands	1949–54	Common Program, provisional constitution
1918	Treaties of Versailles and Paris	1954	First PRC constitution
1919–25	May Fourth Movement	1955	Bandung conference; USA–ROC mutual defense treaty
1921	Chinese Communist Party founded	1956	Hundred Flowers campaign
1925	Death of Sun Yatsen; May Thirtieth Incident	1957	Anti-rightist movement
1926–8	Northern Expedition	1958	Great Leap Forward initiated, rural collectivization achieved
1927	Peng Pai’s soviet at Nanchang	1959–60	Famine
1927	White Terror	1959	Military occupation of Tibet
1928–38	Chiang Kaishek in control from Nanjing	1959	Lushan Plenum
1931	Japanese forces seize Shenyang (Mukden)	1960	Sino-Soviet split
1931–4	Chinese Soviet Republic, based on soviets of southern China	1960	Liu Shaoqi becomes Chairman of the PRC
1932–4	Manchukuo Republic	1962	Border conflict with India
1932	Japanese invade Shanghai	1963–6	Socialist Education Movement
1934–45	Empire of Manchukuo	1964	PRC successfully tests nuclear weapon
1934–6	Long March	1966–9	Cultural Revolution, first phase
1935	Zunyi conferences	1969–73	Cultural Revolution, second phase, return of Deng Xiaoping
1936	Chiang forced to Xi’an, agrees to second united front	1969	Border clashes with USSR
1937	Japanese invade Beijing and Nanjing	1971	PRC seated at the UN; death of Lin Biao
1937–47	Yan’an base area center of Mao’s operations	1972	Nixon and Kissinger in China;
1945	Japanese surrender, World War II ended	1973	10th Party Congress
1946–9	Civil war between nationalists and communists	1973–6	Cultural Revolution, last phase
1947–9	Nationalist transfers to Taiwan	1975	Death of Chiang Kaishek
1947	Local resistance in Taiwan against Nationalist arrival	1976	Deaths of Zhou, first Tian’anmen incident; deaths of Zhu De and Mao; Tangshan earthquake; arrest of Jiang Qing and her collaborators
1949	Chiang arrives in Taiwan, declares continuity of Republic of China		
1949	People’s Republic of China declared	1978–80	Democracy Wall

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| 1979 | Normalization of relations with the USA, PRC war with Vietnam; USA-Taiwan Relations Act | 1997 | Death of Deng Xiaoping; Hongkong becomes part of PRC |
| 1980 | Special economic zones introduced | 1999 | USA bombs Chinese embassy in Belgrade |
| 1982 | New constitution allows some privatization of land use and income | 2000 | Removals from planned Three Gorges Dam reservoir space begin |
| 1984 | Britain agrees to return Hongkong | 2001 | Air incident with USA above Hainan island; PRC joins WTO |
| 1987 | Martial law lifted in Taiwan by ROC | 2003 | First PRC manned space mission |
| 1989 | Tian'anmen movement and suppression | 2005 | Anti-secession law, evidently aimed at Taiwan |
| 1992 | Deng Xiaoping retires from government power | 2006 | Three Gorges Dam completed |
| 1996 | USA accuses China of expropriating weapons technology | 2008 | Tibetan unrest; Sichuan earthquake; Summer Olympics held in Beijing; |
| | | 2009 | Charter 08 activists arrested; Xinjiang unrest |

