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Bao Shichen and Agrarian Reform in Early Nineteenth-Century China

Abstract Known primarily for his reformist proposals in the areas of military affairs, foreign policy, the salt monopoly, and the grain tribute system, the influential early nineteenth-century literatus Bao Shichen 包世臣 (1775–1855) also made throughout his life numerous suggestions regarding the improvement of agricultural practice and of rural life. Contrary to the arguments of his older contemporary Hong Liangji that the empire was facing an imminent demographic and provisioning crisis, Bao argued that there was ample possibility for increasing crop yields, and improving popular livelihoods, if a more rational approach was taken to cropping decisions, farm labor allocation, agricultural commercialization, and local-level social organization. Bao was fond of quantification, and, far more than Hong, employed statistical analysis (albeit crude) to bolster his arguments. Fundamentally committed to increasing the power and wealth of the imperial state in the face of threats both foreign and domestic, Bao was highly optimistic that this could be achieved simultaneously with fulfilling his other basic commitment, relieving what he saw as widespread popular immiseration.

Keywords agriculture, property, population, productivity, Bao Shichen, Hong Liangji, quantification, salt, tobacco, opium, silver

Within the frequently back-biting 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. The early nineteenth-century literatus Bao Shichen, however, wore this as a mark of the highest pride. Born in Jingxian, Anhui, Bao was the offspring of a once-eminent family that had fallen on hard times. When his father, a village schoolteacher, took ill, Shichen supported him in his final years on the proceeds of his own market gardening.¹ When the father

¹ Bao’s father is identified as a Green Standard officer by Liu Guangjing, “Shijiu shiji chuye Zhongguo zhishifenzi Bao Shichen yu Wei Yuan,” 996; Hiromu Momose, “Pao Shih-ch’en,” 610, identifies him instead as a village schoolteacher. Most evidence seems to support the latter view.

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died, Shichen was able to utilize family 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-level (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 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 and scholar of calligraphy, Bao is known in China primarily as an anti-foreign saber-rattler in the years leading up to the Opium War of 1839–42.² In English-language scholarship, however, he is probably better known for his (largely behind-the-scenes) input regarding the 1820s and 1830s reforms of 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 contractors—Bao has come to be seen by some recent scholars as an economic “liberal.”³ My own reading of him, as we shall see, is somewhat skeptical of this characterization.

Bao Shichen expounded his views on agriculture in various writings throughout his adult life.⁴ As in his other areas of policy advocacy, he became

² For example, Chen Wenyu, “Aiguo youmin, lichang gaige de Bao Shichen,” 48–49; Hiromu Momose, “Bao Shichen,” 116–17.

³ “Liberal” here means the belief that profit-driven private entrepreneurship serves the public interest better than appropriation of commercial functions or other market intervention by the state. The strongest identification of these views with Bao is made by Manhoung Lin. See her “Two Social Theories Revealed,” and, more recently and fully, *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808–1856*. On the reform of the Grain Tribute Administration, see Zhang Yan, “Bao Shichen yu jindai qianye de ‘haiyun nancao’ gaige,” 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 Huaipai Salt Monopoly,” 1–39.

⁴ Bao’s *On Wealth* (*Shuochu*), written in 1801 when he was 27, and never published during his lifetime because of its bold call for reforming the basic political structure of the empire to meet the current crisis, contains in passing considerable comment on agricultural policy. In several essays supplementary to *On Wealth*, notably those on agricultural administration and local decimal-unit household regimentation (*baojia*), Bao expands these ideas considerably; these supplementary essays, likewise written around 1801, were eventually included in Bao’s self-published collected works, *Anwu sizhong*. In other policy papers and correspondence produced over nearly a half century, and especially an essay dismissively entitled “Notes from the year 1820, part two” (*Gengchen zazhu, er*), he presents a comprehensive program of agrarian reform. The 1844 preface to the *Anwu sizhong* itself, and that to the subsection of that work on material welfare entitled “Four Works for the People” (*Qimin sishu*), both address agrarian issues in more general terms. Finally, we have the record of Bao’s single political posting, as magistrate of Jiangxi’s Xinyu county in 1839, where he was forced, rather uncomfortably, to confront many rural issues on the ground.

progressively less utopian and more cautiously pragmatic over the course of the Jiaqing (hereafter “JQ” in the context of dates) and Daoguang (“DG”) reigns. His growing pessimism regarding the potential to fundamentally jump-start the empire’s agricultural output and dramatically improve the lives of its farming population was certainly a function of Bao’s own personal aging process, but it is very tempting to see it as reflecting, as well, a genuine deterioration of Qing rural economy and society in the half century of the great divergence.

Population and Productivity

Though Bao Shichen was thirty years younger than Hong Liangji (1746–1809), both men had been at one time or another protégés of Zhu Gui (1731–1807), former tutor to the eventual Jiaqing emperor and, during the first years of Jiaqing’s personal rule, probably the most powerful minister in the empire. Despite this common patronage, Hong and Bao disagreed profoundly on two of the most pressing policy issues of the day. Hong famously urged a thorough purge of the bureaucracy in the wake of the downfall of Heshen, while Bao, like Zhu Gui himself, advised a general amnesty for most officials in the interest of administrative stability. And, more relevant to our concerns here, Bao and Hong held diametrically opposed views of the potential of the empire’s agriculture.

Bao Shichen remained convinced throughout his youth and middle age that the productive capacity of the Qing agrarian economy was much greater than assumed by others, and supremely confident that, following his formulas, this economy might 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 argued in 1801, in unstated reference to the dire demographic predictions of “China’s Malthus,” Hong Liangji. “But they have not worked this out mathematically.”⁵ Twenty years later, Bao wrote that “There are those who say that because the population is growing daily, the productive capacity of the land cannot keep pace with food supply needs. These are merely the words of petty Confucians (*xiaoru*), who do not understand the situation today or the way the world works (*bu ta lizhi*).”⁶

Bao was right, at least, about Hong Liangji’s arguments, which though they

⁵ Bao Shichen, *Shuochu*, in *Bao shichen quanji*, 188. A similar reading of Bao’s views, and their correct “refutation” of those of Hong Liangji, is made by James Z. Lee and Wang Feng, in *One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities*, 167.

⁶ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu er,” in *Bao Shichen quanji*, 210. Note that there are three identically-titled collections of Bao’s writings published by Anhui guji chubanshe, dated 1991, 1993, and 1997. With the exception of the *Shuochu*, which is in the 1991 volume, and except where noted, all other citations to the *Quanji* in this paper refer to the 1997 volume.

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.⁷ Bao was very different. Indeed, as we'll see, he seems to have had an intense infatuation with numbers, to a degree not remotely matched by even the most sophisticated economic analysts of the preceding "high Qing" century. He argued that "The empire's land (*tianxia zhi tu*) nourishes the empire's people (*tianxia zhi ren*). It is self-evident that if the population grows, so does the number of producers (*shengzhe*); this is the very basis of wealth (*fujī*). It is true that there is no longer much virgin land (*kuangtu*) remaining, but the real problem is that human work capacities (*lizuo*) have not been utilized efficiently or systematically (*bu ru fa*)."⁸ In effect, Bao was reasserting, in the face of Hong Liangji's skepticism, a classic article of Confucian statecraft faith: the ability of human beings to triumph over the limitations of nature (*yiren shengtian*).⁹

In his youthful utopian tract *On Wealth* (*Shuochu*), Bao proceeds by pointing out that, by statute, one *li* (unit of distance, somewhat less than a kilometer) is defined as 360 paces (*bu*=5 chi, or Chinese feet) or 180 *jiang* in official feet (1 *jiang*=5 paces).¹⁰ A *mou* (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 3,600 *li* squared, or some 6,868,800,000

⁷ The classic text is Ping-ti Ho, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368–1968*. 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*, 75–76. For selections from Hong's 1793 population essays, translated by K. C. Liu (Liu Guangjing), see Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 174–75.

⁸ Bao, "Gengchen za zhu er," in *Quanji*, 210.

⁹ Bao, "Liuzhi Jiangxi xin fubu Chen Yusheng," in *Quanji*, 258–59. Bao's characteristic optimism, in line with that of earlier statecraft thinkers but increasingly challenged in his own day, not only by Hong Liangji but also by younger contemporaries such as Gong Zichen, is also noted by Liu Guangjing, "Shijiu shiji chuye Zhongguo zhishifenzi Bao Shichen yu Wei Yuan," 995–1030.

¹⁰ Bao, *Shuochu*, 188–89. For a detailed study of the *Shuochu*, see my article "Rewriting the Qing Constitution: Bao Shichen's *On Wealth*."

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 have an 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 crops other than grain, 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 of the empire's total population. If one of these six is employed in one of the other legitimate non-farming occupations, 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. Within seven years after the restoration of good government by a heroic ruler (*yingyi*)—the newly empowered Jiaqing emperor?—the people will be well supplied with their needs and happy with their lives, the country will become rich, and the ruler will be well respected and secure.

It is instructive to compare Bao's numbers and projections with those of the widely-respected modern scholar of late imperial demography and economy, Guo Songyi.¹¹ Whereas Bao calculates total arable land in the early nineteenth century at more than 4 billion *mou*, Guo takes the official figure (*Qingmou*) for 1812 of 791, 525,000 *mou* and converts it to an actual figure (*shimou*) of 1,050,436,000 *mou*—that is, a total empire-wide arable of less than a quarter of Bao's cheery estimate. On the other hand, Guo estimates the population in 1812

¹¹ Guo Songyi, "Ming-Qing shiqi de liangshi shengchan yu nongmin shenghuo shuiping," 373–96.

as roughly 350 million, or one-half that of Bao's odd estimate of 700 million. Guo's estimate of per-*mou* annual grain yield is only somewhat less than Bao's (2.34 *dan* vs. 2.50 *dan*), but his yield per working farmer is lower.¹² Most significantly, in Guo Songyi's view both per-capita productivity and standards of living had been in decline already for decades by the time Bao Shichen wrote, in 1801, and would continue an accelerated decline over the subsequent century, primarily the result of unchecked population growth—a factor about which Bao professed himself unconcerned.

In hindsight, therefore, Bao was wrong about his projections, and even more wildly wrong about his numbers. There is no indication that Bao had been to Beijing, where he might have seen official figures, before he wrote; his patron Zhu Gui had been recalled there to serve the Jiaqing emperor in 1799, and repeatedly invited Bao to join him, but apparently he did not. The revised Jiaqing-era *Da Qing huidian*, though published only in 1812, was well in preparation by the turn of the century, and Guo Songyi accepts its figures as reasonably accurate, but again there is no indication that Bao had been in communication with the *Huidian*'s editorial staff before he wrote his *On Wealth*. His numbers, then, seem to have been entirely self-generated. In other words, he made them up.

Agricultural Practice

In his early essay on “Agricultural Administration” (*nongzheng*), Bao marshals 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 twenty-six-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

¹² I cannot be precise here because Guo and Bao use different units.

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 any 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 numbers 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.¹³

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*).

It is the task of the official (and also the literati-landlord) to instruct. He must

¹³ Bao, "Nongzheng," 208.

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" (*guomai*).

Bao then 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 *mu* of fallow wasteland, so this modest levy is capable of contributing over 30,000 *mu* 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 0.2 catties of grain, amounting to 20,000 catties county-wide. Bao reiterates that corvée assessments must be made with absolute respect for the annual 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.¹⁴

Property

Bao Shichen professed himself a devoted believer in private proprietorship. In 1844, toward the end of his life, he wrote that there are three cardinal principles that policy makers must grasp in order to achieve agricultural productivity: *li* (ritual correctness), *yi* (righteousness), and *xin* (faith). As applied to agriculture, *li* referred to the proper division of wilderness space into arable fields, as in the model of the well-field system of antiquity. *Xin* referred to the division of time into the agrarian calendar—the confident belief that the seasons will follow each other in rational succession, and the knowledge of what action is appropriate to each moment in the year. And *yi*, or "what is right," is deferential respect for the system of private/household ownership of agricultural land (*minyong zhi*). At the

¹⁴ Ibid., 187.

root of the current crisis is wanton expropriation of the people's property and wealth by "thieving officials" (*taochen*), clerks, and local elites.¹⁵

Yet, in practice, Bao proved in numerous ways no unambivalent champion of private property rights and personal liberties. In his youthful *On Wealth*, for example, he proposed a detailed and fussy code of sumptuary laws for all classes of society; farmers were to wear garments of any solid color other than green (*qing*), which was reserved for merchants and artisans, and simple, unpatterned cotton footwear.¹⁶ As we shall see, he also imposed strict limits on production and personal consumption of a range of contraband goods. But his most striking qualifications to the principle of private property came in relation to natural resources and famine relief policies.

In a lengthy disquisition in *On Wealth* on the salt monopoly, Bao argues that salt represents "wealth bequeathed by Heaven" (*tiandi zhi cang*) to all humanity, and 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; like salt, they are collective assets and belong to no single private individual or household (*fei minjia siye*). However, as in his later, successfully-adopted policy recommendations regarding the Liang-Huai salt gabelle in the 1820s and 1830s, Bao combines his argument for collective ownership of natural resources with a call for private commercial management of extraction and distribution: merchants bidding for distribution contracts for salt in feasible job-lots will deliver it more efficiently than will hereditarily enfranchised official-merchants, resulting in better prices for the consumer, well-earned profits for themselves, and—by no means least important—much increased salt tax revenues for the representative of the collective interest, the state.¹⁷

In a less celebrated policy paper of 1804, Bao applies analogous reasoning to another resource, the cedar forests in the Western Hills outside Beijing. Ever since the relocation of the capital in the early Ming, trees in these sparsely-inhabited highlands had been communally harvested by local people, with the wood sold in Beijing for use primarily as incense sticks. The yield was modest but sustainable, and the activity was effectively taxed by the state at a wood-tax collection station in the Miyun county (Shuntian prefecture) seat. Over time, somewhat larger-scale commercial timber-farming enterprises were staked out in the area, and this too, in Bao's view, was equitable and appropriate. The problem came in 1799 when, at the height of the White Lotus campaigns (unclear whether this was before or after the demise of Heshen early in that year), the

¹⁵ Bao, "Preface" (*Xuyan*) to *Qimin sishu*, in *Bao Shichen quanji*, 159–61.

¹⁶ Bao, *Shuochu*, 139–40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184–86.

woodlands were seized by the state (*zhao ru guan*), and soldiers sent in to strip the forests for profit, to be applied to military uses. Bao condemns this abuse of fiscal policy, which rightly should be tailored to balance the legitimate revenue needs of the state, the livelihoods of private households, and the sustainability of the resource base.¹⁸

Provisioning

The second major policy area in which Bao's enthusiasm for the sanctity of private property was compromised was in provisioning, especially in the handling of dearth. In his youthful essay on the decimal-unit household regimentation system (*baojia*), titled "Shuo baojia shiyi" and written in conjunction with his *On Wealth* around 1801 but first published only in his 1844 collected works, Bao presents a utopian scheme to turn this hoary institution into nothing short of an instrument for economic redistribution.¹⁹ In his essay, Bao offers considerable detail on the posting of household door placards (*menpai*), 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 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.

In "Shuo baojia shiyi," redistribution in normal times would proceed 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

¹⁸ Bao, "Miyun shuikou shuo," in *Quanji*, 245–46.

¹⁹ Bao, "Shuo baojia shiyi," in *Quanji*, 271–82.

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.

In practice, however, both in an advisory and an administrative role, Bao’s own actions in the face of local dearth were considerably less radical and idealistic. His redistributionist impulses were first tested by a looming famine in his adopted hometown of Nanjing in 1814–15.²⁰ Over the first six months of 1814 no appreciable rain fell in the Jiangnan region. The crops failed, and over the following winter and spring there was major dearth, both within Nanjing city and in surrounding areas. The situation was complicated by the fact that a local rebellion in southeastern Henan province the year before had spilled over and gathered additional recruits in the Yangzhou hinterland of northern Jiangsu. Refugees from both fighting and drought further besieged Nanjing.

Ever since the posting of Bailing to Nanjing as governor-general of Liang-Jiang in JQ 16/6 (1811), Bao Shichen had served on Bailing’s staff as an advisor on river-conservancy matters. As the drought worsened during the course of 1814, Qin Changye (Yitang), a Reader in the Hanlin Academy, native and resident of Nanjing, and one of the most eminent men on the scene, several times approached Bao to express his concern about the likelihood of famine and inquire about how it might be dealt with. Bao drew upon his research into past events, determined that the closest analogy was to a famine in Changzhou prefecture in 1785 that had been successfully managed by the Changzhou Prefect Jin, and drew up a twenty-point program (in five sections) that adapted Jin’s policies to the current time and place. Among other things, Bao argued that effective famine relief frankly necessitated redistribution of wealth from the rich

²⁰ Sources for this affair include Bao “Wei Qin Yitang shidu ge hua Baimen Huangzheng” (Plans for famine relief in Baimen presented to Hanlin Reader Qin Yitang), “Shang Bai jixiang shu” (Letter submitted to Governor-general Bailing), and “Da Fang Baoyan shangshu shu” (Letter in response to Board President Fang Baoyan), all in Bao, *Qimin sishu*, *juan 2*, 222–28, 230–32, and 232–34, *Quanjia* (1997).

to the poor (*shuaifu yipin*). He submitted this plan to Qin, who dithered over it. (Bao claimed that Qin really understood almost nothing about agrarian policy and that he had to explain even the simplest things repeatedly to him.) But when Qin began to observe poor rural people (*xiangmin*) plundering the grain stores of their richer neighbors he understood that the time to act had come, and he sent Bao's plan and a cover letter to Governor-general Bailing proposing a systematic famine relief operation.

On JQ 16/7/24 Bailing convened a meeting at Nanjing's Zhongshan Academy to discuss such plans. In attendance were Qin Changye, Fang Baoyan (Board President and, along with Qin, the most eminent man resident in the city), the Provincial Treasurer, the Provincial Salt Commissioner, the Nanjing Prefect, and the two magistrates of Shangyuan and Jiangning counties, which divided the city of Nanjing and its suburban areas. There were essentially three components to the plan they arrived at. First, the Salt Commissioner disbursed 15,000 *shi* of grain from the salt administration granary for immediate discount sale (*pingtiao*) on the local market. Second, Bailing ordered the allocation of 60,000 taels from the provincial treasury for assigned purchase of rice from the thirty-two rice mills along the river outside the city gates. Finally, a subscription drive was launched among local wealthy households to contribute charity relief (*yizhen*) for distribution via a system of tickets of eligibility. Bailing issued a proclamation to start this drive and summoned wealthy gentry and merchants for a second meeting at the Academy on JQ16/8/4 to urge them to contribute. Four of the wealthiest households in the city immediately contributed a total of 100,000 taels, and another hundred households eventually donated smaller amounts up to 5,000 taels apiece. Altogether 177,000 taels were collected.

But problems and contention plagued the project from the start. First, although the rice mills were glad to sell the rice at reasonable cost to the state for relief purposes, Jiangning Magistrate Cai Junbi unilaterally decided to order them to sell at a 20% discount below market price, and the mill owners balked. They took their protest to the Provincial Treasurer, who was furious at Magistrate Cai. Eventually, a compromise was worked out whereby the mills sold the grain at a discount of 8%.

Second, a dispute broke out among the officials about who was to be in charge of the relief program. All agreed that the seniority and reputations of Hanlin Reader Qin and Board President Fang made them the obvious candidates to head up the subscription drive, but who was to manage the investigation of eligibility and the actual distribution of relief? At the Zhongshan Academy meeting, the Prefect Qiu Shutang argued that the project should be categorized as "*minjuan guanban*" (non-governmental local elites contribute the money but it is managed by the officials—that is, by the prefect and county magistrates), while others felt it would be more appropriately handled as "*minjuan minban*" (both funded and

managed by local elites themselves). Again, brokered by Board President Fang, a compromise was reached, whereby 27,000 taels were entrusted directly to the two county magistrates for distribution to urban residents (for some unexplained reason Shangyuan Magistrate Shen Bangji suddenly recused himself on grounds of incompetence, leaving Jiangning Magistrate Cai to handle the task by himself), and the remaining 150,000 entrusted to a mixed commission of twenty-four men—twelve “assistant magistrates” (*zuo'er*) and twelve provincial degree-holders (*juven*) for distribution to rural people.

Related to this was the issue of just who were eligible recipients of relief. There was some sentiment among officials that urban residents alone be ministered to, rural populations left to fend for themselves. Bao Shichen persistently argued against this position, noting that “the rural townships are the foundation of the city” (*sixiang wei cheng zhi genben*), and also that famine refugees from outside the prefecture ought to be fed directly in rural areas, while preventing them from entering the city. On both counts his position won out, and eventually at least 89,000 rural dwellers and another 9,000 refugees received aid.

Things did not go smoothly for Bao, however, despite the eventual determination that the relief program he advised was a success. Board President Fang, for example, was reportedly unhappy about several elements of the project’s management, and conveyed his discomfort to Governor-general Bailing, prompting Bao to write Fang directly in spirited defense of his reasoning. Bailing himself was yet more of a problem. At several points during the subscription drive he chose to call it to a premature halt, only to revive it when corpses and near-corpse numbering in the thousands were deposited outside the city gates. Relations between Bao and his patron and employer progressively soured during the process, and by the time of Bailing’s transfer out of his post (he died shortly thereafter, in 1816) they were clearly on rather bad terms.

This uncomfortable episode may well have soured Bao Shichen on even the most cautious of redistributionist solutions to provisioning crises. As Xinyu magistrate in 1839, in the face of torrential rains that had wiped out much of the grain crop, the now elderly Bao did no more than request the deferral of the county’s land tax and grain tribute obligations to the future (*tihuan*), just as his predecessors had routinely done after repeated bad harvests.²¹

Agriculture and Commerce

Bao Shichen’s writings are suffused with empathy for the agrarian population, and for farming, which, as with nearly every author in the Confucian statecraft

²¹ *Xinyu xianzhi*, vol. 3, 19. We will return to Bao’s contentious tenure in this county below.

tradition, he considered the foundation of the economy. Farming is brutally difficult, Bao insists, and farmers are genuinely immiserated. In the *Nongzheng*'s central section on labor allocation (*zuoli*), Bao 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 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 labor 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.²²

Bao's consistent emphasis on the primacy of agriculture, however, cannot be read as a corresponding deprecation of commerce. The major fear is not that farmers will desert their fields in order to adopt other trades, but that they will become unemployed vagrants (*yumin*). He frequently invoked the term "*simin*"—the four (legitimate) occupations—to suggest that merchants and artisans were indeed worthy and contributing participants in the multi-sectoral Qing economy (though, as we shall see, he thought they were relatively undertaxed). And his conception of agriculture itself was by no means one of self-sufficiency; rather, he envisioned an active participation in the commercial market and cash cropping. Lengthy sections of his agricultural manual *Nongzheng* were devoted to market-oriented sericulture, aquaculture, arboriculture, and horticulture.²³ And in *On Wealth* he radically proposed that the domestic customs be abolished altogether, so that all commodities can move about the country more easily, "for the benefit of farmers" (*jun huo biannong*).²⁴

Bao, however, is unwilling to grant to cultivators complete freedom in crop selection and land allocation. He is emphatically opposed to dissipating potentially productive resources on the evils of tobacco and alcohol. These are familiar complaints from statecraft reformers 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

²² Bao, "Nongzheng," 186–87.

²³ *Ibid.*, 189–208.

²⁴ Bao, *Shuochu*, 186.

guo,” or, literally, “Tobaccoland”), but by the sixteenth century it was cultivated domestically. He says that 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!²⁵

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.²⁶

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 0.5 to 0.7 catties of wheat. Bao continues his analysis, stating that in the current 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,

²⁵ Bao’s arguments against tobacco cultivation are noted as well in Carol Benedict, *Golden-Silk Smoke: A History of Tobacco in China, 1550–2010*, 45 and 75.

²⁶ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu er,” 210. Compare also *Shuochu*, 186, which makes a similar argument.

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 a Suzhou adult male's 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 than he eats as food. For Bao, then, the waste of the empire's food supply, in this one prefecture alone, was astounding. He notes the 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.²⁷

Bao enthusiastically included coastal trade in the circulation of agricultural produce he sought to encourage. As is well known, he was a consultant and drew up detailed plans for the adoption of the "sea route" for commercial shipment of tribute grain northward along the coast in the Daoguang reign. Indeed, more than two decades earlier, in 1804, he had championed the shift from Grand Canal to coastal shipments, mounting detailed arguments to dismiss fears of excessive costs, delays due to the uncertainty of coastal winds and currents, and the hazards of piracy.²⁸ Less celebrated are his arguments in favor of opening coastal trade in commercial farm produce, such as the one he advanced for Haizhou, northern Jiangsu, in 1815.

In the fall of that year, Bao made a personal inspection tour of Huaizhou's Ganyu county. He observed that, although much of the area was mountainous and uncultivable, it was capable of commercialized production of beans, miscellaneous grain, pigs, and fish. Moreover, in several of the region's market towns there were processing plants for bean oil and bean cake. For the most part, it was a case of "having commodities but no market for them" (*youhuo wushou*). In fact, though, there was a ready market for these goods in the cities of Jiangnan, where there were also raw and processed cotton, paper goods, and other commodities which might be exchanged for them. Unfortunately, the interior waterways linking Ganyu and Jiangnan were mostly impassible, so the small quantity of goods that were traded this way were carried by overland foot porters, and the resulting high transport costs constituted a "waste of commercial capital" (*fou yu maiben*) for Ganyu producers. There was an obvious alternative, that being export via Ganyu's one good maritime harbor, Qingkou, but in order to

²⁷ Bao, "Gengchen za zhu er," 211.

²⁸ Bao, "Haiyun nancao yi" and "Haiyun shiyi," in *Quanji*, 11–13, 81–85.

enforce collection of customs on the trade at the Huai customs, in inland Huai'an, coastal trade via that port was prohibited by law. Not that some smuggling via Qingkou did not already take place, but this was controlled and violent "evil gentry" and "thugs," costing the producers dearly while netting the government no revenues whatsoever. The solution, for Bao Shichen, was simple: legalize the coastal trade via Qingkou and set up a branch of the Huai customs at that port. After all, some coastal shipping such as that of Shandong beans to Manchuria was already legally underway. As with his favored reforms of the Liang-Huai salt administration and the northern grain tribute, Bao argued that the removal of excessive bureaucratic restraint in this instance would predicate a "progressive expansion of commercial exchange" (*liutong riguang*), from which the farmers and merchants would derive profits and the state enhanced tax revenue.²⁹

Maritime Trade

Domestic coastal trade was one thing, but overseas trade was quite another. In his youthful utopian *On Wealth*, he allows the need for some officially-regulated inter-cultural exchange with Central Asia but absolutely prohibits all overseas trade (*chuyang maoyi*) and all maritime navigation to Southeast Asia and beyond (*dongnan kaiyang*). 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*), and all products of foreign ingenuity using steam or mechanical power. (So much for technology transfer!) Importers of such novelties will be summarily beheaded.³⁰ In 1801, he has not yet identified opium imports as the major evil—indeed, he does not need that particular argument in order to buttress his fundamental anti-foreignism. His animus against maritime trade here seems instead rooted in protectionism for domestic textile producers, and in his more general sumptuary concerns—foreign manufactures are simply one more extravagance that Bao's new and improved population must be denied.

By 1820, Bao has begun to relax his anathema to maritime trade *in toto*, while coming to identify opium imports as the greatest evil facing the empire. 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. In Bao's thinking, 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

²⁹ Bao, "Qingkou shuo," in *Quanji*, 246–48.

³⁰ Bao, *Shuochu*, 141.

users, and the price of opium per ounce is quadruple that of silver. Assuming each user consumes about 0.1 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. Bao notes that since silver is our primary medium of wholesale exchange, and domestic silver mining is insignificant, the strangulation 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 (*nejian*). 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*). 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

Over the course of the 1830s Bao came to link ever more sharply the problems of opium imports and silver outflow with the crisis in the domestic economy

³¹ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu er,” 213.

caused by an increasingly skewed silver: copper exchange rate. In a series of letters to various correspondents, including the otherwise obscure Jiangnan literatus Wang Liu, he discussed Wang's proposal to introduce paper currency. In Wang's view that step would resolve the silver shortage and also, by requiring foreigners to accept Chinese paper currency in payment for their imports, would gradually disincline them to bring opium into China; Bao thought the latter notion was unrealistic, but did offer qualified support to the basic idea of paper money.³²

It is notable that Bao's remedy did not include cutting off all foreign trade, with which by now he had become reconciled. Indeed, in the late 1820s he had actually served for a time as an advisor in the Superintendency of Maritime Customs at Guangzhou.³³ In a series of letters written in observation of the rapid expansion of foreign trade after the Opium War, however, he anticipates the call of early twentieth-century anti-imperialist politicians and scholars by decrying the impact of foreign imports on local handicraft products. It is no longer luxury novelties like cuckoo clocks, nor simply opium, which are the problem, but instead cheap factory-made consumer staples. Bao observes that by this time farmers throughout the lower Yangzi region have become completely dependent on the subsidiary income derived from cotton spinning and weaving to meet their tax obligations and bring their household budgets up to subsistence levels. In recent years foreign machine-made cotton cloth has flooded the Chinese market, undercutting the price of handicraft cloth by as much as two-thirds. At least in Jiangnan, he laments, cottage industry in cotton is effectively dead, and raw cotton dealers in fact rarely visit rural producers anymore to supply them. Again, though, Bao sees the available remedies as restricted to tax and currency reform, the open maritime trade now established as a *fait accompli*.³⁴

The Role of the State

As much of the foregoing suggests, one of Bao Shichen's consistent themes throughout his writings about agriculture is the responsibility of officials to pay personal attention to the conditions of farm life and to routinely intervene to ameliorate and improve such conditions. This was understood as the essence of governance (*tizheng*) by the rulers of antiquity (*xianwang*), but in recent

³² Bao, "Yu Zhang Yuanfu shu," "Ta Wang Liangsheng shu," and "Cai ta Wang Liangsheng shu," all in *Quanji*, 214–20. See also Manhoung Lin, *China Upside Down*, and William T. Rowe, "Money, Economy, and Polity in the Daoguang-era Paper Currency Debates."

³³ See Bao's biography by Hiromu Momose in Arthur Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period*, 610–11.

³⁴ Bao, "Ta zuzi Meng Kai shu," dated DG 26/5/24, and "Zhi qian dasima Xu Taichang shu," dated DG 26/6/18, both in *Quanji*, 234–39.

generations it has greatly declined. Officials of the past understood how to encourage appropriate crop selection, farm labor allocation, the techniques of irrigation, and how to stabilize consumer commodity prices, but no longer. Today, while rural people (*xiangli yumin*—implying an inability to make rational production decisions on their own) rarely visit a town or city and never see the face of an official, the latter devote themselves to poetry and literary pursuits, leaving any contact with the people to predatory underlings. The people are reduced to privation, and no matter how diligently they labor they see their parents and children cold and malnourished, even without the arrival of a dreaded natural disaster. “Exhausting their finances at the hands of extortionate bullies, exhausting their bodies in service of their oppressors, year in and year out, how are they able to bear it?”³⁵

Take for example the case of irrigation. Bao states confidently that there is no part of the empire that is incapable of being irrigated, so that the grain production in even the arid northwest can eventually equal that of the fertile southeast.³⁶ The state’s responsibility for maintaining the hydraulic infrastructure is at the center of a detailed letter Bao wrote to incoming Jiangxi Governor Chen Luan in 1836.³⁷ At Beijing the preceding year Bao had been notified of his impending appointment to a magistracy in that province, and had eagerly sought out as many Jiangxi natives as he could find in the capital, including the staff of the long-in-the-making revision of the Jiangxi provincial gazetteer, to inform himself of conditions in his impending jurisdiction. At the point of writing, however, Bao had been forced to delay his acceptance of his magistracy to undertake a two-year mourning for his mother at home. This did not prevent him from lecturing the incoming governor on just what was wrong in Jiangxi and what should be done about it.

Bao points out that virtually all the rice produced in Jiangxi is grown in polder fields reclaimed from lakes and riverbanks. “In the past people gobbled up the lakes to make fields, but now the lakes gobble up the people as if they were fish.” Ecological decay has set in, primarily because of a failure of maintenance. Small polders, usually owned by households or lineages, are encompassed within large polders. The small polder walls are maintained, albeit indifferently, but in a classic free-rider syndrome no one has tended to the large polders, which have

³⁵ Bao, “Nongzheng,” 163–64.

³⁶ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu er,” 210.

³⁷ Bao, “Liu zhi Jiangxi xin fubu Chen Yusheng,” dated DG 16/4/13, in *Quanji*, 256–60. Bao addresses this man as “Chen Yusheng,” but the *Jiangxi tongzhi* (1881), vol. 16, 24–25, identifies the Jiangxi governor in this year as the well-known activist official Chen Luan. Bao routinely addresses his correspondents by their alternate names. I have not seen confirmation that “Yusheng” was an alternate name of Chen Luan, but I believe that he is the same individual.

fallen into great decay. Without systematic repair to these, repairs to the small polders are increasingly ineffective. Decades of neglect have progressively worsened the situation, but the years since 1830 have been an out-and-out disaster, with major floods wiping out most of the crop every year. Local and regional officials have turned a blind eye to the problem, concentrating their efforts solely on collecting the land tax and the grain tribute. Indeed, the continuing need to meet these tax obligations even while their farm income shrunk to nothing has left these households, literally and figuratively, under water—many have responded by abandoning their holdings and becoming wandering vagrants (*liumang*). At this stage in the game, neither the financial capacities of the people themselves (*minli*) nor the public-works budgets (*gongxiang*) of county and prefectural governments are capable of meeting the challenge. Bao urges incoming governor Chen to tackle this problem systematically: commission detailed topographical maps and cadastral surveys, draw up plans for large-scale hydraulic reconstruction, apportion costs to landholders who can afford it and can expect to benefit from the increased hydraulic security, and make up the remainder out of provincial revenues. The job is surely daunting, but, characteristically, Bao is fully confident that with proper management it can be successfully done.³⁸

Tax and Currency Reform

In 1801, after returning from the White Lotus front, Bao toured Jiangnan and was deeply struck by the immiseration of the people due to imposition of agrarian taxes. He was particularly “broken hearted,” he recalled, by their willingness to court death (*changsi*) in resistance to these crushing impositions. This formative experience stayed with him all his life.³⁹ In his lengthy essay on agricultural administration, written shortly after this tour, he argued that the most urgent and fundamental thing that officials can do to alleviate popular plight is to reduce agrarian taxes:

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

³⁸ For a remarkably detailed account of large-scale polder maintenance organization in the Pearl River delta in the early nineteenth century, involving provincial coordination and seed money, gentry management bureaus, landholder subscription, and merchant contributions, see David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China*, chapter 18. This is clearly the kind of arrangement Bao had in mind for Jiangxi and, given his service in Guangzhou in the late 1820s, it might even have provided the specific model for his proposals of 1836.

³⁹ Bao, preface to *Anwu sizhong*, dated DG 24/9/26, in *Quanji*.

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.⁴⁰

And in the main text of the utopian *On Wealth* (again written in 1801), Bao offers a concrete scheme for effectively shifting the state's fiscal burden 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.⁴¹

The chief impetus to Bao's more pragmatic agrarian reformism throughout his mature life was to reduce this crushing tax burden. Toward the end of his life he recalls this long battle, and notes with some irony that he has not been arguing his own case, since he owns merely a token piece of property in his native place. His income, rather, derived primarily from sale of his writings and his calligraphy, and was neither taxed nor significantly affected by monetary exchange rates. This, while those with real property and productivity (*youye zhi min*) were squeezed without mercy.⁴²

Bao agreed that the "great way of producing wealth" (*shengcai zhi dadao*) is to leave as much of it as possible in private, productive hands, and that the best means to enrich the public as well as the private, as if by an invisible hand, is to allow popular wealth (*mincai*) to flourish.⁴³ Yet this was not merely liberal rhetoric: it must be emphasized that Bao, notwithstanding his genuine empathy for popular tax burdens, Bao never sought tax reform in order to benefit the people at the expense of the state. At the very beginning of his first major work, *On Wealth*, he identified state finances as a critical cause for attention: an underfunded state is by necessity a predatory state, as well as a weak one. Throughout his life he continued to recognize the Qing administration as crippling poor, and tailored his policies to enhance the *guofu*. This was one major area in which he differed, in emphasis at least, from High Qing reformers, who tended to take the financial health of the state as a given, rather than a cause of concern. Bao's tax and currency reform proposals normally argued that they would serve both ends at once: profiting the state above and the people below (*shang li guo, xia li min*), profiting the state while conveniencing the people

⁴⁰ Bao, "Nongzheng," 163.

⁴¹ Bao, *Shuochu*, 182.

⁴² Bao, "Zhi qian dasima Xu Taichang shu," in *Quanji*, 239.

⁴³ Bao, *Shuochu*, 182; preface to *Qimin sishu*, in *Quanji*, 159–61.

(*liguo bianmin*), or, in a usage anticipating that of reformers such as Feng Guifen later in the century, benefitting the people while still “enriching the state (*fuguo*).”⁴⁴

Influenced by his discussions with Pinghu Prefect Zhao Linpu in the 1820s, and by reading Zhao’s unpublished writings on the subject, Bao came to believe that the Grain Tribute was the greatest policy problem in central China, and the most difficult to remedy. The difficulty was not that the cause of the problem was not obvious: it was the corruption of local and regional government clerks, which siphoned off revenues from the people below and the state above (and also the legitimate income of transport workers in the tribute collection system). Nor was it that the existing laws were not adequate: they had simply been subject to five hundred years of accumulated abuses. Nor yet was it that the solution was not also obvious: even without adopting the sea route, which Bao himself came to favor, simply establishing more localized military collection depots (*tuntian*) and keeping the details of shipment secret from local administrative meddling would save so much in corruption and overhead that the tax rate could effectively be lowered throughout the lower Yangzi region.⁴⁵ The problem was that fixing the system would require such a concerted and “heroic” effort on the part of well-placed officials that it was unlikely to occur.⁴⁶

In his 1836 letter to Jiangxi Governor Chen Luan, Bao analyzed the problem of grain tribute arrears in that province, a problem that been steadily accumulating over the course of the Daoguang reign.⁴⁷ Although a clerical mafia had gotten control of the collection and reporting process, they had concentrated their deceptions on reporting as paid taxes that in fact had not, rather than, fortunately, the reverse. The shortfalls they reported fell into two categories: *minqian* (tax dues actually not paid by the taxpayer) and *guanqian* (taxes paid by the taxpayer to local authorities but not forwarded upward to higher authority). In 1835, in a gesture of imperial benevolence (but also, certainly, one of recognition of genuine incapacity to pay) the throne had forgiven all *minqian* incurred in

⁴⁴ Bao, preface to the Supplement (*fulu*) to *Zhongqu yishao*, in *Quanji* (1993), 8–10; “Ta Wang Liangsheng shu,” in *Quanji*, 214–15.

⁴⁵ Probably influenced by his early experience in the White Lotus counter-insurgency campaign, where he observed the utility of strategically-deployed military colonies, Bao persistently favored establishing a network of *tuntian* in the heartland to play a role in grain tribute collection. This was a strategy that fellow reformers like Tao Zhu, who otherwise shared Bao’s other innovative ideas on grain tribute collection (notably contracting it to commercial shippers), rejected as infeasible. See Duan Zhao, *Tao Zhu yu Jia-Dao jingshi sixiang yanjiu*, 196–97.

⁴⁶ *Quanji* (1993), 8. For a detailed analysis of dysfunctions in the Grain Tribute during the Daoguang reign, and the resulting loss of government revenue, see Xia Nai, “Taiping tianguo qian hou Changjiang gesheng zhi tianfu wenti,” 409–74.

⁴⁷ Bao, “Liu zhi Jiangxi xin fubu Chen Yusheng,” in *Quanji*, 259–60.

Jiangxi before the year 1830. At the same time, however, a stepped-up coercive campaign got underway to collect the popular arrears incurred *since* that year, an amount the provincial tax investigation bureau (*qingcha ju*) placed at about 700,000 taels. The result had been that the clerical mafia extending from the provincial bureau on down had grossly abused the collection process, ruthlessly “oppressing the helpless and unconnected while fattening up themselves” (*lei gugua er fei shuyi*).

Bao pointed out to the governor that the grain tribute burden fell very differently in different parts of Jiangxi. For one thing, not all counties in Jiangxi were assessed the same amount of tribute dues, and some were not assessed any at all. Whereas this was supposed to reflect their relative grain surplus, it more accurately reflected simply historical accident and the difficulty of collection. Another factor was the differing means employed to collect the grain. In some localities, taxpayers collected their own tribute grain and brought it to the central collection point themselves (*minzheng mindui*); in others, taxpayers collected it but turned it over to administrative functionaries for shipment (*minzheng guandui*); while in still others grain was both collected and shipped by bureaucratic authorities (*guanzheng guandui*). The first alternative had the benefit of keeping administrative manipulation to the minimum, but the second, and still more the third, brought with them the levying of surtaxes and fees (*duifei*, *caogui*, and so on) on the taxpayer to cover the supposed costs of government shipment. Needless to say, those taxpayers whose property lay farther upriver from the collection center paid relatively higher surtaxes, out of all proportion to the product of their land. Bao urged Governor Chen to conduct a detailed survey of provincial realities in order to apportion the burden of tribute payment more equitably and more in line with taxpayers’ ability to pay, in order to put the clerical racketeers out of business and improve both popular and official morale.

Over the course of his career, Bao ever more strongly associated the problem of rising tax burdens with that of currency mismanagement. In 1820 he wrote that currency had been an invention of the Yellow Emperor, as a means of moderating surplus and lack, and thus cultivating the people’s wealth (*mincai*). Today, however, skewed silver: copper exchange rates work precisely against this effect. In an era of ever more intensive agricultural commercialization, a process which we have seen Bao applauded in itself, farmers are subjected to a worsening price scissors: they calculate their budgets in copper coin, while the merchants with whom they deal price their merchandise in silver. Thus, although silver is only a secondary repository of wealth (*mofu*)—grain being the primary (*benfu*)—the value of the latter is directly influenced by that of the former. It is the duty of officials to work intelligently and diligently to bring the silver: copper

exchange back as close as possible to the 1:1000 par rate.⁴⁸

Increasingly, Bao linked the currency imbalance specifically to the problem of growing popular tax burden. In 1839, coincident with the outbreak of the Opium War, Bao wrote his most fully formulated analysis of the currency crisis, “A Simple Remedy for the Silver Famine.”⁴⁹ Farmers in many parts of the empire, Bao noted, were assessed their taxes in silver taels but actually paid them in copper cash. Though the par rate for conversion from taels to cash was 1:1000, the market rate (observed by Bao in Nanchang that year) was 1:1630, and tax collectors often imposed rates of 1:1800 or higher. Thus farmers, who were paid for their goods in cash prices that did not reflect the skewed exchange rate, were increasingly squeezed by their rising tax burden. Bao’s “simple remedy” was assessment of most agricultural taxes directly in copper—as had been the case prior to the late Ming.

Bao increasingly came to view that it was desirable to de-monetize silver as much as possible, and, as we have seen, advocated the introduction of paper currency as one means of doing this. He did so most vocally during his exchange of letters with Wang Liu in the 1830s.⁵⁰ A decade later, however, Bao was still emphasizing the need to introduce paper currency to resolve the still-worsening silver: copper exchange rate. In 1846, he estimated the average market exchange rate in the lower Yangzi at around 1:2000, but added that clerks often demanded commutation rates of up to 1:3000 in their collection of the land tax and the grain tribute, which frequently exceeded the value of the entire yield on their land, driving them into abandoning agriculture. Once again, he argued for the mandating of copper cash as the government’s sole money of account, and the introduction of paper currency, which as he notes the Daoguang court had entertained and rejected in 1845, as one means of effecting the demonetization of silver.⁵¹

On the Ground

After a lifetime of advising others on how to carry out various agrarian reforms, Bao Shichen got his first and only chance actually to enact policies in practice

⁴⁸ Bao, “Gengchen zazhu er,” in *Quanji*, 209–13; see also the 1844 preface to *Qimin sishu*, in *Quanji*, 159–61. For a well-informed analysis of this problem, see Peng Zeyi, “Yapian zhanzheng hou shinianjian yingui qianjian bodong xia Zhongguo jingji yu jieji guanxi,” 24–71.

⁴⁹ Bao, “Yinhuang xiaobu shuo,” in *Quanji*, 228–30. See also “Cai ta Wang Liangsheng shu,” in *Quanji*, 215–20.

⁵⁰ Wang Liu’s ideas are presented in detail in his *Qianbi chuyan* (1837). For analysis of Wang’s proposals and of Bao Shichen’s reactions to them, see Lin, *China Upside Down*, and Rowe, “Money, Economy, and Polity in the Daoguang-era Paper Currency Debates.”

⁵¹ Bao, “Zhi qian dasima Xu Taichang shu,” dated DG 26/6/18, in *Quanji*, 237–39.

during 1838–39, at the age of 64. In the summer of 1838, he received an imperial appointment to Jiangxi as an expectant county magistrate, and in the fall, when the magistracy of Xinyu county opened up, he was assigned to proceed there to fill the post.⁵² It was, to say the least, a chastening experience. Xinyu was officially categorized as a “simple” and “prosperous” jurisdiction (*jianyou*), but in 1838 it was clearly nothing of the sort. It was a county in what Bao himself described as open tax rebellion (*kangwan*). The previously assigned magistrate had actually refused to take up his appointment to Xinyu, leaving it to Bao. When Bao himself arrived in the county, he was intercepted by sympathetic local elites and advised not to enter the county seat, which was in total chaos. Accepting their hospitality, he remained for several weeks some fifteen *li* outside the city, while conducting extensive fact-finding interviews and planning his strategy.

Xinyu was plagued by active conflict between (and among) local people and various higher-level officials, including the prefect, the provincial grain tribute intendant, and the provincial treasurer, whom Bao variously presents as corrupt or well-intentioned but incapable. The county was several years in arrears on its grain tribute payments. Rural property-holders were subjected to a multiplying number of transport and collection fees (*yongfei*, *caogui*), which Bao was not loathe to describe as “squeeze” (*lougui*). On top of this, commutation and bimetallic exchange rates were greatly inflated: the prevailing silver: copper rate in Xinyu markets was bad enough, at 1:1600, but in tax-collection practice it went as high as 1:2000. Tax and commercial litigation was hopelessly backlogged, with a group of sojourning merchants engaged in a protracted legal struggle with locals over defaulted payments (apparently related to the inflated exchange rates). A group of local elites had taken up a subscription for a fund which would help subsidize these inflated commutation and exchange rates, but at the moment there was heated local disagreement about how these monies were to be allocated. Police runners (*zaoyi*) charged with tax collection were detested and often met with violent resistance. A particular cause of local grievance was the seizing by grain tribute functionaries of a local Confucian school to serve as a collection depot. Two local lower degree-holders named Wan Guoyu and Hu Xiangyou had initiated petitions to cashier the grain tribute intendant, to which the provincial treasurer had responded by declaring them “grain tribute thugs” (*caogun*) and ordering their arrest. Provincial authorities, in Bao’s view, had come to the conclusion that the entire county ought to be severely punished for its intractability.

⁵² Sources on Bao’s tenure as Xinyu magistrate include “Fu Chen Qumi shu,” in *Quanji*, 239–44; preface to *Zhongqu yishao*, in *Quanji* (1993), 8–10; Hu Pu’an, “Bao Shenbo xiansheng nianpu,” in *Quanji* (1991), 236–37; and *Xinyu xianzhi* (1849), vol. 3, 19.

Characteristically, Magistrate Bao sought to resolve the issues with reasoned moderation. Once he felt emboldened to enter the county seat, he convened a large meeting of taxpayers and tax collection functionaries, at which he patiently explained that the grain tribute itself was a legitimate fiscal obligation that should be met, and that there were indeed some collection fees that were burdensome but unavoidable. Working through these with all parties to determine which were justified and which not, Bao presents himself as having reached some consensus. He then engaged in a somewhat contentious correspondence with provincial authorities to have the schedule of collection fees for Xinyu pruned of excess. He also pledged to discipline any local functionaries who had egregiously “oppressed the people” (*nuemin*). When the 1839 grain crop was badly affected by summer flooding, he sought successfully to have payments of past arrears deferred again until some future more bountiful harvest.

But whatever his level of actual success in these matters, Bao Shichen clearly failed to resolve the two most compelling problems in Xinyu’s fiscal mess. He deposited the elite-solicited funds with the prefectural treasury, while trying repeatedly to negotiate their fair redistribution to their original donors, but to no avail; once he had been relieved of his magistracy, the provincial governor personally seized the money and arbitrarily decided who and how much to repay. Worse still was the issue of the two “thugs,” Wan and Hu. Bao tried repeatedly to coax them into his yamen on the promise that he would hear them out fairly and present their cases with sympathy to higher authority, but they were not persuaded and fled to neighboring jurisdictions. The exasperated provincial authorities responded with brutal force. Troops were sent down to the Xinyu region to apprehend them directly; both were caught and Wan, at least, died in confinement. In the process some three hundred family farms in the two culprits’ home villages were burned to the ground.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper I noted the current interpretation of Bao Shichen’s policy views as comparable to Western economic “liberalism,” and my own reticence about embracing this position. As we have seen here, Bao adamantly supported private property rights, but by no means unqualifiedly so. He favored in most instances private (merchant) management of economic enterprises, but only on condition of close state supervision, and in what he felt to be the public interest. Indeed, one of the most consistent themes in his agrarian policy advocacy was the need for greater state activism and intervention.

Perhaps a better characterization of Bao’s position, though I’m not yet wedded to this, would be the more neutral “utilitarian.” This would encompass at least

three strains. First, the determined pursuit of greater economic efficiency and productivity. Second—and here he falls closely in line with many “statecraft” scholar-officials of the “prosperous age” of the mid-eighteenth century—a persistent emphasis on ameliorating fiscal and other burdens on the farming population. Third, however, was something relatively newer: an abiding, genuine, and urgent emphasis on attending to the needs of state financing (*guoji*).

In 1846 the aged Bao Shichen wrote a letter to an acquaintance which sought to summarize his career and his approach to political economy.⁵³ The friend had initiated the correspondence, noting, with approval, the unusually candid way that Bao habitually preached the pursuit of profit, in a literati culture within which this preoccupation was formally seen as petty and unworthy. Bao readily acknowledged that “speaking of profit” (*yanli*) was the single strand that unified his entire career. His ideas on how to minimize impositions for public works (*gongfei*), on how to root out irregular exactions (*lougui*), on how to maximize the potential of the ecology (*dili*), all of these were aspects of speaking of profit. So too were the reforms of the salt administration and the shift to the sea route for grain tribute shipments, which Bao noted were largely his ideas though carried out in practice by others, as was the adoption of paper currency as a means to relieve the silver shortage, a proposal that Bao had consistently advanced for decades and continued to emphasize now, though it had never been seriously adopted. Even his calls for sufficient funding for local administrations so as to reduce the gouging of the people (*zuixiao*), and for diligent conduct of famine-relief operations in order to prevent the local population from abandoning their farms, while they might sound on the surface like altruism, were in fact nothing other than “speaking of profit.” In each of these policy areas, Bao found one common dysfunction: siphoning off wealth at the middle level between state and society (*zhongbao*) by clerks and other traitorous middlemen (*jianren*). Each of his policy initiatives had been designed essentially to reclaim this “profit” from such functionaries, and redirect it according to a general formula of 70% to the people and 30% to the state.

Bao as we know was a highly influential policy advocate, but was he equally successful or effective? He was clearly very bright, extremely knowledgeable, and bold in his thinking—and contemporaries respected him for these qualities—but he also strikes me as cripplingly naïve. In concrete situations, as we have seen, notably in his advisory role in managing the Nanjing dearth of 1814 and in his handling of local fiscal matters in Xinyu county in 1838, he was pretty much a failure. He was fascinated by numbers, to an extent that I have not seen matched by any other policy analyst of the mid-Qing era, but his approach to such numbers was, to say the least, cavalier. And his foundational confidence

⁵³ Bao, “Da zuzi Meng Kai shu,” dated DG 26/5/24, in *Quanji*, 234–36.

that the productivity of Chinese agriculture (both per-capita and per-acre) could be continually increased by attentive management was, I think it is fair to say, misplaced.

Bao Shichen's adult life and writings span the years between two major crises: the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition at the turn of the nineteenth century (the generation of reform writers such as Hong Liangji, Yan Ruyi, Tao Zhu, and—a bit later—Wei Yuan), and the great mid-century rebellions (the generation of Hu Linyi, Zeng Guofan, and—a bit later—Feng Guifen).⁵⁴ His writings over this half-century consistently display his sympathy for the rural producer, and also his deep concern with the financial well-being of the state. The latter concern was much more deeply felt among the later generation of reformers than among the earlier one, and on this score Bao was somewhat ahead of his time. So too were his constant efforts to root out exploitative middlemen between the producers and the state, a long-time concern of *jingshi*-minded officials, but a genuine obsession of those in the mid-nineteenth century. If the continuities in Bao's writings are striking, however, so too is the gradual decline from the utopian optimism of his youth, in the heady era of the “Jiaqing restoration,” to the dejected perseverance of his later years. Writing in 1846, he found both the exploitation of the livelihoods of the people (*minsheng*) and the exhaustion of state finances (*guoji*) to be more severe than ever, and worsening every day.⁵⁵ In spite of having enjoyed enormous influence and some notable practical policy successes, by the midpoint of the nineteenth century the problems seemed all too familiar, and the things that concerned him had only gotten worse rather than better.

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⁵⁴ Feng Tianyu draws out Bao's significance as the single figure most exemplifying this transition from the intellectual concerns of the high Qing to the muscular statecraft of the mid-nineteenth century. See Feng, “Daoguang Xianfeng nianjian jingshi xuepai,” 138–51.

⁵⁵ *Quanji*, 234–36.

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