

*Conflicting Counsels to Confuse the Age. A Documentary Study of Political Economy in Qing China, 1644–1840.* By HELEN DUNSTAN. Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies, No. 73. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1996. 363 pp. \$50.00.

*Conflicting Counsels to Confuse the Age* by Helen Dunstan explores the role of the Qing imperial state in the economy from 1644 to 1840. Using the translation and analysis of key primary source texts, the author seeks to provide specialists and nonspecialists with a detailed treatment of Qing government involvement in specific economic and fiscal issues that bear on the imperial state's long-standing and pivotal responsibility for "nourishing the people" (*yangmin*), particularly matters related to grain accessibility and food supply. Although her stated aim is modest—to clarify the issues and terms of debate on these questions—her primary concern is to explore the tensions between two opposing approaches to these issues: direct state interventionism versus noninterventionism which relied on private economic institutions in China's commercial economy, such as market mechanisms, to ensure popular subsistence. The author uses the term "economic liberalism" to describe the noninterventionist position which she carefully defines to avoid inappropriate Western political and social associations with it, and she restricts its use "to cases in which advocacy of nonintervention demonstrably rested on at least a rudimentary argument of the sufficiently beneficial working of a market mechanism" (p. 8). Although she cautions her readers against over-interpretation of the fragmentary evidence respecting noninterventionist views about the benefits of market mechanisms, her thesis is that a "nascent Chinese economic liberalism," built on indigenous roots, was apparent in the 1740s, particularly with reference to monetary and grain supply issues, that was more advanced and influential than had been the case in the past (p. 332).

The author's exploration of Qing interventionist and noninterventionist arguments is handled in a refreshingly detailed and lucid way, by current standards of scholarly presentation. She provides a detailed treatment of seven key issues related to popular subsistence with a chapter devoted to each. Each chapter includes an introductory essay that contextualizes the issue and explicates the text of five to six translations of Qing documents that relate to it, followed by the translated text. The seven topics include: (1) state activism in facilitating the logistical transfer of grain supplies to drought-prone regions in the Shaanxi-Shanxi border region where the Fen and Wei rivers converge on the Yellow River; (2) doubts about the wisdom of state management of grain reserves, the granary system, and the provision of welfare to famine refugees; (3) state reluctance to intervene in the private economy to redress the inequalities in wealth and the tendency to place greater responsibility on the wealthy to manage and provide grain relief; (4) fiscal policy respecting state investment, profit-making, and extractive taxation; (5) the value of prohibitions on liquor and yeast-making to increase grain stocks for food supply; (6) differing approaches to the storage and marketing of grain surpluses, essential for food supply; and (7) Qing commercial policy and the development of a market consciousness that reflected a positive view of the benefits of the spontaneous operation of private economic institutions.

These topics are arranged to show the early indigenous origins of the imperial state's responsibility for popular subsistence, the multiplicity and complexity of issues related to this question in the Qing period, and the growth of a liberal, noninterventionist approach in the mid-eighteenth century. The study culminates in

a provocative concluding essay that makes tentative interpretations about the nature and significance of the noninterventionist, or liberal, approach to the economy in the Qing period and discusses further the appropriateness of applying the term “economic liberalism” to the Qing experience.

The study has a number of strengths that make it a very important contribution to our understanding of Qing stewardship of the economy in matters related to popular subsistence and livelihood. It is particularly strong in its treatment of the Yongzheng-Qianlong transition in the 1730s and 1740s when the interventionist approach gave way to a more restrained, noninterventionist one. The author does an excellent job of drawing together and synthesizing important studies by Japanese and Chinese scholars, and she does not subordinate exposition of evidential detail to interpretive overviews that often mask important aspects of this key issue in Chinese political economy. In a period when scholarship often emphasizes sweeping interpretations and overviews at the expense of detailed argument and when deconstruction tends to diminish the importance of careful historical reconstruction, Dunstan’s study is indeed noteworthy. Moreover, the presentation of actual translations reveals the wide-ranging and innovative character of Qing administrative problem-solving, its style of political advocacy, and its practical orientation, thus providing the reader with important insights into the practical operation of Qing government.

The study loses something of its sharpness and clarity of focus in the concluding chapter, “Sprouts of Liberalism” (pp. 327–33), when the author veers away from her systematic presentation of the interplay of interventionist and noninterventionist themes in Qing stewardship of the economy and focuses instead on further qualification and justification of her use of the term “Chinese economic liberalism.” Even though this reviewer, in general, finds problematic the use of Western terms to describe aspects of the Chinese historical experience, Dunstan has satisfactorily defined and restricted her use of the term in the preface (p. 8), so that further discussion of the term in the conclusion is unnecessary. Instead, more attention might have been given to drawing together the threads of her penetrating analysis and interpreting their implications in Chinese political-economic thought.

These critical observations, however, do not diminish the excellence and importance of this study for an understanding of Qing political economy. Its clear accessible presentation of complex issues makes this study of great interest for specialist and nonspecialist alike, and it is regrettable that it is not published in paperback because of its suitability for upper-level undergraduate and graduate courses. One looks forward to the completion of Dunstan’s study of state policy toward the grain trade and popular subsistence in mid-eighteenth-century China and her projected study of Chinese economic thought from the eleventh to the early nineteenth century.

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*Inflation and Investment Controls in China: The Political Economy of Central-Local Relations during the Reform Era.* By YASHENG HUANG. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. \$59.95 (cloth).

In *Inflation and Investment Control in China*, Yasheng Huang tackles a vexing question for students of China’s post-Mao political economy: has administrative