

CHINESE INTELLECTUAL THOUGHT IN EARLY QING DYNASTY: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF GU YANWU

DIANA-ELENA VEREȘ

Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Cluj-Napoca

diana.veres@ubbcluj.ro

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ORCID: 0009-0005-7568-6080

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Abstract: Seventeenth-century China was a period of profound upheaval and transformation, marked most prominently by the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty in 1644, following the entry of Manchu troops into Beijing. This transition not only redefined the political landscape but also generated a deep cultural and moral crisis within Chinese society. The ascension of a foreign ruling class of Manchu origin was met with resistance and unease among the Han Chinese, who struggled to reconcile the loss of the Ming with the legitimacy of the new rulers. This era of uncertainty and disruption challenged long-standing intellectual and social norms, prompting a reevaluation of cultural identity, governance, and moral principles. Among these figures, Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) stands out as a pivotal thinker who sought to address the intellectual stagnation of his time. His critique of Neo-Confucianism was especially significant, as he rejected its overreliance on abstract metaphysical speculation, which he deemed detached from the practical realities of governance and everyday life. Instead, Gu Yanwu advocated for a return to classical Confucian principles, emphasizing empirical study, moral integrity, and practical application of knowledge. This article examines Gu Yanwu's contributions to Chinese thought, leaving a lasting impact on the trajectory of Chinese scholarship and philosophy in the early Qing period.

Keywords: *Gu Yanwu; hybrid model theory; unity in functional diversity; tianxia; scientific methodology;*

Introduction

Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) is considered to be the most important philosopher of the 17th century. He belonged to opposition circles and was a member of *The Society of Renewal*. Throughout his life, driven by an interest in economics, he traveled to the land of North China with the intention of examining the advantages that different parts of the country could offer in the event of a war of resistance. These journeys were also a good opportunity to enrich his knowledge of geography, history and economics, and to develop his own philosophical ideas. These thoughts

are recounted in his works, one of which is *Tianxia junguo libing shu- On benefit and faults of the empire's local administration*, in which he deals with geography and economics, discussing the positive and negative aspects of the decisions made by Ming government, decisions that lead to collapse of the dynasty. One of the characteristics of his thought is his focus on efficiency, which in his conception is associated with action, the two being inseparable. (GERNET 1985, 199).

His best known work, *Rizhi lu - Records of daily knowledge*, is a diary of daily notes from his travels, with various themes: classical texts, history, psychology or morality. In addition to his extraordinary contribution to the various fields mentioned above, Gu Yanwu remains an important figure in the history of his time, not least because of the school of textual criticism which he founded and which was to celebrate its jubilee in the 18th century. He proposes a new conception, this time scientific, drawing on epigraphy, archaeology, historical phonetics and geography. It is because of this that Gu is considered the true founder of the school of textual and historical criticism, but unlike his contemporaries, he remained in direct contact with the social reality of the time. Thus, after the consolidation of Manchu's power, Gu, like Wang Fuzi and other contemporary thinkers, devoted himself to writing with a view to proposing a solution to bring a sovereign-savior to the helm of the empire, in the hope of restoring Chinese sovereignty. In his works, he speaks of the spirit of rigor which must be confused with the study of the Classics, and considers it necessary to return to the ethical and practical demands of Confucian philosophy. According to this, he considers it necessary *to aim at a comprehensive teaching through the ancient writings and to have a sense of shame*. (ON-CHO 2013, 59).

The study involves intellectual honesty through critical analysis, and shame, in Gu's conception, is the main aspect to be taken into account in any action individuals undertake in order to be moral. Of all kinds of knowledge, Gu emphasizes the primary importance of historical knowledge, which he sees as the tool that ensures concrete learning, moves away from subjectivity in judgment, and provides an objective perspective on study. Historical knowledge also questions sources in a systematic way. (CHENG 2001, 444-446). There are thus some steps that are necessary to the study: to the first step, Gu contributes with his critical studies of the dictionaries *Shouwen jiezi* and *The Five Treatises on Phonology*. Once familiarized with these basic concepts, the study can be directed towards the problems of authenticity of texts, a topic which, is discussed at length in *Rizhi lu* by Gu. In *Rizhi lu*, Gu seeks to understand the reasons for the fall of the Ming dynasty and defines the defect of the feudal system of antiquity as *concentration of power at the local level*, while the imperial administrative system is defined as *concentration of power at the top*. The political ideal *would give centralized administration the essential virtue of feudal organization* and allow for a decentralization of the administrative system, leaving more initiative to local officials and people of merit. Gu claims, like Huang Zongxi, that sovereigns consider the empire to be their own property; he also supports the idea of the possibility of political reform which could only be carried out on the basis of a moral revival of the population, based on a major importance given to education.

As for philosophy, his thoughts are in line with his scientific ideas, criticizing the notions of *human nature* and *spirit*, which had become the main subject of discussion since the Song era. He preaches a return to the real man and recommends openness to all forms of science. (CHENG 2001, 447).

Political philosophy and Confucianism

The collapse of the Ming Dynasty and the conquest by the Manchu-origin Qing Dynasty not only led to a series of discontent among the Han ethnic population but also a revolt within the intellectual class, represented by Gu Yanwu. For Han intellectuals of Chinese origin, the rise of a non-Han, Manchu-origin dynasty in this particular context was equivalent to the loss of society, of the world, of what encompasses *tianxia* (the world under heaven). The cultural differences between the two ethnicities were significant, both in terms of political structure and the manner of governance, with the Qing Dynasty emphasizing the use of culture as well as coercion to maintain peace in society, not to mention the major differences in clothing traditions, which were one of the symbols of Han identity. (GAO 2013, 107-108). During this period, when early Qing emerged, a philosophical movement appeared, initiated by scholars who believed that addressing misinterpretations of the Confucian canon and critically examining Neo-Confucianism could potentially contribute to the reconstruction of a harmonious society in China. Gu Yanwu chose not to serve the Qing, dedicating his life to research and promoting empirical investigation and scientific methodology, although his writings were essential for the scholars of that period, as well. (MA 2024, 39). Gu Yanwu's refusal to serve the Qing Dynasty is also reflected in his criticism of other scholars of the time, who, after having served the Ming Dynasty, aligned themselves with the new Qing rulers. However, once rejected, these scholars began delivering speeches filled with loyalty, demonstrating opportunism and, once again, revealing their strong commitment to their own principles (ZHANG 2013, 161). However, this demonstrates Gu Yanwu's unwavering stance on moral integrity and loyalty to his own values, in contrast to the behavior of those who adapted to the shifting political landscape, emphasizing his principled resistance to the Qing Dynasty. The essential characteristic of Gu Yanwu's political thought is his attempt to combine two antagonistic systems in order to govern the empire, namely, the ancient model, specifically the feudal system with the military model. The ancient model is the familial, hierarchical, aristocratic, local type, while the military model is bureaucratic, meritocratic and centralistic. Gu devised a constitution with a combined model for the early Qing dynasty out of a desire to solve the problems he identified as the two types of despotism: local and central. Historians who study the political aspects of history benefit from Gu's hybrid system, which is due to the evolution of Chinese political thought as opposed to the Western constitutionalist traditions from which he drew his inspiration.

Analyzing the causes of the collapse of the Ming Dynasty and seeking to indirectly influence the new governance, primarily through his writings, Gu Yanwu

reevaluates the *fengjian* system, a system originating from the Zhou Dynasty that involved the distribution of territories to nobles supporting the king. It was associated with moral governance and social harmony, which stemmed from Confucian philosophy. In his analysis of the political issues China faced with the establishment of the new dynasty, Gu refers to the *fengjian* system, reinterpreting it both to critique the new dynasty and to propose it as an integral part of the new governance, aiming to restore social order. (WYNN 2024, 82-84).

Gu did not develop his ideas in a vacuum based solely on Chinese scholarly thought. He was a thinker who immersed himself in textual traditions, but at the same time he was a man grounded in the present, who traveled in order to know and understand more of the outside world. In other words, the hybrid model of constitution that Gu proposes is nothing but a reflection of the problems of the early Qing dynasty, and his attempt to offer practical solutions from an intellectual's perspective (BROWN 2011, 45).

Gu was concerned with both local and central sources of despotism, which he noted in an objective way. Thus, he attempts to reconcile the increased decentralization of authority, the essence of feudal-type reform, with the need for a central, institutionalized order in the modern system. The *hybrid model theory* promoted by this scholar was closely linked to his critique of *rule by law*, written from the perspective of Confucian idealism and legalistic pragmatism. From the Confucian perspective, Gu attacks the regulatory methods of bureaucratic subordinate control. Suffering from local power himself, he yearns for a strong state that can rein in tyrannical local elites. Thus Gu's ideas of central authority and local power, compared with the rule of man and rule by law, become a complicated mixture of antagonistic principles designed to solve the problem of the two types of despotism.

From Gu's perspective, the problem of despotic behavior in the local society was so severe at that time that he believed that the villagers, in particular, would have been much better off without these educated elites. Gu's criticism of local despotism was not just abstract. He experienced the abuses of landowners who exploited peasants. He also proposes a solution to the problem of the two types of despotism, namely the mixing of the two rival systems. He believes that it is only by delegating central authority that the ruler can implement this plan for the smooth running of social life. He sharply criticizes the nature of abusive power in administration caused by over-reliance on rule by law as a position of authority infiltrating the regulations of officials who interpret, apply and manipulate the law to their liking. The irony of bureaucratic centralization was that it stopped the emperor's control over his ministries. The resulting alienation of the state from the real conditions of local society led to fundamental political dilemmas in the late imperial period. (DELURY 2013, 2-4).

At the same time, Gu Yanwu's political influence did not cease with the establishment of the Qing Dynasty. Although he did not hold an official title at court, he maintained connections with various officials from both the former Ming Dynasty and those active within the Qing Dynasty. He also wrote letters and expressed his opinions on important issues in Chinese society. His perspective, grounded

in thorough studies and scientific methodology, which involved consulting multiple sources before formulating a hypothesis, was particularly relevant to the Qing dynasty's officials. An example of this is Gu Yanwu's contribution regarding the number of licentiates during the Qing Dynasty.

The licentiate degree at this time was highly significant in civil examinations, marking the starting point for entering the bureaucracy and scholar class. Observing the increasing number and popularization of this examination, based on his research, estimated that the number of licentiates could reach approximately 500,000. By the Qing period, Chinese society regarded civil examinations as the primary tool for selecting officials and, at the same time, identifying individuals who, due to their educational and moral preparation, could be useful in the society's development. However, as Gu pointed out, and highlighting the lack of moral values among scholars who sought the licentiate degree not to capitalize on their studies, but for the benefits it brought—such as wearing the scholar's robe, exemption from hard or agricultural labor—this system became more of a burden to society. (ZHANG, KIM 2024, 7). In other words, Gu points to the decay occurring in a society where *tianxia* (the world under heaven) is ignored, with a greater focus on political ambitions.

With the criticism of the loss of the world caused by the Qing Dynasty, concerned with providing an alternative in order to avoid the complete destruction of the world and Chinese identity, Gu Yanwu creates a model called the mixed system, or *unity in functional diversity*, *tong yi er zhi shu*. The source of this idea comes primarily from Zhu Xi's theory of unity of principle and diversity of manifestations, knowing that Gu Yanwu was an intellectual of the time, he was familiar with classical writings and launched criticism of Neo-Confucianism and the perspective of their representatives, as well as appreciation and interpretation of the primary sources represented by the classics. From Zhu Xi, Gu Yanwu adopts the idea that a universe in which a single principle gives rise to manifold phenomena, these subsequently return to the source, to the single principle. Transposing this philosophical idea to the political sphere, Gu concludes that unity in functional diversity is the optimal way to find the balance between centralization and diversity, as is reproduced below.

This system, later known as unity in functional diversity, involves the analysis of the relationship between centralization and local administration, which consists of two very important aspects, and which later echoed in modern China, namely: *tong wei yi - centralized unity*, which implies that the supreme authority is concentrated in the central government in order not to spoil continuity, and at the same time, *zhi ze shu - administrative diversity*, which is that management and administration should be left to local governments, thus encouraging each area's own identity and, from its own perspective, efficient government in terms of the specific problems of each area. According to Gu, the emperor, in order to ensure that he holds supreme power, must delegate authority to the people, with the aim of returning it to them, since a concentration of power in the hands of one man, in this case the emperor, leads to decline and endangers the state.

The unity in functional diversity proposed by Gu has two valences: the relationship between the center and the local, which assumes the concentration of power at the center and the management authority assigned to the regions, a model that guarantees a balance between central government and local administration, and on the other hand, the relationship between the state and society, which implies that although the state is the supreme authority, it should not interfere in the management of the affairs of social groups, in order to avoid the domination of society. Society, or the world, by preserving moral and ethical values, contributes, in Gu's view, to the formation of laws, laws which merely reflect the character and will of the people. (CAO 2023, 44-46).

Gu Yanwu proposes a political reform, combining the feudal systems of duchies with county systems, taking over the model developed in the Western Zhou Dynasty, and aiming to avoid the monopolization of power. From his point of view, this division of power would create a system that would meet all the requirements of the times, especially considering the political and cultural crisis that was established with the coming of the new dynasty. The philosophical perspective that lies in the shadow of this reasoning proposed by Gu is based on the way he sees and perceives human nature: he insists on the inherent selfish features of human nature, in opposition to the system that supports the fact that ordinary people must be forced himself to work for the good of the rulers, but in reality they were focused on his own needs. From this perspective, Gu is in an antagonistic relationship with Confucian thought, according to which human nature is good, but is perverted by the political, social conditions that contribute to this aspect. However, Gu believes that love for family is the only inherent emotion that human beings are born with, and that it has a normative role. (WU 2017, 254-255).

Gu Yanwu's philosophical perspective on *tianxia* and *guo*

Tianxia – the world, which is an ancient concept first appearing in the *Classic of Histories*, defines all that is under heaven, specifically, the inheritance received by the son of heaven, namely the territory or domain ruled by him. *Tianxia*, according to Chinese scholars, is not limited to a physical space, but designates the king's land, this space described by humanistic attributes. According to this premise, *tianxia* cannot exist without land, and civilization in turn needs a territory on which to evolve and develop (ZONG 2024, 6). Thus, *tianxia* has a dual nature, involving both the space under the sky and the cultural context it invokes. With the passage of time, *tianxia* transformed and evolved from a geographical space, into a cultural and institutional space, guided by rules introduced by the legendary kings of the Chinese space, kings who established a set of rules and principles originating from the sphere of ethics and morality, *tianxia* becoming a space conducive to order, an evolved place, situated on the border between the physical and the transcendent. With the passage of time, *tianxia* acquired other valences, being influenced by the dominant currents of the reference era. Thus, starting from the definition of *the space under the sky*, we reach the period of the Warring States,

which equates the term with the state, followed by the later dynasties, for which *tianxia* and *state* became synonymous. Subsequently, the term *state* becomes, as pointed out earlier, synonymous with the concept of *tianxia* and at the same time having characteristics that are first of all historical, then ethical and moral, and last but not least, political. (WANG 2020, 17-18).

Gu Yanwu distinguished between the approach of the newly established Qing Dynasty regarding the notion of the *state* and the traditional Confucian perspective. The Qing Dynasty conceptualized the state as something that belonged to the individual rulers, whereas Gu Yanwu analyzed this issue through a Confucian lens, asserting that the world inherently belongs to the people. In this view, the ruler and the people are seen as equals, with the monarch's authority derived from the people's collective will and moral governance (ZONG 2024, 9). In *Rizhi lu*, Gu Yanwu examines the concept of a *lost state*, which is described as the transformation that occurs with the change of dynasties and governance.

According to Gu, the state is closely tied to the ruler. In this context, he criticizes the changes introduced by the Qing dynasty, citing numerous historical examples in which, despite the transfer of power to new sovereigns, the state itself was not lost. This was because ancestral temples, traditions, and the state's identity remained intact, and transitions occurred smoothly without atrocities against the population. The loss of the world (*tianxia*) signifies the sovereign's loss of authority; however, this does not necessarily imply the loss of the state as an identity. *Tianxia* is a concept encompassing not only the political realm but also a system of values and an order that sustains the well-being of the people and unites the entire spiritual sphere. The world (*tianxia*) is far more significant than the state (*guo*), as protecting the world inherently includes safeguarding the state and its territory. According to Gu, the protection of the territory (*guo*) is the responsibility of the sovereign, while the preservation of the world (*tianxia*) is a moral duty shared by every individual. (PAN 2020, 94). This duty aims to maintain social order and uphold cultural values. Individuals are obligated to protect the world to the best of their abilities, as this indirectly contributes to safeguarding the state as a territorial entity.

Gu thus advocates for a political reform in which feudal principles are integrated into the centralized system. This reform leads to a political ideal where the people hold power over the world. For Gu, the loss of the world represents a critical juncture at which humanity's values and principles of justice are obliterated, resulting in chaos and decline. In such circumstances, individuals are no longer guided by virtues and values, becoming akin to animals. The foundation of the world (*tianxia*) lies in moral values such as humanity and righteousness, which Gu considers the essence of an evolved human being. The preservation of the world is achieved through education, morality, and discipline. Gu derives these principles from his study and return to the exploration of Confucian values as presented in the *Analects*, as illustrated by Confucius's disciples. These elements form the cornerstone of his vision for a just and harmonious society. (WANG 2020, 18-20). Gu Yanwu's analysis in *Rizhi lu* offers a thoughtful perspective on the complexities of

political transitions and a gentle appeal for the importance of preserving moral and cultural continuity amidst dynastic change. His distinction between the concepts of *guo* (state) and *tianxia* (world) suggests a more nuanced understanding of governance that goes beyond mere territorial control.

Therefore, *tianxia* can be understood as a moral and spiritual order, implying a collective responsibility for upholding cultural values and social harmony. His argument draws attention to the potential risks of placing undue emphasis on political authority at the expense of moral principles. It cautions against the dangers of dehumanization and chaos that can arise from a lack of ethical foundations. Furthermore, Gu's proposal to incorporate feudal principles into centralized governance represents an innovative approach to striking a balance between traditional values and institutional reforms. This vision not only reaffirms the importance of Confucian virtues in sustaining civilization but also anticipates modern debates about the relationship between state power, moral accountability and individual agency in maintaining societal order.

Gu Yanwu and the reinterpretation of history

Gu Yanwu remained in Chinese history not only for his political and philosophical thought, but also for the fact that he provided a model for the approach to historical research. As a connoisseur and scholar of Chinese history, he was particularly inspired by the work of Sima Qian, but also by that of Sima Guang and his disciples, who continued this tradition. The reason behind this perspective was that he considered cultural grounding to be a prerequisite for rigorous and at the same time valuable research. Gu, himself an adherent of his principle of studying with firm determination, studied all areas within the humanities, including and exploring practical learning, thus not relying on theory alone, and investigating, as he himself asserted, the causes and factors that led to the changes that marked China's historical course.

Gu also insists on the importance of primary sources and their comparison with existing texts in order to lend veracity to the research and to avoid omissions. Thus, his role is a defining one in filling a significant series of historical gaps, as he filled these omissions with his own discoveries. Even in the case of the Confucian classics, he expressed his critical view that literature, once subjected to scientific analysis and comparison, can have historical value, and thus criticized the exclusion of some of the *Shijing* – *The Book of Songs*, poems excluded by the Confucians, who thus illustrated only those parts of society that corresponded to the ethical principles promoted by Confucian canons. According to the sources, Gu used the method of comparing the sources he had identified precisely to emphasize either distortions or missing information.

Gu's historical research was not limited only to the consultation of written documents, but also to other primary sources, such as tombstones, monuments, inscriptions, to confirm or deny the veracity of the texts, considering that in order to obtain a historical research as close as possible to reality, an integrated approach

was important, which implied the inclusion of studies such as geography, phonology, archaeology, and the like, which led to the development of textual criticism. (SANTANGELO 1982, 150-152).

With the passage of time, Gu Yanwu has formulated his own view of Chinese history, based on his lifelong research and brings with it a new perspective on Chinese history. With an emphasis on filling in the gaps and a critical and skeptical approach to existing texts, Gu accepts the traditional, Confucian canon, but to explain the cyclical nature of history, he comes up with a new approach, which involves comparison. In this regard, analogy is used to describe the Ming dynasty as a year made up of four seasons: in the first period it was defined through the prism of virtues, characterized by peace and dedication to civil society, but the second stage was defined by the rise of taxes, the disunity of society and the emergence of competition. The third stage involves the intensification of disorder, with the last stage being defined by imbalances and chaos. He draws an analogy in which he introduces the moral framework which is meant to regulate interpersonal relations and which, when neglected, leads to decay. Just as he expressed the difference between the *state - guo* and the *world/society - tianxia*, in the same way, he explains success and failure through the importance that the epoch gives to the governance of virtues and moral values, considering moral habits as the factor that can change the destiny of a dynasty, supported by other values such as erudition acquired through education and the dignity of individuals, believing that intellectuals can prevent the decay of society (SANTANGELO 1982, 162-165).

Although his perspective on history was one that was dependent on classical Confucian values, again with reference to the primary sources of the Confucian canon, Gu Yanwu advocates a historical perspective based on traditionalism, but does not deny the new models of interpreting history presented by his contemporaries. However, although he is open to change, believing that changes can be neutral or positive, he reinforces the idea that some concepts are unchangeable, referring here to customs, by which we should understand the foundations of Chinese civilization, deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy. (SANTANGELO 1982, 168-170). Even so, his contribution is a particularly important one, as he demonstrates the relevance of a scientific methodology for Chinese history, pursuing objectivity and emphasizing the practical function of historiography.

Conclusions

Gu Yanwu is widely regarded as having made a notable contribution to the development of Chinese political and philosophical thought. His theories continue to resonate with contemporary society. During the Ming and early Qing dynasties, his thought placed an emphasis on the individual's role in contributing to national prosperity. This principle continues to be relevant in the context of globalization and the political and economic challenges currently facing China. In the context of rapid change and international interdependence, Gu Yanwu's idea that every citizen has an active role in maintaining national order and well-being could be seen

as a powerful call for individual and collective responsibility.

Gu also placed great emphasis on the importance of adapting to historical and social change, an idea that finds particular resonance in the context of contemporary China, which is facing fundamental economic and political transformations. His philosophy has emphasized pragmatic reforms and the need to face external challenges with national unity, and these principles could potentially serve as a guiding light for China in consolidating a coherent domestic vision and enhancing an active role on the global stage. Furthermore, his ethical thinking, which places great emphasis on personal virtue and self-discipline, is of great importance in the construction of a society based on respect and shared responsibility.

These values are essential in the creation of a sustainable political and social culture. In today's world, where traditional values may sometimes appear to be in conflict with external influences and the rapid pace of change, Gu Yanwu's theories can offer a way to reconcile tradition and modernity. They provide a framework for balancing the conservatism necessary to preserve cultural identity with openness to innovation. As a result, his principles continue to have a significant impact on China's reform and development processes, as well as on how societies can respond to global crises and challenges.

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