

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOURISH THE PEOPLE: THE STATE CIVILIAN GRANARY SYSTEM IN CHINA, 1650–1850, by Pierre-Etienne Will and R. Bin Wong. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991. 607 pp.

For nearly one hundred fifty years, food shortages have been so remote from our daily horizon that we have great difficulty imagining a world in which hardly five to seven years passed between one and the next. Still, it is that world and not our own that humanity has known throughout its history. One does not get used to famine. In every climate and in every period, famine has been a dreaded scourge, owing to its destructive effects on the social order. “As to the people, if they have not a certain livelihood, it follows that they will not have a fixed heart. And if they have not a fixed heart, there is nothing which they will not do, in the way of self-abandonment, of moral deflection, of depravity, and of wild license.” The citation from Mencius, which figures prominently at the very beginning of *Nourish the People* (p. 2), does not apply to China alone. The same fears are found in the West, as they are undoubtedly found in all societies that are sufficiently hierarchical to include an elite that is aware of what it owes to its social position. No authority can avoid the question if it has the slightest interest in staying in place.

“Nourishing the people” was—and still is, though in different forms—an ineluctable clause in the social contract. Often tacit, it is none the less compelling.

The interest of the Chinese example as presented by Pierre-Etienne Will and R. Bin Wong lies nevertheless in its uniqueness, in terms of its dimensions and its visibility. Throughout the two thousand years of our era, there have been a few states larger than China. There have been no states more populous or more enduring, or any that boasted such a centralized and solidly organized administration.

In Europe, provisioning policies functioned essentially at the local level. Emerging in the Middle Ages in Italy’s more or less independent city-states, they spread progressively through the cities of Switzerland, Germany, and elsewhere. In France, the great concern of kings was keeping Paris supplied

with food; the other cities of the kingdom (Lyon, for example), and to an even greater extent the countryside, had to manage more or less on their own. In this respect the central authority of the old regime behaved essentially as if it were just one local authority among many, holding de facto rather than legal sway over the others. The cities and regions threatened by famine did not hesitate to hold onto their grain by force any more than the king hesitated to compel them to release their stores to keep Paris supplied. Only in the nineteenth century was an overall policy instituted on the national level. In China, the concept of such a policy goes back to the early centuries of the empire, although the lack of documents sometimes prevents us from appreciating the details. In the Qing period it is attested by an incomparable wealth of documents. *Nourish the People* is the result of vast efforts to sort through that documentation.

The book is in four parts. The first, by R. Bin Wong, gives a historical account of the storage system of the Qing from 1650 to 1850. After a period of start-up and development lasting until about 1735, the system went through a peak period of some fifty years; then, in the 1780s, it entered a phase of growing difficulty. In 1850, it was still functioning, more or less; the collapse came later. The second part of the book, by Pierre-Etienne Will, analyzes the way the system worked, from the physical preservation of stored grain to stock management and accounting and the control of management by the central administration. One chapter is devoted to the difficulties encountered in interpreting the accounts and statistics. The third part, for which the principal authors called upon several collaborators (James Lee, Jean C. Oi, and Peter C. Perdue) sheds the light of regional studies on the north (Shandong), the center (Hunan), and the south-west (Yunnan and Guizhou). Finally, in the fourth part, R. Bin Wong attempts to evaluate the role of the system of reserve supplies within the general framework of Chinese political economy, and he sketches out a comparison with analogous phenomena in the rest of the world.

At the beginning of the Empire, taxes were collected in kind, by and large, but this had already ceased to be the case when the Qing came to power. Coinage and commerce played about as important a role in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China as they did in Europe. The problems to be resolved if the system of grain reserves was to work properly were also roughly the same. The imperial administration sought not only to prevent famines (the Ming dynasty seemed to have settled for that), but also to compensate for harvest fluctuations and to stabilize prices, a delicate task that demanded careful reflection. In the West, only certain city-states had the same ambition, but under simpler conditions. Each city-state could in fact consider the external world as a reservoir to be exploited in an emergency, without any

precautions or limits except those of its own supremacy in terms of buying power and diplomacy. If massive grain purchases created food shortages in certain export regions, the city-states did not have to be concerned, since those regions were not under their jurisdiction. The Chinese state, for its part, did not have the same sort of reserve supplies outside its own borders. When famine threatened in one region, the state could of course send in grain from other, better-supplied districts, but only within certain limits, since it was responsible for those districts as well.

Under such conditions it was impossible to consider trade as a panacea, as the Physiocrats for example did in France. Trade does come into the picture, but within the more general framework of a policy of foresight, in which stockpiling at various levels was essential. Public stockpiling is certainly necessary—in the famous “ever-normal granaries”—but it in no way excludes community stockpiling and private stockpiling, not managed by the central administration although under its more or less direct control. Stockpiling is in certain respects an instrument of trade. The whole question is how to make the overall system work as harmoniously as possible, minimizing the ups and downs instead of amplifying them. It appears that the Qing administration managed to do just this for nearly a century. If this result could be confirmed, in particular by the study of the famines of the period (or their absence), it would represent an exceptional success in terms of its scale.

In China as in Europe, the intervention of public authorities in the subsistence of the population had numerous and vociferous adversaries whose arguments often sound pretty much the same. Of course there were (there always are) incompetent and corrupt civil servants, and inopportune or badly managed interventions that made things worse. But private commerce has no special privilege exempting it from negligence, error, and embezzlement. The real question is whether freedom of trade has to be absolute and limitless, as the Physiocrats demanded and as the neoliberals demand even today, or whether it must be exercised within certain limits and according to certain rules—which thus presuppose the existence of a higher authority to enforce them. The answer is not in doubt. Unlimited freedom in the grain trade has never been anything but utopian, even in our day. And the traders most hostile to state intervention are not the last to request it when things go badly for them. The catch is that the state has no doctrine to guide it, for to the extent that an explicit economic doctrine exists (in the West), it confines itself to advising the state to do nothing at all. Under such conditions, it is hardly astonishing that state intervention should so often be inept.

Qing China may well not have had as explicit a body of doctrine as contemporary Europe does. The success of the reserve supply system left room

for numerous adaptations and reforms, which show that serious thought was being given to these issues within the central administration. For example, how far can one go in stockpiling money rather than grain without running too great a risk? When and how should reserve supplies be reconstituted so as to avoid raising prices too high? And how can the volume of the reserve supply in each region be modulated in relation to the transportation systems from which it benefits? The Qing reserve supply system did not result from the rigid application of a dogmatic ideology, but from constantly renewed efforts to think pragmatically in order to solve a problem that it would have been suicidal to ignore. The Chinese experience has universal value, and Will and Wong's book, which makes that experience accessible, is therefore of interest for the history of economics as well as for Sinology.

FRANÇOIS SIGAUT
Centre de recherches historiques
EHESS
54, Boulevard de Raspail
75006 Paris
France
