

# FROM PHYSIOCRACY TO A NEW PRODUCTIVE RURAL CHINA

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This paper examines the reception and impacts of Western ideas of the “agrarian” in China. In particular, it traces how the agrarian philosophy of the Physiocrats traveled across space and time and how this line of thinking influenced the Chinese urban-rural transformation at the turn of the twentieth century. The paper examines Adam Smith’s interpretation of the Physiocracy, and how the agrarian idea was embedded in the liberal school of political economy. By tracing the significant role of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Liang Qichao in cross-cultural borrowing, the paper reveals the Western “agrarian” roots within the concept of “local self-government.” As the paper suggests, it was this line of thought that influenced the state regeneration in early modern China. As a representative case, Zhang Jian’s village-ism and his agrarian practice in Nantong are presented as the epitome of the local self-government movement in the early twentieth century, which marked one of the first rural modernization efforts in China. By tracing the intellectual transmission of the idea of the “agrarian,” the paper aims to unpack the connotation of the “agrarian modern” as an alternative to the mainstream model of high-dense cities and depopulated countryside. This paper offers a perspective to situate the urban-rural transformation in early modern China in a global context without the conventional West-East divide.

**Keywords:** Agrarianism, agrarian modern, rural transformation, urban-rural continuum, China.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper grew out of an intellectual journey contemplating China in the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of foreign penetration and the fall of the Qing dynasty, it has become a widely received approach to read the whole century as part of a perennial search for modernity. In the spatial domain, this century-long endeavor of modernization is widely described as an urbanization process. However, history also witnessed moments when a few reformers repeatedly returned to their commitments to rural alternatives. Instead of focusing on the centralized schemes of city-making and industrial production, a series of reform projects indicated a shared belief that an agrarian Chinese modernity could be realized from the bottom up.

The agrarian reformers that I am referring to are a set of names loosely distributed across the political spectrum: Zhang Jian, Sun Yat-sen, Yan Yangchu, Tao Xingzhi, Liang Shuming, Zhou Zuoren, and Mao Zedong. Despite their hugely different political ideologies, they all shared an increasing, if not consistent, concern about the rural masses. They all noticed, though to varying degrees, the potential problems of a city-based modernization, and demonstrated a conviction that modern state-making in China had to start from the rural people and communities. For them, the agrarian reform was not simply urbanizing the countryside or making the hinterland modern in the same way as the cities. Instead, they saw distinct modernity from the potentially mobilized villages.

To be sure, we do not want to confuse these agrarian pursuits with any nostalgia for the rural idyllic. “Agrarian” in this paper refers specifically to a path to modernization that does not presuppose the mainstream mode of urbanization. Indeed, one might argue that the agrarian movements are deeply entrenched in China’s agricultural society, and thus profoundly influenced by a wide array of cultural traditions. And yet, it is equally critical to notice that the agrarian efforts in question were ultimately committed to new modes of production and governance that embraced values of science, technology, and democracy. Such ideas of the agrarian modern, though very much unknown to most Chinese by the turn of the century, had been widely disseminated in the West. The first school of modern agrarianism dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century, when a group of French economists, commonly known as the Physiocrats, built a

theory of the "rural economy." The very modern ideas behind the twentieth century Chinese agrarian movements were, to a great extent, an outcome of cross-cultural borrowing. To truly understand the agrarian efforts in China, a series of names are equally important: François Quesnay, Thomas Jefferson, Henry George, Fukuzawa Yukichi, John Dewey, Peter Kropotkin, Saneatsu Mushanokōji, Karl Marx, Karl Kautsky, and Vladimir Lenin.

Indeed, the space here does not allow us to cover all these chains of thoughts. Strategically, this paper shall focus on one major agrarian reform, and the history of ideas that took shape long before the reform project came into being. In particular, it traces how the agrarian philosophy of the Physiocrats was introduced to China, and how this line of thinking, which was incorporated into the local self-government movement, influenced the Chinese urban-rural transformation at the turn of the twentieth century.

## 1. FRANÇOIS QUESNAY AND A TRANSFORMING FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE

Any serious look at the school of the Physiocrats has to start from the historical context of eighteenth century France. Before Quesnay, Mercantilism had been the dominant school of economic thought for centuries (Gide and Rist 1915). They saw foreign trade as the primary source of wealth. The government was granted absolute rights to direct and regulate the whole process of trade. By the early eighteenth century, the huge debt and sharp decline of farm produce drove the kingdom into a remorseless financial system. Suffering from falling prices and heavy duties, the poor could barely make ends meet. Many landowners abandoned their property, leaving large tracts of arable lands wasted (Higg 1963).

The worrying condition of the late *ancien régime* began to draw criticism from economic writers at home and abroad. By the 1750s, the growing interest in the English political economy led to a famous debate over the grain trade. However, it was François Quesnay who effectually consolidated all these influences, and set up a school of agrarian philosophy. For Quesnay, curing the sickness of a state would require a thorough understanding of the "physiology of social order," and it was the objective economic law that would determine how wealth was to be distributed across different sections of society (Meek 1962). To make this "natural" economic order legible to others, Quesnay designed a chart, famously known as the *Tableau Économique* (Quesnay 1894). In the three columns of the Tableau, economic activities take the form of circular flows traveling between cultivators, proprietors, and manufacturers. Agriculture stands as the only sector capable of producing an annual surplus, with the other industries being "sterile." As Quesnay explained, the country's opulence would primarily depend on the extent to which the wealth absorbed by the right-hand column of the "sterile industries" could make its way back to the left. One of the highest priorities for the state was to dedicate a larger portion of capital to agriculture. To maximize the benefit of the "natural laws," economic activities should be freed from mercantile obstacles. A free grain trade and a simplified taxation system would be the key to relieving the burdens levied upon the poor peasantry.

By the late 1750s, Quesnay started to hold regular meetings at Versailles for a small group of persons sharing interests in the political economy. The meetings turned out to be an effective tool to popularize his ideas and earned him important disciples, such as Marquis de Mirabeau, who wrote extensively about Quesnay's theories, and Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, who edited Quesnay's writings and became the chief editor for the school's major periodicals (Higgs 1963). These efforts soon paid off. By the early 1760s, the liberal philosophy of the Physiocrats had generated huge impacts among the intellectuals. The two edicts enacted in 1762 and 1764 virtually put an end to any restrictions on the internal grain trade (McNally 1988).

And yet, the Physiocracy was not simply an economic doctrine solely focused on taxes and grain trade. As the school developed, it was increasingly confronted by the central question regarding state-society relations—the tensions between the interests of the liberalized individuals and the state welfare. As David McNally reminded us, the publication of *Philosophie rurale* in 1763 marked a turning point from which the political dimension of the Physiocracy became more visible (McNally 1988). For Quesnay, as for all the Physiocrats, the proper functioning of the economic laws would require a “well-ordered” institutional framework. While they all supported economic liberalism, they also agreed that a preexistent social arrangement would be the key to preventing self-centered individuals from tearing society apart (Quesnay 1915). For the Physiocrats, the best form of this social order was what they termed “legal despotism,” a centralized monarchy strictly checked by “the spirit of natural laws” (McNally 1988). Thus the two-fold and even seemingly paradoxical theory of the Physiocrats: on the one hand, they celebrated the individual right to property and the liberal pursuit of self-interest; on the other hand, they prioritized agricultural investment as opposed to commerce and manufacture, left little doubt about the monarchical system, and claimed that only a unified state could provide a pre-condition where the individual pursuits would contribute to the general welfare.

Both aspects of the physiocratic doctrine significantly influenced the French territory. Despite being an absolute monarchy, France in the *ancien régime* had been quite divided in many ways. Across the provinces were various systems of laws, taxation, and administration. For the Physiocrats, their agrarian ideal was to transform this fragmented territory into a unified kingdom grounded on the bedrock of agriculture. Not only did they directly contribute to the laws of free trade during the school's heyday, but the impact of their general theory also lingered long after Quesnay's death. From 1774 to 1776, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, who had been closely associated with the school, was appointed as Controller-General of Finances, and further carried the physiocratic political economy into practice (Higgs 1963). In 1775, he directed du Pont de Nemours to draft a memorandum examining the fragmented local government and proposing a “national regeneration” scheme for the king (du Pont 1913–23). For Turgot, it was due to the poorly organized administrative system that the individuals of the kingdom had little sense of their responsibility to the state. To develop a public spirit, Turgot proposed a standardized local administration system and a national council responsible for the education of the general masses (du Pont 1913–23). Although Turgot fell from power before he could put this in place, the idea of state-making, particularly in this memorandum, profoundly influenced the national territorial reorganization in the French Revolution (Higgs 1963; Drinkwater 2020). From 1789 to 1791, the National Assembly eliminated the traditional provincial boundaries and redivided the nation into 83 *départements* (figure 1). Unlike the old system, the *départements* were given similar size and the exact same institutions, with each further divided into districts, cantons, and communes. On the one hand, by dividing the nation into more than 44,000 communes, this system reconstructed a decentralized and interconnected rural-urban territory that celebrated a liberal economy and local autonomy (Woloch 1991). On the other hand, it effectually unified and standardized the preexistent regional varieties and offered a powerful channel through which the localities were subordinated to the state as a whole.

## 2. PHYSIOCRACY INTERPRETED AND DISSEMINATED VIA ADAM SMITH

The far-reaching influence of the Physiocracy is reflected in Adam Smith's celebrated *The Wealth of Nations*. According to his biographers, not only did Smith visit Paris and attend the Physiocrats' regular meetings during the heyday of the school, but he even intended to dedicate the book to Quesnay, had the



Figure 1: The French départements in 1790. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

latter not died shortly before its publication (McNally 1988). In his Book IV, Smith compared the two existing systems of political economy—the mercantile system and the system of the Physiocrats (Smith 1904). While, for Smith, the superior occupation of agriculture does not necessarily render the other industries completely barren, he pays a generous tribute to the Physiocrats' liberal thinking. As Smith puts it, the physiocratic system, "with all its imperfections, is perhaps the nearest approximation to the truth that has yet been published upon the subject of political economy" (Smith 1904, 2: 176).

Indeed, compared to the physiocratic vision of an agrarian economy grounded on an absolute monarchy, Smith holds a far more laissez-faire position. However, the very lineage between the two reveals Smith's political economy beyond a mere model of self-seeking individuals—the model for which he is widely known. Smith never downplays the central place of agriculture for economic improvement (McNally 1988). Nor does he neglect the possible erosion of the social relations in a society of free markets. For Smith, while the sovereign is to be restrained from intervening in any private economic activities, the state must take on the duties to protect society from external violence and internal injustice (Smith 1904). As argued by Smith, only within this state-maintained, well-ordered institutional framework could the individual pursuits of self-interests safely contribute to society's general interest. Such "economic liberalism" benefiting both individuals and the state is not unlike the paradoxical two folds within the Physiocracy.

Through Smith's writings, the theory of the Physiocrats was made available to a broader audience. It was through *The Wealth of Nations* that the Physiocracy was introduced to Yan Fu (1854–1921), who later translated the book for the Chinese audience (Pi 2000; Borokh 2012; Smith and Yan 1929). Moreover, it was also based on Smith and the Western school of political economy that Meiji Japan was able to develop its own theory of state formation, which in many ways envisaged a modern agrarian state built upon interconnected localities.

### 3. ENLIGHTENED LOCAL AUTONOMY BY WAY OF MEIJI JAPAN

Learning from Japan is an essential feature of China's path to modernity. The renowned Meiji Enlightenment (1868–1912) provided an ideal Eastern model of gaining wealth and power through the benefits of the West. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) was one of the first who systematically introduced the liberal school of political economy to Japan. Not only did he open the first economic course ever held in any Japanese institution, but he also published an extensive list of books for the general audience (Sugiyama 1994). While the doctrine of liberalism and individualism is evident throughout his writings, the interpretation of Fukuzawa bears a strong nationalist bent. For Fukuzawa, Western theories need to be understood within the specific context of his time, and the ultimate goal of such learning is to gain strength and confront Western countries. On the one hand, he repeatedly argues for economic activities free from government interventions, emphasizing equality between individuals and nations. On the other hand, he stresses every citizen's duty to the state, and contends that the Smithian free-trade doctrine does not apply everywhere. For Fukuzawa, international free trade with equal benefits to both sides could only be an unrealistic ideal unless the hearts and minds of the Japanese people were adequately enlightened (Sugiyama 1994). The acute priority, therefore, lay in popular education and institutional reforms.

It was with this mindset that Fukuzawa extended his economic theory to the broader realm of state-making. Before the Meiji era, Japan was based on the *han* (domain) system, with the whole empire divided into estates controlled by feudal lords (Kamiko 2010a). The early Meiji government replaced the feudal domains with a new system of prefectures and districts (*ku*) (figure 2). While this new system of administration hugely facilitated state-building programs such as tax collection and military conscription, it also led to an excessive centralization of the state power. In 1876, Fukuzawa wrote *Bunkenron* (On Decentralization of Power). Citing Alexis de Tocqueville, the essay drew a distinction between "administrative power" and "political power," arguing for the distribution of the former through elected local assemblies (Kim 2005). For Fukuzawa, not only would this local administration ward off the power abuse of the central government, but it would also help train the populace for public participation. According to Fukuzawa, the assemblies would be responsible for a series of welfare initiatives, ranging from constructing roads and dikes to managing public health and local police (Kim 2005). Such an idea of local autonomy carried a double meaning right from the start: on the one hand, the assembly offered a basic unit of civil society where socioeconomic activities could develop relatively free from state intervention; on the other hand, allowing the local people to manage their own affairs would reinforce the bonds between individuals and the state, thus helping to find the "point of convergence" between the seemingly conflicting public and private interests (Kim 2005, 77).

Fukuzawa's writings on local autonomy significantly impacted the public discourse on the local administrative system. The two decades following the prefectural divisions witnessed a series of national regeneration programs, completely reshaping the state's structure. In 1878, *The County, City, Town, and*

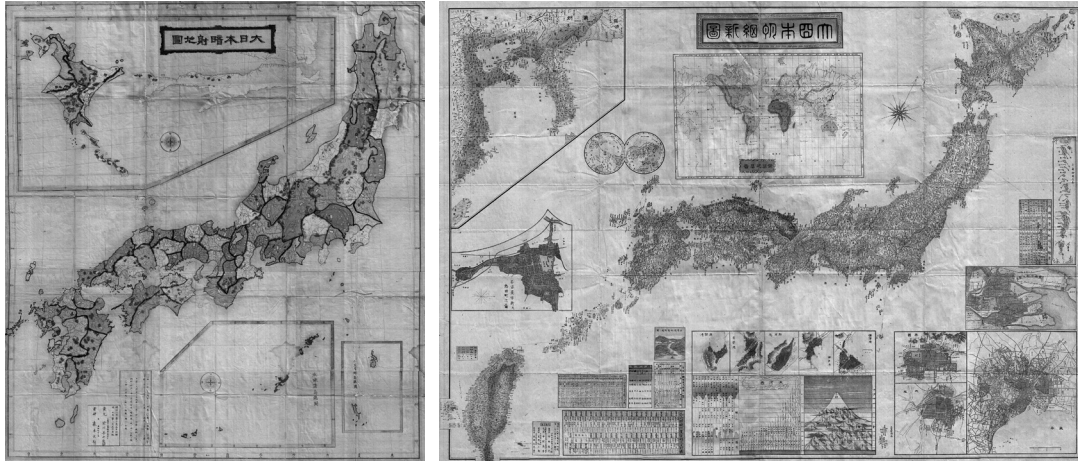


Figure 2 (left): Map of early Meiji Japan in 1875. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 3 (right): Map of Meiji Japan in 1895. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

*Village Organization Law* became official, abolishing the early-Meiji districts (*ku*) formalized about a decade ago (Kamiko 2010a). The law introduced counties and cities (*gun* and *ku*) as the units between prefectures (*fu* and *ken*) and towns and villages (*chou* and *son*), transforming the national territory into a three-tiered system. While local assemblies were not institutionalized this time, the 1878 law marked the beginning of the formal quest for modern local autonomy. In 1881, the central government announced its commitment to the promulgation of the constitution. Establishing a long-term local self-government system soon became one of the state's top priorities. Such an endeavor almost took a decade, culminating with the *City Law and the Town and Village Law* in 1888 (Kamiko 2010b). Cities, towns, and villages were finally designated as basic local administrative units, each with an elected assembly requested by law (Figure 3). For the lawmakers of the Meiji Constitution, the establishment of the city, town, and village system forms a stronger foundation of the state. It not only allows the local people to administer their own lives, but also helps cultivate their public spirit for the general needs of the state.

After the 1888 law, seeing the emerging struggles within the fledgling National Diet and the increasing international tensions between Japan and China, Fukuzawa published a few essays re-evaluating the local communities of traditional villages and towns in the pre-Meiji era (Kim 2005). As contended by Fukuzawa, the people of the Edo era, though unable to practice political power, had proved their potential to thrive via self-administration despite the turbulent conditions of civil warfare (Kim 2005). For Fukuzawa, it was the local communities and the individuals diligently working on their private pursuits that formed the bedrock of modern Japan. With the growing uncertainty of the internal and external circumstances, local self-government seemed to be the only way to keep most people out of the political turmoil. And it goes without saying that agriculture would play an indispensable role in this community-based local autonomy. In fact, as Carol Gluck reminded us, the agrarian texture within the spirit of local autonomy continued to grow toward the final years of the Meiji era (Gluck 1985). Faced with the financial crisis following the Russo-Japanese War, the local self-government system was increasingly called upon to fulfill its functions, such as social education, moral exhortation, the management of finance and infrastructures, and of course, the support of agricultural production. Officials of the central government started to make frequent references to Western agrarian

projects, such as French *départements* and *communes*, and the Garden Cities of England (Gluck 1985). For the statesmen and many intellectuals of the late-Meiji period, local autonomy not only functioned as a key fiscal solution to the national difficulty, but also stood for an idealized agrarian model in the civil society.

As history tells us, this set of modern agrarian ideas was introduced to China by the turn of the twentieth century, and eventually developed into a major discourse on state regeneration. Many intellectuals contributed to this learning process. Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), who lived in Japan as a counselor of the Chinese embassy from 1877 to 1882, first introduced the term self-government (*zizhi*) to China (Kuhn 1975). Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a leading reformer advocating constitutional monarchy, was also a key figure popularizing such an idea. However, it was Liang Qichao (1873–1929) who was able to make a radical departure from Confucian morality, and brought the discourse on local self-government to the next level.

Liang's encounter with Western ideas started in the early 1890s. While initially very much a disciple of Kang Youwei, Liang quickly broadened his mind. By the time he started to publish essays making impacts across the country, Liang had developed professional relationships with Yan Fu and Huang Zunxian, both famous for their first-hand Western learning (Chang 1971). Liang's unique vision and experience made him one of the few who could break away from traditional Chinese thinking, and synthesize Western liberalism and Meiji Japan's success in a relatively coherent way. Drawing from Yan Fu, Liang attributed the power expansion of the West to the sheer energy unleashed from individual pursuits (Chang 1971). For him, the traditional Chinese society had long lacked the very energy needed for a national transformation. In contrast, as Liang argued, Meiji Japan witnessed groups of "dynamic activists" who unselfishly fought for the fate of the state. Liang called these people *zhishi* (gentlemen with great goals) (Wills 2012). For Liang, the Japanese success lay in its Westernized political system, which offered a dynamic framework where public and private interests could be achieved at the same time.

In an 1897 essay entitled *Shuo qun* (On Grouping), Liang delivered the term *qun* (grouping), which was to become a central concept in Liang's social-political thinking (Chang 1971). For Liang, the notion of *qun* is closely associated with local self-government. Central to it lies the issue of how to integrate the Chinese people into a cohesive community. This community, as Liang stressed, should never be confused with the kinship institute in Chinese tradition. It instead indicated a new social order grounded on democracy and "public-mindedness," an ideal where the common people would be granted rights of political participation (Chang 1971). Since most Chinese had not been sufficiently educated, as Liang contended, modern institutions such as journals and study societies would be necessary steps toward any truly self-governed locality. In particular, Liang saw the study society of the gentry-literati as the most crucial organization in the coming reform. It was out of this idea that Liang accepted an invitation from a reformist governor, and became the chief lecturer at the School of Current Affairs (*Shiwu xuetang*) in Hunan in 1897 (Chang 1971). With the support of the local gentry, Liang founded the famous Hunan Study Society (*Nan xuehui*), and designated "local self-government" as part of its motto (Zhang 2012). While his reform program in Hunan did not last long, Liang's radical teachings of popular rights and local self-government were disseminated throughout the country via an array of journals and newspapers.

After the Hundred Days' Reform of 1898, Liang fled to Japan, and spent most of his time in the Tokyo-Yokohama area until his return in 1912. The 14-year exile offered Liang profound first-hand experience of the Meiji reform. He quickly picked up the Japanese language, and soon was able to access various ideas of

Japanese thinkers and their interpretations of the Western world (Chang 1971). He founded a series of Chinese-language journals which circulated both in China and overseas. First, through the *Qing yi bao* (Journal of Disinterested Criticism) and later the *Xinmin congbao* (New Citizen Journal), Liang commented on current events and taught the general audience about new ideas from the West (Chang 1971). It was in this period that Liang was able to refine his thoughts in 1896–97, and became even more influential than in his earlier years in China. In his famous series *Xinmin shuo* (On the New Citizen) of 1902, Liang reinforced his earlier idea of *qun*, explicitly attached it to the concept of the nation-state, and developed a new ideal of citizenship (Chang 1971). For Liang, the essential morality of a modern citizen was public virtue. The only way to ward off Western imperialism, as Liang put it, was to develop a national community where every individual could participate in the state's public life. Central to this collective freedom was the idea of self-government with three folds: "individual self-mastery, local self-government, and national self-rule" (Chang 1971). As Liang argued, individual liberty and local autonomy not only did not impede "collective freedom," but they also formed the basis for a cohesive national community.

#### **4. WAVES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND ZHANG JIAN'S VILLAGE-ISM**

The combined efforts of Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and the like profoundly impacted the public discourse at the turn of the century. The last decade of the 19th century witnessed not only a growing trend of study abroad but also a few significant shifts within the group of international students. With the focus of Western learning switching from science and technologies to politics, Japan, blessed with cultural and geographical proximity, replaced the Western countries as the top destination for Chinese students. Within a couple of years, the number of students in Japan grew from several hundred to more than ten thousand, making Tokyo-Yokohama the center of the fledgling Chinese intelligentsia (Chang 1971). These changes, particularly coinciding with Liang's exile in Japan, reinforced the reformist influence that had already taken place. Japanese constitutionalism, especially the idea of local self-government (*difang zizhi*), became a central theme populated among the intellectuals at the turn of the century.

The Qing government, after the humiliating crisis in 1900, finally recognized the urgency of institutional reform. In 1901, the court issued an edict calling for complete reform over a wide range of issues (Wills 2012). It started to take proposals from high-ranking officials, many of whom held the same basic principles as liberal thinkers like Yan Fu and Liang Qichao. Between 1906 and 1907, the Qing court sent a group of commissioners traveling to Japan and the West to study various forms of constitutional government (Wills 2012). The Japanese constitutional monarchy and local self-government system became the primary model that the Qing rulers were to draw from in the final years of the dynasty. In 1908, the court officially announced a gradual installation of local assemblies (Kuhn 1975; Kuhn 1986). In the following year, the self-government regulations for cities (*cheng*), market towns (*zhen*), and rural townships (*xiang*) were promulgated, marking the official government's first commitment to local self-government (Kuhn 1986).

To be sure, as Philip Kuhn reminded us, these self-government programs formalized by the Qing court were in many ways "highly restrictive," and were hugely different from the liberal ideals envisaged by Liang Qichao and the like (Kuhn 1975; Kuhn 1986). For the Qing rulers, the local self-government system was completely supplementary with no substantially different functions than the rural gentry in the traditional society. The responsibilities of the local elites, who were to play a major role in the local autonomy, would be primarily limited to areas



the county government was unable to cover, and would be strictly supervised by the regular bureaucracy. In contrast to the liberal reformers' enthusiasm for real public participation, the Qing court's programs were far from a genuine scheme of vibrant local communities. However, despite all its limitations, this constitutional experiment, with full support from the central government, significantly boosted the motivation of the local elites. According to Kuhn, before the fall of the Qing, local self-government entities such as deliberative assemblies (*yishihui*) and executive councils (*dongshihui*) had been put in place in many regions (Kuhn 1975).

It was against this background that Nantong, an erstwhile rural backwater in the Yangtze River Delta, became one of the most prominent self-governed localities in China. As we shall soon find out, not only was Nantong's transition influenced by the countrywide movement of the late Qing, but it also received direct impacts from Meiji Japan. Behind those Japanese experiences of local autonomy was a state-making ideal firmly grounded on interconnected agriculture and industries and a local populace well-equipped with public spirits. This line of thinking is fundamentally "agrarian." The story of Nantong vividly exemplifies how the Western ideal of the agrarian modern influenced China's rural-urban territory.

The modern transformation of Nantong cannot be separated from Zhang Jian (1853–1926), who famously received the highest degree in the imperial civil service examination, returned to his hometown, and ended up as the leading figure of Nantong's local elites (Shao 2003). The early development of Zhang's agrarian thinking dates back to the mid-1890s. In the wake of the humiliating defeat by Japan, Zhang determined to strengthen his country through "industry." To him, the concept of this industry was rather broad. Almost from the very beginning, Zhang was well aware of the central place of agriculture in Nantong's modernization (Wang 2005). From 1895, Zhang Jian and his associates built a series of factories, the Dasheng Cotton Mill being the most prominent (Shao 2003) (figure 4). In 1901, to meet the increasing demand for cotton, he established the Tonghai Land Reclamation Company, which turned out to be one of the first agricultural joint-stock companies in China (Wang 2005). The company's goal was to transform about 18,000 acres of salt land along the seacoast into cotton fields. The reclaimed land not only served as a reliable cotton-producing base for Zhang's factories, but also offered favorable conditions for pasture and grain cultivation for quite a long time (Wang 2005). In his 1901 Tonghai Land Reclamation Company IPO Prospectus (*Tonghai kenmu gongsi jigou zhangcheng qi*), Zhang explicitly referred to the Japanese Agricultural Society, and proposed building an agricultural school on the site of the land reclamation. While the school did not materialize for various reasons, the proposal revealed Zhang's early commitment to the agrarian modern, and the Japanese impacts way before local self-government became a nationwide movement.

In 1903, invited by the Japanese consul in Shanghai, Zhang Jian took a seventy-day trip to Japan, which tremendously shaped his vision of modernity (Shao 2003). He visited the Fifth Industrial and Agricultural Exposition in Osaka, and spent most of his time investigating factories, farms, schools, and libraries, among others. Shortly after his return, Zhang published the *Diary of Travels East*, in which he recorded what he had learned in remarkable detail (Shao 2003). For Zhang Jian, the trip to Japan offered him a glimpse of how a system of local self-government would work in a constitutional monarchy. As the call for an institutional change gradually took up the major discourse, Zhang joined the constitutional reformers, and became a full supporter of local self-government. From 1904, Zhang used his close relationships with high-ranking officials to push forward the Qing court's reform agenda (Shao 2003; Wang 2005). After the central government publicly endorsed the model of local assemblies, Zhang worked with the reformist elites, and formally requested permission from the

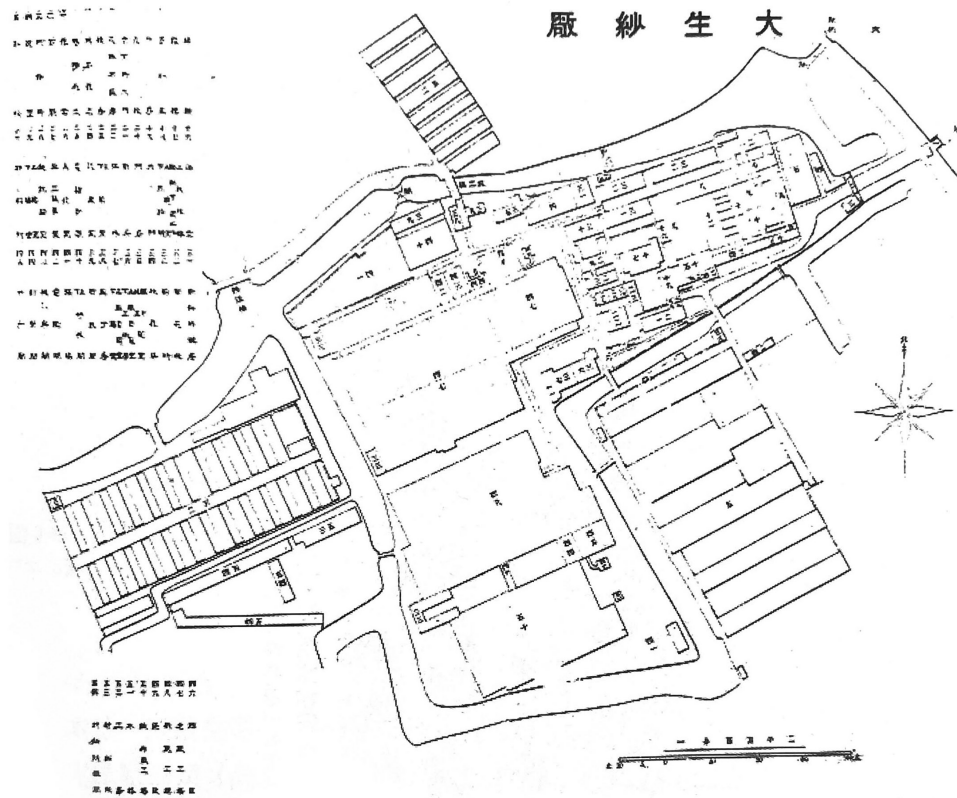


Figure 4: Plan of the Dasheng Cotton Mill. Source: Fan Kai, *Minguo Nantong xian tuzhi*, 1991.

Nantong administration to put local self-government into practice. In 1908, the Nantong local assembly and executive council were elected, with Zhang as head of the former (Shao 2003). Through the self-government bodies, the new elites—essentially consisting of merchants, industrialists, professionals, and scholars—were granted administrative authority over an array of local affairs. They took over the existing institutions, such as the educational association and the local chamber of commerce, and soon built a group of quasi-government agencies ranging from the Survey Bureau to the Agricultural Society. Such an institutional change significantly expanded the power of the new elites, enabling local people to manage virtually everything concerning the public interest.

As the local self-government reform began to take shape, the modern transformation of Nantong went into a new phase. Increasingly, local self-government became the single rubric under which new projects were organized. For Zhang Jian, local self-government was the centerpiece of the constitutional reform. It provided an effective system channeling energies at the lower level for the general welfare of the state. It also allowed a certain degree of local autonomy. In the scenario where the Qing should fall, the self-governed localities could even serve as what he would call "pure self-government" entities to keep the people away from the political turmoil (Shao 2003). For Zhang Jian, the crux of this model was finding the convergence point between national and local interests. Zhang often used "village-ism" (*cunluo zhuyi*) to describe his idea of local self-government. For him, not unlike the case of Meiji Japan, the village in China formed the basis of the

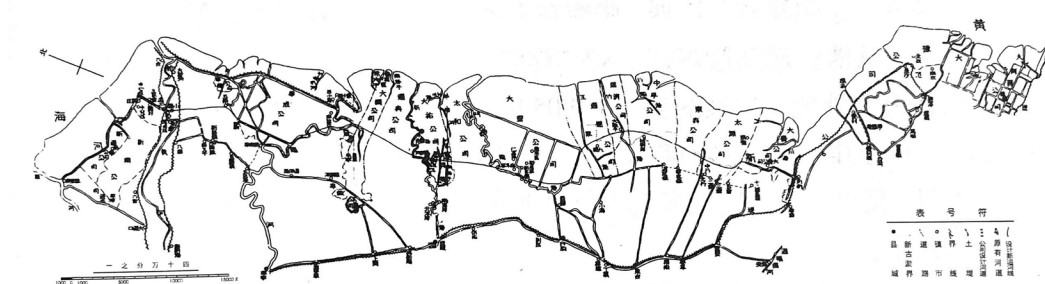


Figure 5: Masterplan of land reclamation companies in the region. Source: Wu Liangyong, Zhang Jian yu Nantong, 2006.

entire empire (Shao 2003). Drawing from the Japanese model of local autonomy, Zhang saw implementing a variety of initiatives from village to county as the key to sustaining Nantong's flexibility amid the growing domestic instability. To this end, for Zhang Jian, "village-ism" had a broader connotation beyond the traditional concept of village per se. It meant transforming the whole region of Nantong—an effort of modernization across the rural-urban continuum.

The two decades following Zhang Jian's trip to Japan witnessed an array of projects with such an ideal of "village-ism." Centered around the industrial system of the Dasheng mill, the new local elites founded dozens of factories and more than 20 land reclamation companies in the Nantong region (Wang 2005) (figure 5). These projects not only restructured the local economy, but also transformed the urban-rural territory. Salt marshes were converted into cotton fields. With a growing number of immigrants, new types of buildings, such as factory dormitories, office buildings, and warehouses started to emerge. Numerous towns arose directly out of the agro-industrial initiatives. In the case of Tangzha, an erstwhile tiny village five miles from the county seat was transformed into a prominent industrial center with more than a dozen factories. As more and more peasants chose to specialize in cotton growing, the town also became a grain trade center due to the increasing demand for grain imports (Shao 2003). Prompted by the immense need for fuel, machines, and raw materials, Tiansheng, the closest port to Tangzha, soon developed into a full-fledged town with ample facilities. Under Zhang Jian's leadership, a canal was created to ease the traffic between the port and the factory; new means of transportation, such as steamships that were introduced to connect Nantong to the outside world (Shao 2003). In 1912, the local elite leadership founded the Roadway Bureau and proposed a new highway system, further breaking down the geographical barriers between different parts of the region. All these efforts were charged by the regional self-government idea of village-ism. From the very beginning, the modernization of Nantong was on the track of an agrarian alternative, aiming for a self-governed community distinctive from the city-centered paradigm.

The fall of the Qing dynasty did not stop Nantong's modern exploration. On the contrary, the empire's collapse generated a power vacuum much more favorable for the new local elites. To be sure, the local self-government efforts had to adapt to the fledgling Republic, especially after 1914, when the central government officially cut off the support to all the self-governed initiatives (Kuhn 1975). It was against this background that Zhang Jian decided to enhance Nantong's self-government movement, and started to consciously build a "model city" potentially to be applied in other parts of the nation. Such an idea entailed a shift of focus from agriculture and manufacturing to cultural facilities and social welfare. To attract and accommodate the increasing number of visitors, Zhang

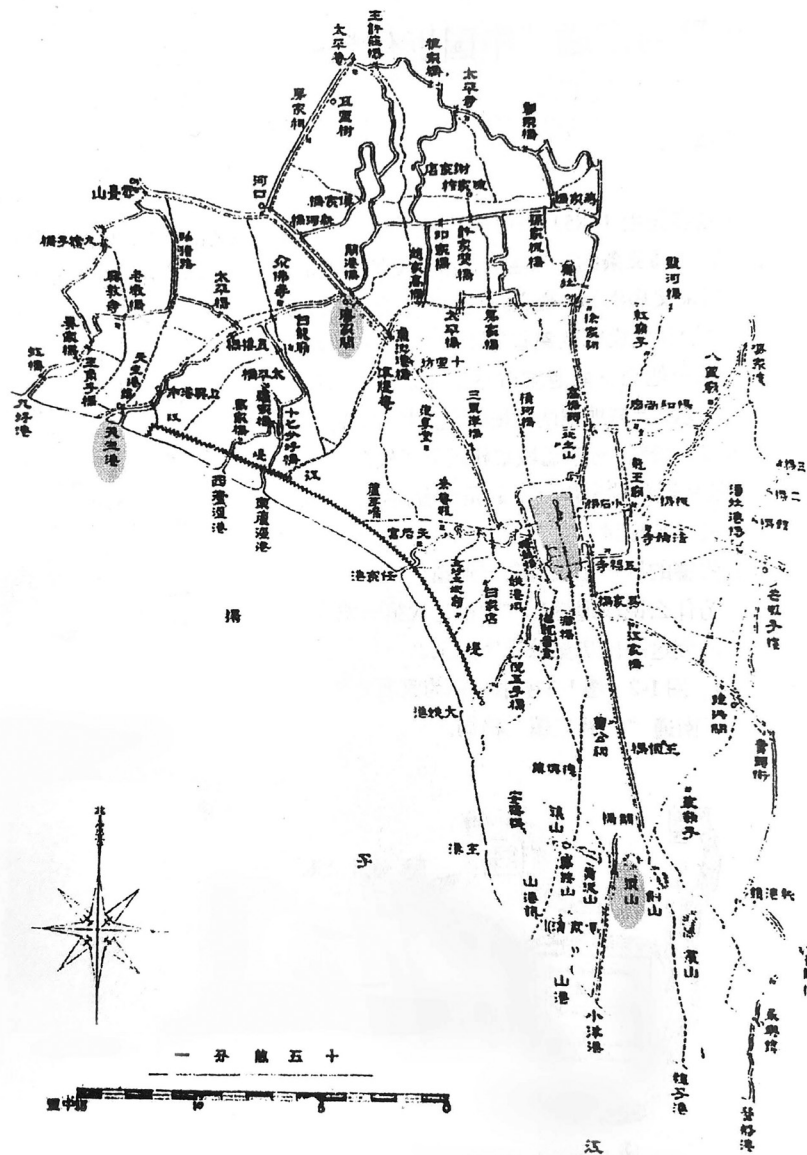


Figure 6: The "one city and three towns" in Nantong region. Source: Wu Liangyong, *Zhang Jian yu Nantong*, 2006.

Jian and other elites developed a new downtown outside the south gate of the old city, and created a recreational center consisting of five public parks. An equally ambitious plan was put forward in the mid-1910s to transform the Langshan area, a traditional religious and scenic spot several miles from the county seat, into a "model district" of cultural landscapes (Shao 2003). These efforts soon paid off. By 1918, Nantong as a "model county" received high recognition from both the domestic and foreign press. Tangzha, Tiansheng, and Langshan, together with the expanded downtown and numerous factories and townships in between, formed the famous regional structure of "one city and three towns" (Wu 2006) (figure 6).

Behind all these achievements was Zhang Jian's intellectual debt to the Japanese local self-government, which was deeply informed by the agrarian modern first developed during the Enlightenment. Recalling this origin is essential as it allows us to truly make sense of Nantong's transformation: the fact that Nantong was one of the first efforts to modernize the rural-urban continuum all at once is precisely the manifestation of its agrarian root. Wu Liangyong, a renowned Chinese urban planner, once compared Zhang Jian's Nantong model with Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (Wu 2006). As Wu argued, both projects appeared at the turn of the century, and both aspired to "promote urban development and improve citizens' lives." And yet, Wu went on, while Garden City was a response to the deteriorating living environment of modern cities, Zhang Jian initiated the Nantong model in a historical context where modernization had barely begun. Instead of following the mainstream mode of city-centered development, the self-government of Nantong embarked upon an alternative path to modernity. The urban development Zhang Jian aspired to achieve might be better understood as a rural-urban development, or—to completely lose the binary thinking—an experiment of the agrarian modern. This concept of the agrarian is closely attached to the global intellectual framework of modern agrarianism. By tracing the Western agrarian roots of Zhang Jian's ideal, not only can we compare the case of Nantong with Western reforms, but we can also examine their true intellectual connections.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is adapted from my working doctoral dissertation *The Reception and Impact of Western Ideas of the Agrarian in China*. I thank Charles Waldheim, Anita Berrizbeitia, and Michael Szonyi for their invaluable advice.

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