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CORPSE ADMONITION: WU KEDU AND BUREAUCRATIC PROTEST IN LATE QING CHINA

Abstract

In late imperial China, an extremely small number of bureaucrats adopted corpse admonition (*shijian* 尸諫) to protest with their death what they regarded as inadequacies or failings in the imperial structure. This article introduces the case of Wu Kedu 吳可讀, who killed himself to protest the designation, by the late Qing empress dowagers Ci'an and Cixi, of Guangxu as the emperor, and as the adopted son of Xianfeng and not as the heir to Tongzhi. The article argues that Wu Kedu's suicide, which was highly praised during and after its time, was an attempt to sway bureaucratic opinion to put a check on the arbitrary power of empress dowagers, but instead had the unintended consequence of reinforcing it. More importantly, Wu Kedu's corpse admonition was a precursor of the outpouring of voices of remonstrance over political issues at the turn of the twentieth century, leading to further development of the Chinese "constitutional agenda."

Keywords

Bureaucratic protest, constitutional agenda, corpse admonition, late Qing China, suicide

INTRODUCTION

The Qing state in formerly Ming Chinese territories was, broadly speaking, a Confucian-Legalist complex, Confucian in name and Legalist in practice. Educated in classical Confucianism, Han Chinese bureaucrats succeeded in the Qing civil service examinations by demonstrating their mastery of Confucian morality and Song-dynasty commentaries on it in writing.¹ Yet, they were, in Weberian language, "rational" enough to realize that the Confucian emphasis on moral leadership in governance and politics remained an ideal that had to be complemented and supported by intimidation and punishment in a Legalist fashion.²

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¹On the relationship between the civil examinations and the imperial bureaucracy, see Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²Moreover, morality was no substitute for ability in administration, which Qing rulers highly valued in their selection of officials. See James T.C. Liu, "Some Classifications of Bureaucrats in Chinese Historiography," in *Confucianism in Action*, edited by David S. Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 180. See also R. Kent Guy, *Qing Governors and Their Provinces: The Evolution of Territorial Administration in China, 1644–1796* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

Nowhere was this complexity more obvious than the censorial system of impeachment, remonstrance, and surveillance.³ In the Confucian ideal, wise rulers willingly receive and act on the remonstrance of morally superior bureaucrats whom they have attracted to their ranks. In reality, bureaucrats were rarely impartial, incorruptible, and immune to the “organized pressure” that stemmed from their informal and personal relations with friends and kinsmen.⁴ Recognizing the incompatibility between the ideal and the real, rulers, from the Qin (221–206 BCE) to the Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, regularly deployed censors (*yushi* 御史; commonly known as *yanguan* 言官 or “speech officials”) to report on the incompetence and malfeasance of bureaucrats, both in the capital and at the provincial and county levels, and impeach them. As purportedly more objective observers of imperial policymaking, censors, at least in name, were also required to caution the ruler and report on his inadequacies and failings.⁵ Despite their low rank compared to, for example, the Grand Councilors and Hanlin Academicians of Qing times, censors could submit secret memorials directly to the emperor.⁶

The Censorial Bureau (*Yushitai* 御史臺) of pre-Qing times was an institution independent of the bureaucratic structure, serving as an advisory board to the emperor. The policy of the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661–1722) toward censors critical of his administration was generally lenient on the condition that they did not prevaricate or were seen to be speaking for their personal interests. In contrast, the Yongzheng (r. 1723–35) and Qianlong (r. 1735–96) emperors were famously hostile to censorial opinion, literati activism, and especially factionalism. The Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors, unlike Kangxi, did not take kindly to any implicit criticism of themselves. Maintaining that the “avenues of remonstrance” (*yanlu* 言路) remained open, they sometimes found it difficult to ascertain if censorial reports were true to the Confucian ideal devoid of private or factional interests, and tended to view them with suspicion.⁷ As a background, Qing emperors generally affirmed that literati factions were inherently exclusive and selfish organizations, invoking the late Ming period as an example of how unrestrained literati factionalism could subvert the Confucian order that it professed to protect. The emperors

³Charles O. Hucker, “Confucianism and the Chinese Censorial System,” in *Confucianism in Action*, 182–208. That said, Hucker does not identify Confucianism and Legalism as persistently competing or separate traditions, preferring to call the seemingly Legalist characteristics of model Chinese governance “rigorist Confucianism.”

⁴C.K. Yang, “Some Characteristics of Chinese Bureaucratic Behavior,” in *Confucianism in Action*, 134–64.

⁵On the evolution of the Qing censorial system, see Lin Qian 林乾 and Ju Hua 句華, *Yanguan yu Kang Qian zhengzhi* 言官與康乾政治 (Speech officials and politics of the Kangxi to Qianlong reigns) (Hefei: Anhui renmin chubanshe, 2013); and Zheng Cuibin 鄭翠斌, *Qingmo zhengzhi xuanwo zhong de yushi (1894–1911)* 清末政治漩渦中的御史 (1894–1911) (Censors in turbulent late Qing politics [1894–1911]) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), 42–60. See also Hucker, “Confucianism and the Chinese Censorial System,” 186–89; and Wang Kaixi 王開璽, *Wan Qing zhengzhi shi: shu qian nian wei you zhi bianju* 晚清政治史: 數千年未有之變局 (The history of late Qing politics: A change unprecedented in thousands of years) (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2016), 380–81.

⁶Silas H.L. Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control in China: Evolution of the Palace Memorial System, 1693–1735* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 23–24.

⁷David S. Nivison, “Ho-shen and His Accusers: Ideology and Political Behavior in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Confucianism in Action*, 209–43.

portrayed themselves as guardians of Confucian morality from opportunistic literati who formed bickering factions that did more harm than good.⁸

In particular, the Yongzheng emperor viewed the Censorial Bureau as curtailing his exercise of imperial (monarchical) power. He incorporated it into the Censorate (*Duchayuan* 都察院), which became part of the bureaucracy under the leadership of the emperor and his ministers.⁹ Rather than cautioning the emperor and preventing him from committing mistakes, censors were now required to report on the failings of fellow bureaucrats, including those in the top-ranked executive institutions of the Grand Council (*Junjichu* 軍機處) and Hanlin Academy (*Hanlinyuan* 翰林院). The job scope of a Qing censor included making recommendations on appointments and policies, impeaching bureaucrats, and returning an edict to the emperor for corrections if he spotted mistakes in it (*fengbo zhaoshu* 封駁詔書).¹⁰

Eventually, the censors held little control over the emperor's actions and policymaking as their advisory role was taken over by the Grand Council and Hanlin Academy.¹¹ Most censors received information on local conditions through hearsay in the capital, so the emperor could not rely on them for accurate and useful information on provincial and county affairs. Censors were also known to reveal the contents of their reports to their colleagues as a sign of factionalism and partisanship. Qing emperors preferred the more direct, secretive palace memorial system in which correspondence on confidential matters was strictly between them and the memorialists, transmitted by the confidants of memorialists.¹² In short, the Censorate, by Qing times, had lost its capacities of counseling the emperor and checking imperial power. It became an institution devoted to reporting on bureaucratic shortcomings operating only from the emperor's perspective.¹³ The ability to remonstrate was so fundamental to Han Chinese scholar-officials that according to Lin Qian 林乾 and Ju Hua 句華, the Qing restraints on censorial opinion heralded the end of "traditional Confucian politics" (*chuantong rujia zhengzhi* 傳統儒家政治).¹⁴

This article examines the protest of Wu Kedu 吳可讀 (1812–79), a censor and a minor bureaucrat in late Qing China who remonstrated against his sovereigns by committing suicide. Wu Kedu's suicide and the message it sought to convey were remarkable, given the heavy restraints on censorial power and political expression at the time.

⁸On the early Qing emperors' devotion to eradicating clique politics of the Han Chinese lettered elite, see Nivison, "Ho-shen and His Accusers," 218–32; Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, 29–39; and Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 278–82. That said, the early Qing emperors, most notably Qianlong, often defended provincial and county bureaucrats from licentiates and protesters who challenged their authority; from their perspective, the occurrence of local literati protests indicated unrestrained literati behavior and not administrative malfeasance. See Seunghyun Han, *After the Prosperous Age: State and Elites in Early Nineteenth-Century Suzhou* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), 1–2.

⁹Lin and Ju, *Yanguan yu Kang Qian zhengzhi*, 136–43.

¹⁰For more on the jurisdiction of Qing censors, see (author unknown) *Qinding taigui* 欽定臺規 (Imperially commissioned rules of the Censorate), in *Gugong zhenben congkan* 故宮珍本叢刊 (A compilation of rare texts from the palace) (Haikou: Hainan chubanshe, 2001), vol. 316, 14.

¹¹Wang Qian 王倩, "Jiancha yushi he wan Qing zhengju: yi Yikuang bei he an wei xiansuo de kaocha" 監察御史和晚清政局: 以奕劻被劾案為綫索的考察 (Supervising censors and late Qing politics: The impeachment of Yikuang) (PhD diss., Huazhong shifan daxue, 2008), 1–22.

¹²Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control in China*, 48–49.

¹³Zheng, *Qingmo zhengzhi xuanwo zhong de yushi*, 56–60.

¹⁴Lin and Ju, *Yanguan yu Kang Qian zhengzhi*, 167–214.

During the Qing dynasty, the Manchu emperors sought to preserve and exercise their arbitrary power through inner-court institutions, namely the Grand Council and the Imperial Household Department (*Neiwufu* 內務府), while circumventing the influence of the Han-Chinese-dominated outer-court bureaucracy of the Censorate, Hanlin Academy, and the six boards and nine ministries. The Qianlong emperor was singled out by China scholars as having personalized imperial authority and wielded immense imperial power to the detriment of his bureaucrats, who were as helpless as their Ming counterparts in checking the arbitrary power of the ruler.¹⁵ Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), albeit less successful under the peculiar circumstances of her time, sought to assume the imperial prerogatives that Yongzheng, Qianlong, and her other ruling ancestors had so astutely maintained.¹⁶ Wu Kedu disputed Cixi’s designation of Guangxu (r. 1875–1908) as the adopted son of Xianfeng (r. 1850–61) and not as the heir to Tongzhi (r. 1861–75). Wu Kedu argued that because of Cixi’s decision, no descendant would offer ancestral worship to Tongzhi. Wu Kedu committed suicide and asked Cixi to issue an edict proclaiming the future son of Guangxu as both the adopted son of Tongzhi and the successor to the throne.

Marianne Bastid has shown how Wu Kedu’s suicide and the responses it generated from Cixi’s inner-court supporters conceptualized imperial authority as “governed no longer by ancient ritual custom but by a code of principles derived from government practice and sanctioned by history.”¹⁷ However, Bastid did not analyze Wu Kedu’s motivations for suicide and the implications of his suicide on its own terms. Beginning with Bastid’s argument, I discuss Wu Kedu’s suicide as a seldom-used method of bureaucratic protest, corpse admonition (*shijian* 尸諫), which had the unintended consequence of aggrandizing Cixi’s imperial authority when Cixi moved to formalize her arbitrary power with the support of her close associates and the complicity of the Han Chinese bureaucrats. Nevertheless, Wu Kedu’s desperate effort also had some positive influence in that under the increasing pressure of bureaucratic opinion, Cixi, despite her autocratic power, still had to open the case to broad political discussion and engagement. This enlarged process of political participation proved important in venting bureaucratic frustration and stabilizing the court. It also helped restore some form of imperial normalcy (no matter how limited it was) and paved the way for, or at least reflected, the trend of later political reforms.

In particular, I argue that Wu Kedu’s *shijian* contributed to what Philip A. Kuhn calls the “constitutional agenda” of nineteenth-century China. The Qing regime, as Kuhn

¹⁵Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 113–31. On the interplay between the arbitrary and bureaucratic powers of the Qing emperor, see Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch’ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); and Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). See also Norman Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China: Filial Piety and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) for more examples of Qianlong’s conflict with his bureaucrats.

¹⁶On how Cixi maintained her control of the late Qing court, see Li Yuhang and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi through the Production of Art,” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in China* 14.1 (2012), 1–20.

¹⁷Marianne Bastid, “Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” in *Foundations and Limits of State Power in China*, edited by S.R. Schram (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1987), 163–71, and see 170.

describes, had “brought the authority of the throne, the discipline of the bureaucracy, and the efficiency of imperial communication to a level previously unknown in Chinese history,” and it was more effective at the top than at the bottom of the hierarchy.¹⁸ However, at the turn of the nineteenth century, literati (the lower bureaucracy and upper gentry, who had little recourse to making their opinions known to the court) opposition to Heshen 和珅 (1750–99), the Manchu favorite of the Qianlong emperor, who allegedly usurped imperial power for himself and his accomplices, coalesced into a moral-political force that challenged the imperial hold over elite activism and expression of critical political opinion.¹⁹

According to Benjamin A. Elman, the “constitutional” framework of Qing China was rhetorically guided by the Confucian classics in political matters, such that all literati activism and reformist initiatives had to find their historical precedents in the classics. It was “unconstitutional” for scholar-officials to advance their personal interests through factionalism and horizontally defined peer organizations, which all self-respecting Confucians should disavow.²⁰ If Kuhn’s “constitutional agenda” refers to a will to grapple with “a set of concerns about the legitimate ordering of public life,” that will had certainly strengthened among the politically conscious and involved literati of nineteenth-century China, not only at the provincial and county levels as most scholars have emphasized, but also in the capital and center of imperial power.²¹

As William T. Rowe suggests, Qing China operated under a “widely assumed set of constitutional principles, which defined and constrained the activities of the state, including the throne itself.” In addition to the Confucian classics, the Qing *Institutes* (*Da Qing huidian* 大清會典) and all administrative, criminal, and legal precedents of the Qing constituted what may be called the Qing constitution.²² Together, these written records, memorized by aspirants to high office for passing the civil service examinations, defined the cosmological underpinnings and formal jurisdiction of powers held by the monarch, bureaucrats, and commoners.

As we shall see, Wu Kedu’s final testament was written along those lines, challenging the legitimacy of Cixi’s arbitrary power. While it did not profess to broaden and make

¹⁸Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 21–22.

¹⁹“Moral-political” refers to the Confucian ideal whereby the moral cultivation of the individual formed the basis and source of sociopolitical action in the outside world. See Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890–1911* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 15–16.

²⁰Benjamin A. Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch’ang-chou School of New Test Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 276; “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies,” *Modern China* 15.4 (1989), 407.

²¹Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, 2. Largely as a result of the 1980s turn to cultural and social histories from intellectual, institutional, and legal histories, most scholars have focused on the devolution of imperial power to the local levels as a transformation of ruling style in nineteenth-century China. For some examples, see Mary Buckus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Stephen R. Platt, *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007); William T. Rowe’s *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984) and *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); and Han, *After the Prosperous Age*.

²²William T. Rowe, “Rewriting the Qing Constitution: Bao Shichen’s ‘On Wealth’ (*Shuochu*),” *T’oung Pao* 98 (2012), 211–16, and see 211.

institutional provisions for literati and popular participation in imperial decision-making, it succeeded in sparking a heated debate on the most sensitive issue in late Qing politics, namely the rules of imperial succession. Thereafter, Wu Kedu's final testament encouraged members of the Qingliu 清流 (Pure Stream) faction, comprised of both bureaucrats and non-degree-holding literati, to express their political opinions more freely and speak up against future imperial decisions, especially those that favored the Self-Strengthening bureaucrats (the Yangwu 洋務 faction) headed by Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901).²³ In other words, Wu Kedu's corpse admonition and its immediate aftermath reflected discernable changes in the relationship between rulers and their bureaucrats and literati during the late nineteenth century.

According to Hao Chang's own words, Wu Kedu was an "intellectual in crisis" who used his own life to define what constituted the most ideal loyalty of the traditional Confucian scholar-official. In the likes of Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1864–98), Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869–1935), and Liu Shiwei 劉師培 (1884–1919), Wu Kedu failed to adjust to the dramatic change of times and make the transition to a new-style intellectual-official despite increasing western influence. Wu Kedu was trying to restore some sense of normalcy and order to the rules of imperial succession, which he considered to constitute the bedrock of Confucian political orthodoxy at a time when the Confucian myth of cosmological emperorship came under intense scrutiny and question. This Confucian myth was essentially the notion that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled corresponded with natural phenomena.²⁴ Out of despair and desperation, he committed suicide, failing to accept what he saw as the breakdown of the Confucian order and reconcile his worldview with a rapidly changing China. If life was "a consummatory process of quest for moral perfection," Wu Kedu had sacrificed his life to complete the quest.²⁵

To integrate the different dimensions of Wu Kedu's suicide, I apply, with some obvious modifications, the tripartite analytical framework that Paul Cohen has used to study the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901): the past reconstructed (event), the past experienced (experience), and the past mythologized (myth).²⁶ This study essentially focuses on the admonition of Wu Kedu's corpse and predominantly includes my own interpretations and review of the available literature. Nevertheless, Wu Kedu's suicide revealed changing, multi-faceted interpretations of that same event over time, both as an experience of his peers and contemporary observers who lived through it, and as a myth fashioned by a later generation of Chinese writers who sought to explain and make sense of their own circumstances. In fact, corpse admonition as a form of remonstrance became a source of introspection for intellectuals who perceived this event and were weathering

²³Yang Guoqiang 楊國強, *Shuashih yu Xifa: Wan Qing Zhongguo de jiuwang xinning he shehui tuosun* 衰世與西法: 晚清中國的舊邦新命和社會脫榘 (Decline and western ways: New missions and social dislocations in late Qing China) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), 258–307. The divide between Qingliu and Yangwu is a complicated issue, on which I shall elaborate later.

²⁴Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*. See also Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

²⁵Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 181.

²⁶Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). My account of Wu Kedu's corpse admonition prioritizes it as an event and focuses less on the logical or epistemological aspects of historical reconstruction (see p. xv of Cohen's book).

their respective cultural and political crises. By analyzing the Qing observers and Republican Chinese writers' interpretations of Wu Kedu's event, I explore how Qing bureaucrats and their descendants, both before and after the founding of the Chinese republic, coped with the disintegration of their cultural and political *Umwelt* and made sense of its collapse.

(INDIVIDUAL) LITERATI ACTIVISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINA

Wu Kedu's corpse admonition was a political performance and strategy aimed at protesting Cixi's exercise of arbitrary power during the late Qing, which has long been viewed as a period of imperial decline.²⁷ However, Qing imperial power was surprisingly resilient amid the devastating demographic, economic, political, and social crises that plagued China in the nineteenth century, and it did not dissipate until around Cixi's death in 1908.²⁸ One reason why the Qing lasted as long as it did was that Qing rulers from Qianlong to Cixi adopted the "divide-and-rule" strategy by playing one bureaucratic faction against another to maintain their arbitrary and bureaucratic powers.²⁹

During much of Cixi's regency (1861–1908), three power holders dominated imperial policy: Cixi (the throne); Li Hongzhang and his aides, who derived their power largely from their administrative functions; and the Qingliu group of scholar-officials and outsiders of the bureaucratic structure, who professed to uphold Confucian morality—the ideological legitimation of imperial power.³⁰ Wu Kedu belonged to the Qingliu faction and had close contact with leaders of the group such as Baoting 寶廷 (1840–90; a Manchu), Huang Tifang 黃體芳 (1832–99), Zhang Peilun 張佩綸 (1848–1903), and Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), who were identified as the "Four Remonstrators" (*si jian* 四諫) in *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (the *Draft Qing History*) for their frequent, impassioned petitions to the throne. Compilers of *Qingshi gao*, many of whom were former Qing bureaucrats highly critical of Cixi, identified Wu Kedu as the forerunner of late Qing remonstrators. Indeed, the attempts of the Four Remonstrators intensified after Wu Kedu's suicide, a trend confirmed by Chen Baochen 陳寶琛 (1848–1935). Chen Baochen, a Qingliu member and Grand Secretariat Academician (*Neige xueshi* 內閣學士), had submitted numerous petitions to the throne and was sometimes hailed as one of the Four Remonstrators.³¹

²⁷Pamela Kyle Crossley, *The Wobbling Pivot, China Since 1800: An Interpretive History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 118.

²⁸Joseph W. Esherick, "Reconsidering 1911: Lessons of a Sudden Revolution," *Journal of Modern Chinese History* 6.1 (2012), 1–14. See also Stephen R. Halsey, *Quest for Power: European Imperialism and the Making of Chinese Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

²⁹James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Council on Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992).

³⁰Lloyd E. Eastman, *Throne and Mandarins: China's Search for a Policy during the Sino-French Controversy, 1880–1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 3–4. From 1861 to 1881, it was a co-regency by Ci'an (1837–81) and Cixi. However, contemporaries and historians have generally understood that Cixi controlled the court with the complicity of Ci'an and Prince Gong (1833–98). See Crossley, *The Wobbling Pivot*, 117–18.

³¹For Chen Baochen's description of the trend of remonstrance after Wu Kedu's corpse admonition in his poem, see Liu Yongxiang 劉永翔 and Xu Quansheng 許全勝, eds., *Cangqulou shiwenji* 滄趣樓詩文集

Wu Kedu's dramatic act of protest encapsulated the spirit of bureaucratic remonstrance and literati activism of late Ming Donglin 東林 members, who fought the political domination of eunuch strongman Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627) by successfully placing themselves via the civil service examinations into the powerful Hanlin Academy.³² Political intrigue and infighting doomed the Donglin convergence between Confucian moral philosophy and political activism, but the influence of the Donglin movement remained in the Spring Purification Circle (*Zhanchunji* 湛春集), a semi-official association of high-ranking bureaucrats and non-degree-holding literati that appeared in the 1820s. The Spring Purification Circle, after more than a century of condemnation of Donglin activism by the imperial state as the cause of collapse of Ming China, openly professed an admiration for the Donglin literati for their moral opposition and political aspirations. Similar to the Xuannan Poetry Club (*Xuannan shishe* 宣南詩社), the Spring Purification Circle was a “quasi-literary association” that rallied political dissenters in the guise of ceremonial and literary activities.³³

That these associations still wore disguise pointed to the looming threat of imperial prohibition of their activities. Nevertheless, many scholars rightly point out that Hong Liangji's 洪亮吉 (1746–1809) famous, well-documented letter of remonstrance to the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) in 1799, one that almost cost him his life, had important influence on the nature of political dissent in nineteenth-century China.³⁴ The Jiaqing emperor, as Elman observes, opted for a “minimalist purge” of Heshen's faction by punishing Heshen alone, hoping that bureaucratic loyalty would return to the person of the emperor with Heshen no longer in the picture. Although the Jiaqing emperor had promised to widen the *yanlu* (largely to elicit rhetorical support for his campaign against Heshen), Hong Liangji, as a minor bureaucrat serving in no advisory capacity, knew that his letter would not be read by the emperor unless he first created some bureaucratic

(Collected essays of Cangqu Pavilion) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2006), 167. For the list of the Four Remonstrators, see Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽, ed., *Qingshi gao* 清史稿 (Draft Qing history), *juan* 444 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 12460. For a list of Qingliu members, see Chen Yongqin 陳勇勤, “Qingliu dang chengyuan wenti kaoyi” 清流黨成員問題考議 (An inquiry into the membership of the Qingliu faction), *Jindaishi yanjiu* 4 (1992), 244–49. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Kang Youwei also proposed soliciting suggestions from the populace for political reforms, but I shall focus on the bureaucratic order and leave out non-officials like Kang Youwei for this article.

³²Elman, “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China,” 393–96. It is worth mentioning that from as early as the Qianlong reign, eunuch power had risen as an abnormality in the political operations of the Qing court. As Cixi's favorite eunuchs, An Dehai (1844–69) and Li Lianying (1848–1911) amassed considerable power by forging networks with bureaucrats, clerics, and merchants in Beijing. See Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 161–94; Norman A. Kutcher, “Unspoken Collusions: The Empowerment of Yuanming Yuan Eunuchs in the Qianlong Period,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 70.2 (2010), 449–95; and Emily Mokros, “Reconstructing the Imperial Retreat: Politics, Communications, and the Yuanming Yuan under the Tongzhi Emperor, 1873–4,” *Late Imperial China* 33.2 (2012), 76–118.

³³Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, 63–99; Wang Wensheng, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*, 156; Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 282–306.

³⁴On Hong Liangji's remonstrance with the Jiaqing emperor, see Susan Mann Jones, “Hung Liang-chi (1746–1809): The Perception and Articulation of Political Problems in Late Nineteenth Century China” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1971); Nivison, “Ho-shen and His Accusers”; Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 284–87.

opinion by circulating it among his close associates and sending it to Prince Cheng 成親王 (1752–1823), one of the emperor's brothers.

Having served as one of the compilers (*bianxiu* 編修) of the veritable records of the Qianlong emperor, Hong Liangji gleaned from court documents that Heshen's damage to the realm was collateral. In his letter, Hong Liangji went against the Jiaqing emperor's proclaimed magnanimity and insisted that all members of Heshen's clique must be punished to deter future literati complicity in bureaucratic malpractice and subversion of Confucian literati standards of honesty and service. At the time, the Jiaqing emperor was already receiving many groundless accusations about bureaucrats from his censors. When he read Hong Liangji's letter, he was incensed at Hong Liangji's audacious abuse of the *yanlu*, and got him arrested and sent into exile. Within months, however, the Jiaqing emperor exposed his concern for bureaucratic opinion by pardoning Hong Liangji and restoring full honors to him. Hong Liangji returned to his hometown and never served again in any official appointment.³⁵

The Jiaqing emperor's punishment of Hong Liangji cowed Qing censors into silence in subsequent years. According to Lin Qian and Ju Hua's analysis, no censor spoke a word about corrupt officials and political scandals throughout the decade from 1800 to 1810, and Hong Liangji himself refrained from all political discussions up to his death.³⁶ However, to some of the literati at large, the Jiaqing emperor's mercy signaled that their dissent would be condoned if voiced through appropriate channels or with the purest of intentions, introducing *qingyi* 清議 (disinterested discussion) protest patterns that became "characteristic of nineteenth-century gentry activism."³⁷

Some individual bureaucrats did take their cue from Hong Liangji's example. Jiang Zhaokui 蔣兆奎 (1729–1802), the Superintendent of the Grain Tribute Administration (*Caoyun zongdu* 漕運總督), threatened to quit his office if his request for the improvement of the hereditary boatmen's (*qiding* 旗丁) welfare was not met, and eventually he did quit after his intense debates with the Jiaqing emperor came to naught.³⁸ Jiqing 吉慶 (?–1802), a Manchu bannerman and Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi (*liang Guang zongdu* 兩廣總督), killed himself after the Jiaqing emperor reproached him for submitting confusing and sloppy reports on frontier developments, which he maintained was unintentional.³⁹ These sporadic cases hardly counted for bureaucratic activism: bureaucratic protests remained confined to one-to-one interactions between the emperor and his petitioner without implicating the mass of bureaucrats or the legitimacy of imperial power.

³⁵Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 275–90, and see p. 284; Lin and Ju, *Yanguan yu Kang Qian zhengzhi*, 216–21. On how the Jiaqing court saw the post-Heshen-era circumstances as an opportunity for positive change and renewal, see Daniel McMahon, *Rethinking the Decline of China's Qing Dynasty: Imperial Activism and Borderland Management at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 42–58, and see p. 42.

³⁶Lin and Ju, *Yanguan yu Kang Qian zhengzhi*, 221.

³⁷Elman, *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship*, 288. In particular, Elman is speaking for the Changzhou school of New Text Confucianism in nineteenth-century China.

³⁸Pu Jian 撲鍵, *Guo zhi dachen: Wang Ding yu Jia Dao liang chao zhengzhi* 國之大臣：王鼎與嘉道兩朝政治 (A great minister of the state: Wang Ding and the politics of the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns) (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin chubanshe, 2015), 46–50.

³⁹Pu, *Guo zhi dachen*, 67–74.

Nevertheless, these acts of bureaucratic protest were significantly different in nature from those of previous reigns. From the Yongzheng emperor's handling of Zeng Jing's 曾鯨 "treason" to the Qianlong emperor's treatment of "soulstealers" and imperial mourning practices, bureaucratic reactions, no matter how negative, were discursively acquiescent, sometimes bordering on the unctuous.⁴⁰ Beginning with the Jiaqing reign, bureaucrats, in protesting what they viewed as misinformed, unfair, or simply wrong imperial judgment, felt a deep sense of self-righteous indignation against their ruler. The uncoordinated, isomorphic acts of defiance indicated that many bureaucrats of nineteenth-century China had no qualms about incurring the wrath of their ruler through dramatic acts of protest and remonstrance so long as their statements were made. This was in addition to the deterioration of bureaucratic discipline, which in the Jiaqing emperor's view had led to local government malfeasance and examination boycotts that were also an expression of "righteous anger," but on the part of the literati.⁴¹

The case of Wang Ding 王鼎 (1768–1842) was a telling example of the trend, constituting the other corpse admonition in Qing China (to my knowledge, there were only two cases). Wang Ding was known to have taken a hardline on the British off the Canton coast during the Opium War (1839–42) and was one of the most influential Han Chinese bureaucrats in Beijing. He hanged himself after Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850), the leading opponent of the opium trade, was exiled to Xinjiang. Wang Ding wrote a last testament for the Daoguang emperor (r. 1820–50), proclaiming his suicide to be in protest of Lin Zexu's dismissal and the emperor's decision to reopen negotiations with the British. However, Wang Ding's main rival in the "inner Opium War," Mujangga 穆彰阿 (1782–1856), had been pushing for a conciliatory approach toward the British and cowed Wang Ding's son into concealing the testament.⁴² The Daoguang emperor, although saddened by Wang Ding's death, proceeded to sue for peace with the British. At the same time, he bestowed honors on Wang Ding for the latter's steadfast loyalty.⁴³

Some censors became famous for remonstrating against Mujangga, albeit to no avail.⁴⁴ Wang Ding and the censors who took his side could not reverse the court's decision to scapegoat Lin Zexu and exile him to Xinjiang—a gross injustice, from their perspective, to a loyal bureaucrat who had vehemently opposed the British and the opium trade. As

⁴⁰Jonathan D. Spence, *Treason by the Book* (New York: Viking, 2001); Kuhn, *Soulstealers*; Kutcher, *Mourning in Late Imperial China*.

⁴¹Seunghyun Han, "The Punishment of Examination Riots in the Early to Mid-Qing Period," *Late Imperial China* 32.2 (2011), 133–65, and see p. 152. The Jiaqing emperor hoped that local literati and lower-level degree-holders (*juven*) could check bureaucratic misrule. However, as later developments had demonstrated, the empowerment of provincial and county elites irrevocably diminished imperial power at the local level.

⁴²For the biographies of Wang Ding and Mujangga, see Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽, ed., *Qingshi gao liezhuan* 清史稿列傳 (Draft biographies of eminent men of the Qing dynasty) (Taipei: Mingwen shuju, 1985), vol. 4, 11412–18. For references to Wang Ding's suicide, see Meng Sen 孟森, *Ming Qing shi jiangyi* 明清史講義 (Treatises on Ming and Qing history) (Taipei: Liren shuju, 1982), vol. 2, 968; Ni Yuping 倪玉平, *Daoguang wangchao* 道光王朝 (The Daoguang reign) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2008), 188–91; Pamela Kyle Crossley, *Orphan Warriors: Three Manchu Generations and the End of the Qing World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 105; and Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, 212.

⁴³*Qingshi gao liezhuan*, vol. 4, 11415.

⁴⁴Peng Ming 彭明, ed., *Jindai Zhongguo de sixiang licheng: 1840–1949* 近代中國的思想歷程: 1840–1949 (The historical trajectory of modern Chinese thought: 1840–1949) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1999), 32.

many contemporaries had eulogized, Wang Ding must have understood that his death could create a stir in bureaucratic circles but do little to effect the changes he had wished to see.⁴⁵ Qi Junzao 祁雋藻 (1793–1866), a high-ranking minister who had served in the Daoguang, Xianfeng, and Tongzhi courts, broke the silence when he commented, after Mujangga's fall from grace in 1851, that Wang Ding was a "pure minister" (*chunchen* 純臣) who sacrificed his life in fulfillment of his Confucian ideals.⁴⁶ To understand why corpse admonition was a powerful form of bureaucratic protest in nineteenth-century China (and before we examine Wu Kedu's suicide in detail), it may be instructive to discuss briefly the use and narrative of suicide in late imperial Chinese culture and politics.

THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF (MALE) SUICIDE IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

The study of suicide in late imperial China has focused almost exclusively on women who killed themselves to maintain chastity after their fiancés or husbands died. Although there are no statistics on suicide in imperial China before 1900, extant writings reveal that female suicides were more common than male suicides in imperial China.⁴⁷ While female suicides were largely motivated by the values women ascribed to their roles and responsibilities to family, male suicides were usually responses to a broader community, one that extended beyond family, township, or village to the dynasty (*chao* 朝) or "nation" (*guo* 國).⁴⁸

Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145 or 135–86 BCE), who suffered the dishonor of castration but lived to complete *The Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), created an imposing martyr in Qu Yuan 屈原 (340–278 BCE), who drowned himself after his native Chu kingdom was conquered. Since then, for both male and female writers, Qu Yuan had embodied the values of integrity, loyalty, and purity; he was the progenitor of Ming-Qing Chinese political martyrs.⁴⁹ Reform-minded officials of the late Qing Hunan province frequently invoked the words and deeds of Qu Yuan, identifying him as a local ancestor to define their probity, highlight their patriotism, and justify their actions.⁵⁰

⁴⁵On the circumstances surrounding and aftermath of Wang Ding's suicide, see Pu, *Guo zhi dachen*, 499–508.

⁴⁶Qi Junzao 祁雋藻, *Qi Junzao ji* 祁雋藻集 (The complete works of Qi Junzao) (Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe, 2011), vol. 2, 302.

⁴⁷Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 94.

⁴⁸For the historical interpretations and significance of female suicides in Ming-Qing China, see Paul S. Ropp, Paola Zamperini, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, eds., *Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), which first appeared as a special issue in *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 3.1 (2001). See also Margery Wolf, "Women and Suicide in China," in *Women in Chinese Society*, edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 111–41; and Andrew C.K. Hsieh and Jonathan D. Spence, "Suicide and the Family in Pre-modern Chinese Society," in *Normal and Abnormal Behavior in Chinese Culture*, edited by Arthur Kleinman and Tsung-yi Lin (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1981), 29–47.

⁴⁹Xiaorong Li, *Women's Poetry of Late Imperial China: Transforming the Inner Chambers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), passim, and see 136.

⁵⁰Platt, *Provincial Patriots*, passim.

As Paola Zamperini suggests, male suicide was always tragically heroic, and the choice not to commit suicide was always problematic. Those who chose disgrace over suicide felt compelled to invoke Sima Qian and to assign for themselves the role of the record-keeper who possessed the moral obligation not to die.⁵¹

To be sure, Qu Yuan enjoyed a mixed legacy among both premodern and modern Chinese intellectuals, although the image of him as an icon of dissent and loyalty ultimately prevailed. Most writers followed Sima Qian's description of Qu Yuan, whom he had created in his own image, as a representative of scholarly frustration, as someone who was born out of his time and lived unappreciated.⁵² However, according to the Han-dynasty historian Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), Qu Yuan flaunted his talents, exalted himself above others, and criticized his king, which made him a traitor. Seen in this light, Qu Yuan's main motivation was self-aggrandizement, and his suicide reflected a thwarted sense of entitlement on his part.⁵³ Qu Yuan committed an "egoistical suicide," not an "altruistic" one, in that he ended his life because he felt predestined by fate and could no longer endure life as it was, not because he was serving some abstract concept or higher purpose.⁵⁴

The contention over Qu Yuan's image of whether he was a loyal official true to his words or a self-serving poet who had exaggerated his own abilities and sought both real and posthumous fame was also reflected in the dilemma that the Ming-dynasty scholar-officials faced after their dynasty fell to the Manchus in 1644. Faced with martyrs who had committed suicide during the Ming-Qing transition, surviving subjects (*yimin* 遺民) justified their choice of living through the ordeal as a more difficult and unbearable one to make.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Han Chinese scholars by the late eighteenth century generally had a more nuanced and sophisticated definition of bureaucratic loyalty, as characterized by their involvement in the state-sponsored scholarly projects of the eighteenth-century Manchu regime.⁵⁶

In *The Analects*, Confucius proposed that for gentlemen (*junzi* 君子), "while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished" (*shashen chengren* 殺身成仁).⁵⁷ In particular, he praised Shi Yu 史魚, who lived sometime during the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), for standing firm on his

⁵¹Paola Zamperini, "Untamed Hearts: Eros and Suicide in Late Imperial Chinese Fiction," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 3.1 (2001), 99–100.

⁵²Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 14. For the evolving image of Qu Yuan as a patriotic poet, see Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

⁵³Gopal Sukhu, *The Shaman and the Heresiarch: A New Interpretation of the Li sao* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 7.

⁵⁴For the differences between altruistic and egoistical suicides, see Emile Durkheim (trans. Robin Buss), *On Suicide* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 156–261. See also Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, 95.

⁵⁵Ho Koon-piu, "Should We Die as Martyrs to the Ming Cause? Scholar-officials' Views on Martyrdom during the Ming-Qing Transition," *Oriens Extremus* 37.2 (1994), 123–51. To date, we do not have a convincing explanation of why dying for a fallen dynasty was an issue that was more pronounced during the Ming-Qing transition than in previous periods of collapse and disorder.

⁵⁶R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasures: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 1987), and see 83.

⁵⁷*The Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau, Book XV, no. 9 (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 133.

principles: “When the Way prevails in the state he is as straight as an arrow, yet when the Way falls into disuse in the state he is still as straight as an arrow.”⁵⁸ Shi Yu was the Minister of Rites in the Wei kingdom. However, the Duke of Wei had not held him in high regard and refused to heed his advice regarding state affairs. On his death bed, Shi Yu ordered his son to place his corpse below the window of the house and not bury it. Through this action, Shi Yu was admonishing his lord for his favoritism toward sinister ministers in the court.⁵⁹

It is worth mentioning that Shi Yu did not commit suicide to admonish his ruler. Gradually, however, Shi Yu became the progenitor of practitioners of corpse admonition in imperial China. Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (200–121 BCE) admonished Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) for traveling incognito and not devoting himself to governing the realm. Allegedly, he told his son, “Though I am no Shi Yu, I hope I might just be able to use my corpse to admonish him,” and then committed suicide.⁶⁰ In this story, the assertion of pure morality trumped everything else, as Mencius suggested with his famous metaphor of fish and bear paws: “Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take dutifulness than life.”⁶¹ In short, the Confucian-minded remonstrator should point his ruler toward positive change without regard for himself.⁶²

That said, corpse admonition, which involved the spectacle of bodily death and conveyed a political message with it, was seldom used as a form of bureaucratic protest in imperial China. Bureaucrats preferred tapping into the wealth of anecdotes and principles in the Confucian classics and relying on their eloquence and rhetorical tactics to sway the emperor to their opinion on state affairs. The high point for corpse admonition came in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when officials committed suicide to dissuade the intransigent Jiajing emperor (r. 1521–67) from posthumously elevating his father, a prince, to the status of emperor after succeeding his childless cousin to the throne. To the practitioners of corpse admonition, all other alternatives were exhausted, from submitting petitions and remonstrating with the emperor in the court to refusing to cooperate with the emperor in matters of government and kneeling outside the palace.⁶³ The Jiajing emperor stood firmly by his decision to honor his birth parents and not consider himself the adopted son of the late emperor’s father Xiaozong (r. 1487–1505). In this “Great Rites Controversy,” both the emperor and his courtiers searched the rich repertoire of historical precedents and classical quotes to define the parameters of ritual propriety and to resolve the succession crisis in their favor. As Carney T. Fisher notes, the controversy was more a moral conundrum than a political one. Disputants of the emperor’s actions protested his deviation from the imperial rituals and succession rules, which were established by

⁵⁸*The Analects*, Book XV, no. 7, 133.

⁵⁹*Kongzi jiaoyu* 孔子家語, *juan 5* (Shanghai: Huiwentang shuju, 1917), 59–62.

⁶⁰Thomas Eric Smith, “Ritual and the Shaping of Narrative: The Legend of the Han Emperor Wu,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1992), 400. According to Sima Qian, however, Gongsun Hong did not commit suicide or admonish the emperor about the incognito excursions, but enjoyed the latter’s trust until his death.

⁶¹*Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau, Book VI, Part A (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 166.

⁶²On the Confucian notion of remonstrance, see Hucker, “Confucianism and the Censorial System,” 193–207.

⁶³Huai Xiaofeng 懷效鋒, *Jiajing zhuanzhi zhengzhi yu fazhi* 嘉靖專制政治與法制 (The authoritarian political and legal system of the Jiajing reign) (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989), 116.

the dynasty's founders and influenced by Confucian morality, and the termination of his uncle and cousin's agnatic line, not his legitimacy to succeed the preceding emperor.⁶⁴

Despite the slow but growing trend of self-righteous expression of political dissent on the part of bureaucrats in the nineteenth century, and for all the spectacle of violence on one's body, corpse admonition remained an unpopular form of bureaucratic protest during the Qing dynasty, which witnessed only two cases of corpse admonitions. The Qing state was indeed well known for its "prison of letters" (*wenzi yu* 文字獄) or literary inquisition, but it was relatively receptive to opposing views in policymaking on the condition that they did not criticize the emperor or interfere with the emperor's final decisions.⁶⁵ After Wang Ding's death, as James M. Polachek notes, a literati-bureaucratic opposition galvanized and acquired a "highly visible organizational form," namely the anti-British Gu Yanwu Shrine Association.⁶⁶ It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the development of this association and its relevance to late Qing politics, a task that Polachek has admirably accomplished. Suffice it to say that collective action, as opposed to individual action (including the sensation of corpse admonition), through approved or condoned channels of protest, was usually preferred by bureaucrats who sought not to subvert imperial power, but to work their way around it. The fact that the association, named after the famous anti-Manchu Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82), was actually allowed to operate bespoke the high tolerance of the mid- and late Qing state (which retreated from Qianlong's intrusive politics) for strongly-expressed opinions that might not be congruent with its own.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, in the context of changing bureaucratic behavior and widening *yanlu* in nineteenth-century Chinese politics, corpse admonition still signaled the ruler's ultimate failure, for whatever reason, to listen to its practitioner. Given the sensation of corpse admonition, the ruler had to address it and give it a proper hearing. This was the case for Wu Kedu's suicide, which will now be reviewed at length.

DYING TO MEMORIALIZE (EVENT)

Wu Kedu was born into a family of letters in Gaolan 皋蘭, Gansu province, in 1812. Although his ancestors enjoyed no significant success in the civil service examinations, he received a holistic education in the Confucian classics at home, and was particularly fond of copying the memorials and literary works of Du Fu 杜甫 (712–70), Lu Zhi 陸贄 (754–805), and Lu You 陸游 (1125–1210), whose writings displayed their loyalty to the emperor and strong political convictions. Wu Kedu admired and identified with Lin Zexu; he copied the latter's petition to the Daoguang emperor to ban the opium trade.⁶⁸ After a few unsuccessful tries, Wu Kedu finally passed the metropolitan

⁶⁴Carney T. Fisher, *The Chosen One: Succession and Adoption in the Court of Ming Shizong* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).

⁶⁵Yan Chongnian 閻崇年, *Zhengshuo Qingchao shier di* 正說清朝十二帝 (Correct accounts of the twelve emperors of the Qing) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006).

⁶⁶Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, 206.

⁶⁷Polachek, *The Inner Opium War*, 205–35.

⁶⁸These copies are collected in *Wu yushi Kedu shouze* 吳御史可讀手澤 (The writings left by censor Wu Kedu), housed in the Peking University Library. See Guo Weidong 郭衛東, *Qingfu yu zaijian: Ming*

examinations and attained the *jinshi* 進士 title in 1850. He became a secretary (*zhushi* 主事) at the Board of Punishments (*Xingbu* 刑部), where he was known to be uncompromising in recommending punishments for corrupt, incompetent, and negligent officials.⁶⁹

During his stint in Beijing, Wu Kedu befriended Li Hongzao 李鴻藻 (1820–79) and Weng Tonghe 翁同龢 (1830–1904), who were Hanlin Academicians, alleged leaders of the Qingliu faction, and chief tutors of the Tongzhi emperor. Wu Kedu remained on good terms with them throughout his career.⁷⁰ Known for their outspokenness (an unintended substitute for censorial opinion), Li Hongzao and Weng Tonghe had supported the empress dowagers against Sushun 肅順 (1816–61) in the Xinyou 辛酉 Coup (1861) and were instrumental to the dowagers' rise to power.⁷¹ As a lowly ranked bureaucrat but a prolific poet, Wu Kedu mingled with poet-ministers and Qingliu members such as Zhang Zhidong, Zhang Peilun, and Chen Baochen.⁷²

The Qingliu faction was a loose, Beijing-based coalition of Hanlin Academicians and concerned scholar-officials who generally rejected Zeng Guofan and Li Hongzhang's adoption of western firearms and institutions as the principal means to strengthen China. In place of western learning, Qingliu members proposed revisiting the classics and history, which formed the bedrock of the informal "Qing constitution," for inspiration to resolve the various crises that were plaguing the empire. Qingliu members were similar to the Spring Purification Circle in aspiration and organization in that they emphasized statecraft learning and wider political participation by non-degree-holding but morally upright Confucian literati.⁷³

To their detractors, however, Qingliu members were ideologues who knew little about the conduct of practical matters but were determined to eradicate their political opponents, namely those who advocated reforms to the Confucian order.⁷⁴ The overseas Chinese reformist Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 (1857–1928), for instance, observed that Qingliu members regarded Zeng Guofan, an otherwise loyal Confucian scholar and new-style intellectual-official who staffed his "private bureaucracy" (*mufu* 幕府) with technical specialists from his native province rather than appointees from the civil

zhongye zhi Xinhai geming de zhengzhi wenming 傾覆與再建：明中葉至辛亥革命的政治文明 (Fall and reconstruction: Political culture from the mid-Ming to the Xinhai Revolution) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2009), 41.

⁶⁹*Qingshi gao liezhuan*, vol. 5, 12461.

⁷⁰Chen, "Qingliu dang chengyuan wenti kaoyi," 244–49.

⁷¹On the links between the Qingliu faction and the empress dowagers, see Wang, *Wan Qing zhengzhi shi*, 372–405; Lloyd E. Eastman, "Ch'ing-i and Chinese Policy Formation during the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 24.4 (1965), 595–611; Mary Backus Rankin, "'Public Opinion' and Political Power: *Qingyi* in Late Nineteenth Century China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 41.3 (1982), 453–84; Luke S.K. Kwong, "Imperial Authority in Crisis: An Interpretation of the Coup D'état of 1861," *Modern Asian Studies* 17.2 (1983), 221–38; and Luke S.K. Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days: Personalities, Politics, and Ideas of 1898* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁷²On Wu Kedu and Zhang Zhidong's poetry links (reminiscent of similar ones of the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns in Polachek's account), see Lu Yin 陸胤, *Zhengjiao cunxu yu wenjiao zhuanxing: Jindai xueshushi shang de Zhang Zhidong xuerenquan* 政教存續與文教轉型：近代學術史上的張之洞學人圈 (The continuation of statecraft learning and the transformation of Confucian teachings: Zhang Zhidong's scholarly circle in modern intellectual history) (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2015), 48.

⁷³On the scholarly trend of Qingliu members, see Lu, *Zhengjiao cunxu yu wenjiao zhuanxing*, 38–39.

⁷⁴Wang, *Wan Qing zhengzhi shi*, 378–79.

service examinations, as a “great minister” (*dachen* 大臣) and not a “Confucian minister” (*ruchen* 儒臣). In Gu Hongming’s impression, Qingliu members’ idea of great ministers was those who served the administration with honor but disregarded Confucian learning; that of Confucian ministers was those who equated Confucian morality with practical ability and used it to guide their every action and policy. Seemingly oblivious to the fiscal difficulties of the court to provide for local administrative needs, Qingliu members deplored the Self-Strengtheners as the “Impure Stream” (*zhuoliu* 濁流) and questioned their moral character.⁷⁵ As a Qingliu member, Wu Kedu did not engage in the debate over the right mixture of Chinese and western influences in policymaking and statecraft, even though he remained a traditional scholar-official who swore ultimate allegiance to his emperor and Confucian ancestors.

To put Wu Kedu in perspective, it may be instructive to compare him with Zhang Zhidong, a Qingliu member and famous remonstrator who was nevertheless identified as a Self-Strengthening intellectual-official. Although Zhang Zhidong also believed that it was in China’s best interests to selectively adopt western institutions and knowledge to strengthen itself, he repeatedly censured Li Hongzhang and his protégés for their allegedly uncritical, wholesale import of all things that were western.⁷⁶ To be sure, Zhang Zhidong might also have attacked his political opponents to improve his political standing and secure scarce resources for his own “reformist” initiatives.⁷⁷ Whatever the case may be, we should note that Qingliu and Yangwu were not fixed binaries and certainly did not encapsulate all the complex ideas and values of late Qing scholars. We may thus infer from Hao Chang’s example of “reformist” versus “revolutionary” that it is facile and misleading to pigeonhole any late Qing intellectual as either Qingliu or Yangwu. In the context of a gradual dissolution of legitimacy of Confucian cosmological emperorship during the late Qing, when the idea of the Son of Heaven became incompatible with increasing knowledge of natural laws and western sciences, almost all self-professed Chinese intellectuals responded by reconfiguring their worldview based on both prior knowledge and new concepts of the cosmos and social world.

For example, Zhang Zhidong, by his own interpretation, justified the “traditional” Qing dynastic order against radical reformism by appealing to “secular” images of a

⁷⁵Gu Hongming had served in Zhang Zhidong’s private bureaucracy as an expert in diplomacy and western learning. See He Gangde 何剛德, *Chunming menglu* 春明夢錄 (The record of Chunming’s dreams) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji shudian, 1983), 8. On the “professionalization” and “rationalization” of the late Qing bureaucracy and the transitional nature of private bureaucracies under Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, Zhang Zhidong, and Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), see Li Zhiming 李志茗, *Wan Qing si da mufu* 晚清四大幕府 (The four great private bureaucracies of the late Qing) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2002); K.E. Folsom, *Friends, Guests, and Colleagues: The Mu-fu System in the Late Ch’ing Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); and Jonathan Porter, *Tseng Kuo-fan’s Private Bureaucracy* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1972).

⁷⁶William Ayers, *Chang Chih-tung and Educational Reform in China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Daniel H. Bays, *China Enters the Twentieth Century: Chang Chih-tung and the Issues of a New Age, 1895–1909* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978).

⁷⁷On how the lack of coordination between Zhang Zhidong’s Nanyang fleet and Li Hongzhang’s Beiyang fleet led to Qing China’s naval defeats in the Sino-French War (1884–85) and the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), see Benjamin A. Elman, “Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China’s Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure, 1865–1895,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38.2 (2004), 283–326.

conscientious ruler rather than invoking the mystique of the cosmological emperorship.⁷⁸ Moreover, the dichotomy between Qingliu and Yangwu obscures some of the personal, sometimes intimate relationships between Qingliu and Yangwu members; Li Hongzao, Zhang Peilun, and Li Hongzhang had written letters inquiring after one another's health and about matters of government. In 1882, Li Hongzao even convinced Cixi and Prince Gong 恭親王 (1833–98), in confidence, to relieve Li Hongzhang of his mourning obligations for his mother (*duoqing* 奪情) so that he could remain in service and not have to temporarily retreat to his hometown.⁷⁹ Thus, “Qingliu” was more a phenomenon of heightened political expression among some late Qing bureaucrats who were united more by connections than by convictions.⁸⁰ Although Qingliu members aimed to maintain the status quo by preserving the ruler-centered Confucian order, they were not a clearly defined faction of ideologues who were bent on wrecking the Self-Strengthening Movement.⁸¹

We can only wonder what could have happened if Qingliu members had transformed into new-style, professional intellectual-officials such as Zeng Guofan and Zhang Zhidong, who created private bureaucracies by recruiting other intellectual-officials who might not have passed the civil service examinations, but were recommended for official appointment and promotion for their expertise in administration, diplomacy, transportation, or weaponry; such expertise was increasingly valued after the devastating Taiping Rebellion (1851–64). Nevertheless, the career prospects of Qingliu bureaucrats remained promising in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As a result of his connections and professionalism, Wu Kedu was later promoted to the position of Assistant Department Secretary (*wailang* 外郎) of the Board of Punishments. However, Wu Kedu had to return to his hometown to observe mourning when his mother passed away. Back in Gansu, he became a lecturer at the Lanshan Academy 蘭山書院 and was charged with organizing a local militia, which was a development contemporaneous with other provinces and counties at the time.⁸² When Wu Kedu returned to Beijing from mourning, he received the position of Department Director (*langzhong* 郎中) at the Board of Personnel (*Libu* 吏部).

⁷⁸Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 1–20, and see p. 6.

⁷⁹The “secret” letters are housed at the Shanghai Library. See Jiang Ming 姜鳴, “Li Hongzhang ‘duoqing’ fuchu yu ‘qingliu’ de muhou chouhua: Zhang Peilun Li Hongzhang tongxin yanjiu” 李鴻章“奪情”復出與“清流”的幕後籌劃: 張佩倫李鴻章通信研究 (Li Hongzhang’s return from mourning and behind-the-scenes planning of the “Qingliu”), *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* 3 (2012), 14–22.

⁸⁰I dispute the Qingliu-Yangwu binary, not the use of the categories.

⁸¹Wang Weijiang 王維江, “*Qingliu*” yanjiu “清流”研究 (A study of “Qingliu”) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2009). See also Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, *Hanliutang ji* 寒柳堂集 (A volume of Cold Willow Studio) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2015), 213–30. Some scholars have identified a north-south divide in the Qingliu faction based on the birthplaces of its members and their somewhat coincidentally different political viewpoints. See, for example, Lin Wenren 林文仁, *Nan bei zhi zheng yu wan Qing zhengju (1861–1884): Yi junjichu Han dachen wei hexin de tantao* 南北之爭與晚清政局 (1861–1884): 以軍機處漢大臣為核心的探討 (The struggle between the north and the south and late Qing politics [1861–1884]: A study of Han Chinese Grand Councilors) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2005).

⁸²Liu Jinzao 劉錦藻, *Qingchao xu wenxian tongkao* 清朝續文獻通考 (Encyclopedia of the historical records of the Qing dynasty, continued), *juan* 215, *bin* 14 “tuanlian” 團練 [militia] (1915; Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2000), 9625.

Later, Wu Kedu was appointed as a censor and was known to be plainspoken in his new posting. By then, however, censorial opinion was barely audible and politically weak. As a reminder, censors had failed to impeach Mujangga. Their opinions were practically ignored by the Tongzhi emperor when he insisted on restoring the Old Summer Palace (Yuanming Yuan 圓明園) despite bureaucratic corruption and fiscal difficulties. It took the combined pressure of the empress dowagers and (to a lesser extent) Prince Gong, who were the powerbrokers of 1860s and 1870s Qing politics, to make the Tongzhi emperor relent on his stance.⁸³ Censorial opinion was important and relevant only from the ruler's perspective. Shortly after the death of Xianfeng emperor, censor Dong Yuanchun 董元醇 (?-?) petitioned the throne to honor the empress dowagers Ci'an (1837–81) and Cixi as gatekeepers of Qing imperial power, and keep Sushun, the initial regent for the Tongzhi emperor, at bay. Dong Yuanchun's memorial became the justification needed by Prince Gong and the empress dowagers to remove Sushun from power and execute him. However, for his presumptuous action against an existing regent, Dong Yuanchun was never fully relied on and trusted by Cixi, who assumed Sushun's position as the regent. Dong Yuanchun had transgressed unspoken, never explicitly stated out-of-bounds markers of political behavior, and faded into oblivion soon after his purpose had been served.⁸⁴

Wu Kedu soon experienced how irrelevant censorial opinion had become by the late Qing period. He once complained about Chenglu 成祿 (?-?), the military commander (*tidu* 提督) of Urumqi and a close associate of Prince Chun 醇親王 (1840–91) and the Aisin Gioro imperial clan. Wu Kedu denounced Chenglu for massacring an entire village of innocent men, women, and children, heavily taxing the local population, and being afraid to confront and suppress rebel forces. Wu Kedu's lengthy and strongly worded memorial on why Chenglu should be brought to task and executed and contending that the emperor should order either the death of Chenglu or his own death if his statements were false, offended Prince Chun and the Tongzhi emperor, who demoted Wu Kedu by three ranks and ordered him to lecture at the Lanshan Academy.⁸⁵ Although Wu Kedu seemed content and relaxed in his hometown after his demotion, he sometimes in his poems betrayed his true feelings about the lack of reciprocity for his loyalty to the court.⁸⁶

In 1875, the Tongzhi emperor died without a son and designated successor. The empress dowagers, who had already taken over the reins of government during Tongzhi's illness in the name of tutelage (*xunyu* 訓諭), designated Zaitian 載湉 (the future Guangxu emperor), Prince Chun's son and a first cousin of Tongzhi through both his father and mother, as the "heir to the throne" (*si huangdi* 嗣皇帝) and adopted son of the Xianfeng emperor. It is worth mentioning that on the eve of the death of the

⁸³Young-tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Mokros, "Reconstructing the Imperial Retreat," 76–118.

⁸⁴Wang Kaixi 王開璽, *Wan Qing de si zhang miankong: wan Qing renwu de sixiang yu shigong* 晚清的四張面孔：晚清人物的思想與事功 (The four faces of the late Qing: The thought and merits of late Qing personalities) (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2015), 204–33.

⁸⁵*Qingshi gao liezhuan*, vol. 5, 12461.

⁸⁶Wu Kedu 吳可讀, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji* 吳柳堂先生文集 (The collected works of Wu Kedu) (Shanghai: Jicheng tushu gongsi, 1908), *passim*.

Tongzhi emperor, Prince Gong, the only person who could have competed with the empress dowagers for imperial power at the time, took over the vetting of Manchu memorials (Li Hongzao vetted the Chinese ones) on behalf of the emperor, and approved Li Hongzhang's and Zuo Zongtang's requests for more military funding at his own discretion. This turn of events alarmed Cixi and revealed the tenuous position of the dowager-regents in the existing political structure.⁸⁷ Ci'an and especially Cixi decided to tune the circumstances to their favor. Without conferring with Prince Chun and Prince Gong, they quickly proclaimed Guangxu as the new emperor by pointing out that Xianfeng had no second son and that it was unacceptable to continue his line with someone older than Tongzhi. Their move violated the Manchu law of succession, which held that a new emperor should be from a younger generation.⁸⁸ Confucian rites also demanded that Tongzhi's successor belonged to a younger generation than his own so that he could perform the ancestral ceremonies for Tongzhi.

Behind the scenes, Cixi instructed Pan Zuyin 潘祖蔭 (1830–90) and Weng Tonghe (Weng was the chief imperial tutor of Guangxu) to discuss and recommend her decision publicly so that she could formally “approve” their proposal. By Cixi's design, Guangxu assumed the throne by filial adoption (*jisi* 繼嗣) and not by agnatic adoption (*jitong* 繼統). After Tongzhi's death, the adopted Guangxu became Tongzhi's brother and Xianfeng's only living son and could legitimately succeed Xianfeng. However, the question of Tongzhi's heir remained because *jisi* was prioritized to justify the position of the empress dowagers in the new reign. Whose agnatic line should Guangxu's heir inherit, Guangxu or Tongzhi's? The edict proclaiming Guangxu as the emperor mentioned that Guangxu's son would claim the *tong* (namely, the throne), but fell short of prescribing whose *tong* it would be. Cixi had her agenda in nominating Guangxu as the adopted son of Xianfeng. If Guangxu had become the adopted son of Tongzhi, then Tongzhi's empress (whom we know Cixi hated) would be elevated to the status of empress dowager, and Cixi would have to retire from active politics and could no longer on any grounds “rule behind the curtains” (*chuilian tingzheng* 垂簾聽政).⁸⁹

Cixi's arrangement was unacceptable by Confucian standards, which as we know from the Great Rites Controversy of the Ming, defined the rules of imperial succession as a moral issue and accorded great importance to the continuation of the agnatic lines of former emperors. Self-styled Confucian scholar-officials, both Han Chinese and non-Han Chinese, were worried that Tongzhi's agnatic line would be terminated with Guangxu being designated as Xianfeng's son. As a consolation to the concerned bureaucrats, Guangxu never made an attempt to elevate Prince Chun to the status of emperor, as the Jiajing emperor did for his deceased father—to the dismay of Ming-dynasty literati—which would have further complicated the matter.

In something like an act of no confidence, Guang'an 廣安 (?–?), a Mongol bannerman and Grand Secretariat Academician Reader-in-waiting (*shidu xueshi* 侍讀學士),

⁸⁷Guo, *Qingfu yu zaijian*, 27.

⁸⁸On why Cixi selected Guangxu as heir to Tongzhi, see Guo, *Qingfu yu zaijian*, 32–34. According to Folsom, Cixi succeeded by drawing military support from Li Hongzhang. See his *Friends, Guests, and Colleagues*, 169.

⁸⁹Bastid, “Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” 160–62. Tongzhi's empress died under mysterious circumstances shortly after his death.

memorialized the throne requesting that the decree designating the future son of Guangxu as Tongzhi's heir be engraved on a tablet so that the decision would not be overturned in the future.⁹⁰ He cited the example of Emperor Taizong of Song (r. 976–97), who had designated his own son as successor instead of his nephew, the son of Emperor Taizu (r. 960–76), contrary to the wishes of Taizong's mother, who had persuaded Taizu to pass the throne to his brother Taizong. According to Guang'an, regents should not change or undermine the order of succession to the throne at their whim. Although he accepted that the choice of a successor was the sole prerogative of the throne, he was concerned about the lack of clearly defined rules governing imperial succession and the provision of heirs for the deceased Tongzhi.

As Bastid argues, Guang'an's memorial reached the throne with the help of officials anxious about the future of succession rules, and the empress dowagers' leniency in not punishing him—they simply dismissed his petition as “ignorant and obsolete” (*maomei duchen* 冒昧瀆陳)—indicated that they and their advisers preferred to tread cautiously in the face of literati-bureaucratic opinion.⁹¹ In 1876, censor Pan Dunyan 潘敦嚴 (?–?) made a similar appeal to standardize the rules of imperial succession. However, by insinuating that Tongzhi's wife, who could have become the empress dowager under an emperor of a generation younger than that of Tongzhi, had died of unnatural causes (rumors were rife that Cixi killed her), Pan Dunyan was dismissed from office for his “baseless words” (*wu ju zhi ci* 無据之詞).⁹²

Wu Kedu was disappointed that after the dismissal of Pan Dunyan, debate on the matter had not been sustained. Given the centrality of the ruler in his worldview, his feelings were intelligible. He wanted to support Guang'an's petition by submitting one of his own, but he was advised by a friend that it would be futile to do so as a recently demoted official. After his demotion and return to the Lanshan Academy, Wu Kedu became acquainted with Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠 (1812–85), who was the governor of Shaanxi and Gansu and had also petitioned to the throne to have Chenglu removed from his appointment. Zuo Zongtang liked Wu Kedu for his candor, and they shared an appreciation for men of probity. When he was a censor, Wu Kedu had recommended that ancestral temples and posthumous honors be conferred on officials who had died in their course of duty, and these were officials whom Zuo Zongtang had appreciated as his colleagues.⁹³ Wu Kedu wrote many poems in praise of Zuo Zongtang's character and administration of Gansu and Shaanxi,⁹⁴ and Zuo Zongtang placed Wu Kedu in charge of many matters related to education and examinations.⁹⁵ Throughout his stint in Gansu, Wu Kedu was not pleased with what he viewed as complicity on the part of bureaucrats and even his close associates, who had been paying lip service to the need for formal guidelines to dictate imperial succession with “pious platitudes and vague

⁹⁰*Daqing Dezong jing huangdi shilu* 大清德宗景皇帝實錄 (Veritable records of the Guangxu emperor), *juan* 3 (Taipei: Hualian chubanshe, 1964), 6a–6b.

⁹¹Bastid, “Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” 162–63.

⁹²Guo, *Qingfu yu zaijian*, 38–39.

⁹³Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠, *Zuo Zongtang quanji* 左宗棠全集 (The complete works of Zuo Zongtang), *zougao* 6 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1992), 185–87.

⁹⁴Wu Kedu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, *passim*.

⁹⁵Zuo, *Zuo Zongtang quanji, shuxin* 2, 527–28; and *shuxin* 3, 131.

bromides.” From his perspective, bureaucrats had failed in their duty and right to curb the excesses of imperial power.⁹⁶

Wu Kedu waited four years before he could strike the right opportunity to make his appeal. In 1879, the entombment of Tongzhi was scheduled to take place, and Wu Kedu requested to be among the retinue to participate in the ceremonies. His request was approved. After completing the ceremonies, he left the entourage alone and swallowed poison at a temple in Jizhou 薊州, a temple as close to Tongzhi’s mausoleum as a bureaucrat of his rank could go to, leaving a sealed, secret memorial at the site.⁹⁷ According to Qing regulations, an official’s memorial would be vetted by his departmental superior for offensive language before it could be submitted to the emperor. However, Baoyun 寶瑩 (1807–91), the Manchu Minister of Personnel (*Libu shangshu* 吏部尚書), and the local bureaucrats who handled Wu Kedu’s case understood that corpse admonition in the Confucian world, which was the most honorable display of loyalty by a civil official, was a potentially sensitive and serious matter. They treated it as a confidential matter and left Wu Kedu’s memorial sealed for presentation to the throne.⁹⁸ In the memorial system of the Qing palace, secret palace memorials were contained in securely sealed envelopes to be opened only by the emperor; damaged or opened envelopes would subject the messenger or whoever handled them to capital punishment.⁹⁹

Seeking to emulate Shi Yu, Wu Kedu had been making arrangements for his staged suicide, from finding the perfect site to commit suicide to preparing his coffin and funeral garments.¹⁰⁰ He decided that only his suicide could revive bureaucratic attention to the succession issue and problematize controversial decisions of the empress dowagers. Understanding that his bold censure of the empress dowagers might invite punishment of his family, he entrusted his son to Zuo Zongtang in a posthumous letter.¹⁰¹ In writing his suicide letter to his son, Wu Kedu did not forget to lament that he could no longer discuss current affairs and poetry with Zhang Zhidong, Zhang Peilun, and Zhang Renjun 張人駿 (1846–1923); Zhang Renjun was Zhang Peilun’s nephew and had served as a compiler in the Hanlin Academy.¹⁰²

In his final testament, Wu Kedu called himself a “guilty subject” (*zuichen* 罪臣) for his corpse admonition, stating that it was erroneous to arrange for Guangxu to succeed

⁹⁶Chen Jiexian 陳捷先, *Cixi xiezhen* 慈禧寫真 (A portrait of Cixi) (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban shiye, 2010), 155. See also Keith Laidler, *The Last Empress: The She-Dragon of China* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley, 2003), 158.

⁹⁷Zhu Shoupeng 朱壽朋, comp., *Guangxu chao Donghua xulu* 光緒朝東華續錄 (Continuation of the annals of Donghua, Guangxu reign) (Shanghai: Jicheng tushu gongsi, 1909), *juan* 27, 12a–12b. On the context of Wu Kedu’s suicide, see Bastid, “Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” 163; and Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 158–59.

⁹⁸Baoyun memorial, *Zou wei zhushi Wu Kedu pai chu xingli hou zai tu fudu zijin yi you mizhe daizou shi* 奏為主事吳可讀派出行禮後在途服毒自盡遺有密摺待奏事 (Report on Wu Kedu’s suicide after the entombment of Tongzhi), Guangxu 5.3.17 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120503R17. For a fuller description, see Guo Weidong 郭衛東, “Lun Guangxu chao de jitong zhi zheng” 論光緒朝的繼統之爭 (The dispute over Guangxu’s succession to the throne), *Qingshi yanjiu* 1 (2009), 96.

⁹⁹Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control in China*, 47–51.

¹⁰⁰Wu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, *juan* 4, 29.

¹⁰¹Wu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, *juan* 4, 17–35.

¹⁰²Wu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, *juan* 4, 20.

Xianfeng and not Tongzhi, to whom he was personally grateful for sparing his life when he made the presumptuous proposal to remove Chenglu many years earlier. Wu Kedu pointed to the absence of a decree that formally guaranteed that Guangxu's future son, who was mentioned in passing in the edicts to be the adopted son of Tongzhi, would assume the throne. For everything that the empress dowagers had pledged to do, the future was uncertain, and Tongzhi might not have descendants to offer ancestral worship to his spirit because only an emperor could perform such an honor for a deceased monarch. Wu Kedu informed the empress dowagers that the practice of transferring imperial power from father to son, which had continued unabated for two centuries since the founding of the Qing dynasty, must remain valid. He therefore requested that a new edict be issued proclaiming the first-born son of Guangxu as both the adopted son of Tongzhi and the successor to the throne.¹⁰³ This, although Wu Kedu had not explicitly said so, meant returning to the imperial primogeniture of pre-Qing Han Chinese dynasties. Thus, as Bastid argues, Wu Kedu's memorial was concerned with the role of paternal inheritance in the transfer of imperial power.¹⁰⁴

Wu Kedu hoped that his suicide could restrain the empress dowagers' exercise of arbitrary power with regard to the choice of an heir to the throne and prevent the use of adoption to suit the regents' whimsical purposes. In Wu Kedu's view, unless it was somewhat codified in writing that Guangxu's heir would offer sacrifice to Tongzhi as his son, neither the empress dowagers nor Guangxu himself could guarantee that the successor would act according to their vague, oral instructions. The Chinese respect for the written word and for the authority of public statements issued by the highest order, which were viewed as more effective in inducing submission than coercion and terror, cannot be overstated.¹⁰⁵ Key opponents of the Qingliu group (i.e., "provincial patriots" such as Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 [1811–72], Li Hongzhang, and their protégés) were silent over the succession issue, perhaps for the fear of risking Cixi's endorsement of their Self-Strengthening Movement. Perhaps the issue, so crucial to the staunchest of self-fashioned Confucian scholar-officials, did not matter that much to them.¹⁰⁶ The Manchu princes and bannermen, as Weng Tonghe observed, had been displeased with Cixi's arbitrary selection of Guangxu as the emperor and disruption of succession rules but, for unknown reasons, were cautious in reacting to Wu Kedu's suicide.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³Wu Kedu memorial, *Zouqing yizhi yuding datong gui shi* 奏請懿旨預定大統歸事 (Request to imperially restore the *datong*), Guangxu 5.3 (exact date not specified; 1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120503099.

¹⁰⁴On the circumstances surrounding Wu Kedu's suicide, I have closely corroborated (with documents from the First Historical Archives of China) and followed Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 163. For a complete English translation of Wu Kedu's last memorial, see *The North China Herald*, July 1, 1879, 9–10.

¹⁰⁵For an example of the power of the written word in China, see Hok-lam Chan, "Legitimizing Usurpation: Historical Revisions under the Ming Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–1424)," in *The Legitimation of New Orders: Case Studies in World History*, edited by Philip Yuen-sang Leung (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007), 75–158. See also Arthur Wright, "Propaganda and Persuasion in Dynastic and Contemporary China," in *Four Views of China*, edited by Robert A. Kapp (Houston: William Marsh Rice University, 1973), 9–18.

¹⁰⁶Platt, *Provincial Patriots*.

¹⁰⁷Weng Tonghe 翁同龢, *Weng Tonghe riji (paiyin ben fu suoyin)* 翁同龢日記 (排印本附索引) (A typeset edition of *The Diary of Weng Tonghe* with index) (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970), vol. 3, 1419–20.

While emphasizing that he had acted alone to absolve other individuals or parties of responsibility, Wu Kedu intended his suicide to be a public act.¹⁰⁸ True enough, Wu Kedu's suicide was sensational. Because the suicide involved the contentious issue of imperial succession and was committed during the entombment of Tongzhi, it aroused keen emotion and polemics in the court. Wang Wenshao 王文韶 (1830–1908), Weng Tonghe, and Zuo Zongtang, who were some of the most prominent bureaucrats of the late Qing era, recorded Wu Kedu's death in their diaries or writings.¹⁰⁹ In something like an inquiry, the empress dowagers asked the Princes, High Ministers, Grand Secretaries, Presidents of Boards, Nine Chief Ministries of State, College of Literature, Imperial Supervisorate of Instruction, Office of Scrutiny, and Censorate, which were virtually all the most important institutions of the Qing court, to jointly and duly deliberate over Wu Kedu's memorial and to present their opinions to them.¹¹⁰

Six different memorials on Wu Kedu's suicide, all by purported Qingliu members, were submitted to the Grand Council. Weng Tonghe recorded in his diary that he convened with Hanlin Academicians Pan Zuyin and Xu Tong 徐桐 (1819–1900), both allies of the empress dowagers, to contemplate how they should respond to Wu Kedu's testament.¹¹¹ They submitted a joint memorial, explaining that the Qing's dynastic law forbade the formal designation of an heir apparent and that Wu Kedu had misread the situation.¹¹²

Prince Li 禮親王 (1843–1914) presented his memorial on behalf of the Manchu princes, stating that the choice of successor had already been clearly made in the edict proclaiming Guangxu to succeed Tongzhi and that Wu Kedu's request was pointless.¹¹³ Baoting, a Hanlin Academician of the Aisin Gioro clan, claimed that the distinction between filial adoption and agnatic adoption was artificial.¹¹⁴ His colleague Huang Tifang argued that the imperial clan was subject to neither the procedures that governed the transmission of hereditary titles nor the rules of inheritance among ordinary families, adding that Guangxu's successor should offer ancestral worship to both Tongzhi and

¹⁰⁸Wu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, juan 1, 6.

¹⁰⁹Wang Wenshao 王文韶, *Wang Wenshao riji* 王文韶日記 (The diary of Wang Wenshao) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), vol. 1, 470; Weng Tonghe, *Weng Tonghe riji*, vol. 2, 1006; Zuo Zongtang, *Zuo Zongtang quanji*, shuxin 3, 486–87.

¹¹⁰*Daqing Dezong jing huangdi shilu*, juan 92, 1a–b. It is also recorded in *Guangxu chao shangyu dang* 光緒朝上諭檔 (Archives of imperial edicts for the Guangxu reign) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008), vol. 5, 132. For the translation of the names of institutions, I have closely followed Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 164.

¹¹¹Weng, *Weng Tonghe riji*, vol. 2, 1010.

¹¹²Yongzheng inaugurated the system of "secret succession"—the emperor writes the name of his heir and seals the edict in a casket, which is placed in the rafters behind a placard hanging in the Qianqing palace and opened only after his death. See Evelyn S. Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 102.

¹¹³Shiduo (Prince Li) memorial, *Zou wei zunzhi heyi Wu Kedu yizhe shi* 奏為遵旨合議吳可讀遺摺事 (Memorial under order to discuss Wu Kedu's final testament), Guangxu 5.4.10 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120504010.

¹¹⁴Baoting memorial, *Zou wei libu zhushi Wu Kedu sixun qingzhi baoyang shi* 奏為吏部主事吳可讀死殉請旨褒揚事 (Request to seek imperial praise of Wu Kedu), Guangxu 5.4.10 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120504010.

Guangxu.¹¹⁵ Li Duanfen 李端棻 (1833–1907), a censor, reasoned that considering the young age of Guangxu, the choice of successor would not be made any time soon, recommending that the empress dowagers elucidate their views on the matter, making this the closest option to what Wu Kedu had requested.¹¹⁶

In the end, Zhang Zhidong offered the lengthiest and most elaborate response to Wu Kedu's suicide.¹¹⁷ He first stated that bureaucrats should not interfere in the rules of imperial succession. He then agreed with Baoting that no difference existed between filial and agnatic adoptions and this was an understanding that, according to him, was also shared by the empress dowagers and Guangxu. Zhang Zhidong recalled that ordinary princes were not permitted to offer ancestral worship to a deceased emperor and that only the living emperor could perform the honor. He explained that if the empress dowagers were to grant Wu Kedu's request to nominate Guangxu's first-born son as Tongzhi's successor, they would be violating the dynastic rule that forbade the designation of an heir apparent. Additionally, as Zhang Zhidong explained, doing so risked preventing the most capable son from succeeding if Guangxu had many sons. Thus, Zhang Zhidong proposed that the regents issue a new edict stating that the next successor to the throne would be the adopted son of Tongzhi, regardless of which of Guangxu's sons might become the successor. Guangxu would confirm the edict when he assumed his personal rule.¹¹⁸

Fearing that their widening of *yanlu* over Wu Kedu's suicide might later backfire and foster a Han-Manchu alliance against their controversial decisions, the empress dowagers issued an edict declaring an end to the debate after consolidating the views expressed in the memorials. The same edict stipulated that the heir to the throne would become the adopted son of Tongzhi once Guangxu had decided on his choice of successor. It also stated that copies of Wu Kedu's memorial and the written responses to it, alongside the edict that elicited the responses and this edict itself, were to be deposited in the emperor's study room and used in Guangxu's education. The empress dowagers ended the edict by conferring posthumous honors on Wu Kedu for his candid opinion and loyal devotion. The Board of Personnel provided some money for his funeral expenses and enrolled his name among the list of those in the temple of worthies to whom libations were offered.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵Huang Tifang memorial, *Zouqing youxu qian yushi libu zhushi Wu Kedu yi shen xunzhi deng shi* 奏請優恤前御史史部主事吳可讀以身殉職等事 (Request for the emperor to bestow honors on Wu Kedu for his suicide), Guangxu 5.4.10 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120504010. The Great Rites Controversy and the Ming collapse prompted debates among Qing scholars who were trying to recover Zhou ancestral rites and rebuild lineages at the local level, in a time when ancestral halls and lineages became symbols of Chinese identity in the Manchu empire. See Kai-wing Chow, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 107–28.

¹¹⁶Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 165–67.

¹¹⁷Wang Wenshao viewed Zhang Zhidong's response as the most appropriate and thorough. See his *Wang Wenshao riji*, vol. 1, 473.

¹¹⁸Zhang Zhidong memorial, *Zou wei zunyi libu zhushi Wu Kedu yizhe qing yuding datong gui shi* 奏為遵懿吏部主事吳可讀遺摺請預定大統歸事 (Memorial under order to discuss Wu Kedu's request to imperially restore the *datong*), Guangxu 5.4.10 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120504010. See also Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 167–69.

¹¹⁹*Guangxu chao shangyu dang*, vol. 5, 149–50. For a summary, see also Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 169; and *The North China Herald*, December 24, 1879, 606.

Zhang Zhidong's memorial provided the rhetorical support Cixi needed to justify her own position in the existing power structure. Her final solution to the succession crisis, which had continued for years despite Guangxu's accession to the throne, was to resolve *jisi* and *jitong* all at once by adopting the mainstream bureaucratic opinion of combining them. This was most elaborately enunciated by Zhang Zhidong, that the heir to the throne would become the adopted son of Tongzhi once Guangxu had decided on his choice of successor, and that he would offer ancestral worship to both Guangxu and Tongzhi as the emperor. In effect, Guangxu's son would be the agnatic descendent of Tongzhi and would have two fathers, something which opposing ritualists tried to deny the Jiajing emperor in the Great Rites Controversy. The proposals made by Zhang Zhidong and others sought to remove the theoretical obstacles to Cixi's choice of *jisi* over *jitong*, and can be regarded as attempts to standardize the ancestral rituals of the Qing imperial lineage according to Confucian precepts and historical precedents.

Bastid rightly suggests that by accepting that the successor and son of Guangxu would become Tongzhi's successor, Qing bureaucrats were also ratifying the accession of Guangxu.¹²⁰ As it turned out, Guangxu had no son when he died. Cixi selected Puyi 溥儀, Guangxu's nephew, to succeed him as the Xuantong emperor (r. 1908–12). Previous edicts and memorials had made no provisions for the case of an heirless Guangxu. Cixi had to exercise her arbitrary power enabled by her precedent-setting selection of Guangxu as the emperor, and choose a successor again. However, this time, she did not live long enough to rule behind the curtains and mobilize bureaucratic opinion to support her position.¹²¹

Prince Gong and Prince Chun remained silent throughout the event. Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and their protégés made no mention of Wu Kedu's suicide in their interactions with the throne. Although Wu Kedu's purpose was fulfilled, he was admonished for his supposed ignorance and insolence by supporters of the current political configuration, many of whom were his close associates. To be fair, the Qingliu patrons of Wu Kedu also requested that the emperor and empress dowagers bestow honors on Wu Kedu for his steadfast loyalty to the throne. For their balanced treatment of the event, Baoting, Huang Tifang, and Zhang Zhidong gained prominence and became active remonstrators in the late Qing. Wu Kedu's suicide, which was a political barometer, had the unintended consequence of consolidating formal, bureaucratic support for the empress dowagers' regency and reaffirming for them the loyalty of their allies in the court. This ultimate act of personal sacrifice sorted out and put to rest the positions of the emperor, empress dowagers, and Tongzhi's agnatic line (now combined with Guangxu's), which had been ambiguous since Guangxu ascended the throne in 1875.

More importantly, Wu Kedu's corpse admonition revived bureaucratic interest in the workings of government and heightened scholar-officials' sense of involvement in policymaking within the post-Taiping Qing court. After decades of resurging yet dormant censorial opinion, late Qing bureaucrats generally felt emboldened by Wu Kedu's act and empowered to sway imperial decisions with their memorials and petitions, which were, at least prior to the 1870s, supplementary and seldom decisive in the emperors'

¹²⁰Bastid, "Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty," 169.

¹²¹Chen, *Cixi xiezhen*, 152–56.

decision-making process. Officials who saw themselves as bearers of the Confucian tradition justified Cixi's merger of *jisi* and *jitong* by drawing anecdotes from the classics and history, which governed their and the empress dowagers' actions and speech in an implicit Qing constitution. As a result of Wu Kedu's suicide, that constitution now carried provisions for the rules of imperial succession in writing (i.e., in the edicts deposited in the emperor's study room). This was politically significant, given that such rules had been a source of contention for Ming-Qing bureaucrats and literati because of their lack of codification and vulnerability to change by the arbitrary power of an authoritarian ruler.

JANUS-FACED BUREAUCRATS (EXPERIENCE)

Wu Kedu left his son in the care of Zuo Zongtang, who wrote shortly after his suicide that he could understand why Wu Kedu, given his character, would kill himself to make his point, but he disapproved of his action. Wu Kedu claimed that he was repaying Tongzhi with his suicide (*gan'en tubao zhi si* 感恩圖報之死), which Zuo Zongtang felt was restricted to emotions and not to the purportedly higher purpose of serving and safeguarding the dynasty. To Zuo Zongtang, for all Wu Kedu's righteousness (*zhengyi* 正義), his suicide was "a bit extreme" (*wei pian* 微偏).¹²² Zuo Zongtang held that the Qing practice of not nominating an heir apparent when the emperor was alive had profound meaning. Although he still extolled Wu Kedu for his altruism, he, like Zhang Zhidong, felt that Wu Kedu had breached propriety by disputing imperial prerogatives. Suggesting that bureaucrats could claim no say in the rules of imperial succession, Zuo Zongtang wrote that such rules were decided by heaven and not by man.¹²³ Lamenting Wu Kedu's suicide, Zuo Zongtang helped defray some of Wu Kedu's funeral expenses and occasionally aided his family financially.¹²⁴

At the urging of the local gentry in Jizhou, the site of Wu Kedu's suicide, Li Hongzhang requested the throne to erect a temple to Wu Kedu in which his loyal spirit might find rest.¹²⁵ As a mark of respect to Wu Kedu and respondents to Wu Kedu's testament, the empress dowagers did incorporate Wu Kedu's final testament in the Guangxu emperor's education. It is worth recalling that respondents to Wu Kedu's testament were Qingliu members known to appreciate the purity and value in Confucian rituals and morally upright officials who were willing to sacrifice their lives for their principles. Weng Tonghe confessed in his diary that when he was lecturing on the testament, he

¹²²Zuo, *Zuo Zongtang quanji, shuxin* 3, 486–87.

¹²³Zuo, *Zuo Zongtang quanji, shuxin* 3, 492–93. Many decades later, Puyi shared Zuo Zongtang's opinion, arguing that it was futile to go against Cixi's wishes. See Aisin Jiaoluo Puyi 愛新覺羅溥儀, *Wo de qian ban sheng* 我的前半生 (1964; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 7.

¹²⁴Zuo, *Zuo Zongtang quanji, shuxin* 3, 555–56; 576–77; 658; 687–88.

¹²⁵Li Hongzhang memorial, *Zou wei qian jiancha yushi Wu Kedu yu Jizhou Sanyi miao yi si jianyan qingzhi zhun gai zhou shimin juan jian zhuan ci ru difang Chunqiu jidian shi* 奏為前監察御史吳可讀與薊州三義廟以死諫言請旨準該州士民捐建專祠入地方春秋祭典事 (Request for imperial permission to erect a temple for Wu Kedu with donations from Jizhou residents), Guangxu 5.9.26 (1879) in First Historical Archives of China, Beijing, file number 120509026P. Jizhou was under the jurisdiction of Zhili province, and Li Hongzhang was the Governor-General of the province at the time. See also *The North China Herald*, December 24, 1879, 606.

was moved to tears by its poignant content.¹²⁶ When Weng Tonghe walked past Wu Kedu's ancestral hall, whose construction was sponsored by Zuo Zongtang and erected in 1885, he was overwhelmed with grief.¹²⁷

Professedly speaking for himself and other Confucian scholar-officials, Baoting wrote in admiration of Wu Kedu: "An admonition is easy, but to die for it is difficult."¹²⁸ Zhang Zhidong, the most vocal supporter of Cixi in the succession crisis, regarded Wu Kedu as his first "bosom friend" (*zhiji* 知己) in life. Huang Tifang wrote a eulogy about Wu Kedu, "who was once demoted for petitioning the throne and in the end died for his admonition."¹²⁹ In 1898, after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, Wu Baochu 吳保初 (1869–1913), a protégé of Baoting's who was recommended for office by Li Hongzhang (another proof that the Qingliu-Yangwu divide is artificial), lamented the death of Tan Sitong, an "old Donglin member" (*Donglin jiu dangren* 東林舊黨人), and identified Wu Kedu as a pioneer of late Qing political reforms. To Wu Baochu, both Tan Sitong and Wu Kedu laid down their lives to make their political statements and hence deserved his utmost respect.¹³⁰

As explained by Antonio Gramsci's metaphor of the Centaur, a Greek mythical creature that was half-beast and half-man, the late Qing state used both political coercion (half-beast) and political consent (half-man) in conducting its rule. Late Qing bureaucrats were also Centaurs in that they had a "professional" face (although it might have been due to a consideration of personal political interests rather than coercion) to display when asked by the empress dowagers to present their opinions, and a "sentimental" (or "real") face that revealed itself in their private writings.¹³¹ Speaking as Confucian specialists, Qingliu members were most representative of these Centaurs. They justified the empress dowagers' rise to power when the Tongzhi emperor assumed the throne. They maintained that the empress dowagers' decision to make Guangxu the adopted son of Xianfeng was ritually acceptable by blurring the distinction between *jisi* and *jitong*. Yet, they continued to hold Wu Kedu in high regard, and their private outpouring of emotions for his corpse admonition signaled the internal conflict between ideology and practice they had to grapple with as part of their psychological makeup.

An editorial in the English-language *North China Herald* (Chinese newspapers, including the influential *Shenbao*, were surprisingly silent about the episode) wrote that Wu Kedu's suicide was due to his belief that his opinions on the imperial succession "would not be taken into consideration unless they were emphasized by his death." The editorial was "compelled" to urge its readers to "remark on the want of principle and the rapacity of Chinese officials," from whom Wu Kedu was different: "[This was] a man who knew how to sacrifice his interests to his convictions—not the convictions of Western religion, where something may be sacrificed in the belief that much will be

¹²⁶Weng, *Weng Tonghe riji*, vol. 2, 1164.

¹²⁷Weng, *Weng Tonghe riji*, vol. 2, 1348.

¹²⁸Quoted from Guo, "Lun Guangxu chao de jitong zhi zheng," 97.

¹²⁹Wu, *Wu Liutang xiansheng wenji*, juan 4, 23; 25.

¹³⁰Wu Baochu 吳保初, *Beishan lou shi* 北山樓詩 (Poems from the North Mountain studio) (n.p., 1938), juan 1, 9b.

¹³¹Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 169–90.

obtained.”¹³² *The North China Herald* also claimed that an undercurrent of sadness tinged Wu Kedu’s dying appeal and rendered him “worthy of a place in the ranks of the many patriots that Chinese history has to show.” Nevertheless, Wu Kedu’s suicide failed to bring to justice a “cruel and remorseless tyrant” and led him to “brood over a wrong that he thought his late Sovereign had suffered at the hands of the dual Regency, and a... morbid desire seems to have taken possession of him to emulate the example of earlier patriots whose history plays such an important part in the formation of the character of an educated Chinese.” One of the editors of *The North China Herald* astutely pointed out that the publication of Wu Kedu’s final testament by the Qing court in the *Peking Gazette* was to “allay the suspicion and distrust that the mystery surrounding his death has caused.”¹³³

The North China Herald also noted that Wu Kedu was determined to assist in performing the obsequies of his benefactor (the Tongzhi emperor) and, upon their completion, had offered his life as a sacrifice. An editorial lauded Wu Kedu as the epitome of self-devotion, but it also criticized the “impractical nature of his policy,” claiming that Wu Kedu displayed an impracticability that was the “weak point of the Confucian philosophy.”¹³⁴ Another editorial, written almost a year later, wrote that Wu Kedu’s suicide (a “voluntary death”) was unexpected; only one of the “obsequious crowd” that helped in Tongzhi’s funeral felt called on to die for what appeared to the foreign spectator a “not very important principle.”¹³⁵ The foreigners in China generally viewed Wu Kedu, who had surprised them by being a somewhat atypical Chinese official, in a positive light while denouncing, in their opinion, the authoritarian empress dowagers and their docile bureaucrats. In his 1910 book on Cixi, J.O.P. Bland (1863–1945) lauded Wu Kedu as “an upright and fearless scholar of the best type” whose name, with his “swan-song” (his final testament), would go down in Chinese history.¹³⁶ As the American missionary Arthur Smith (1845–1932) summarized decades after the event, Wu Kedu was “filled with a natural indignation and sense of outrage [and] waited four years before committing suicide near the grave of [Tongzhi]” because Cixi (Smith did not include Ci’an in his condemnation) was acting “above the law.”¹³⁷

That some of most outspoken members of the “conservative” clique, known for their “undeviating attachment to orthodoxy,” defended the empress dowagers after Wu Kedu’s suicide was significant yet puzzling.¹³⁸ At the very least, the case of Wu Kedu shows that these high-ranking officials were not the ideologues that they made themselves out to be. Seen in this light, Wu Kedu was perhaps a greater Confucian ideologue, if we must apply the term. As a censor, he made an honorable display of loyalty with his corpse admonition, requesting the empress dowagers to standardize the rules of imperial

¹³²*The North China Herald*, June 10, 1879, 580.

¹³³*The North China Herald*, July 1, 1879, 2. The *Peking Gazette* obviously carried news about Wu Kedu’s suicide, but its articles were essentially English translations of the edicts and memorials recorded in official sources.

¹³⁴*The North China Herald*, January 15, 1880, 23.

¹³⁵*The North China Herald*, December 9, 1880, 533.

¹³⁶J.O.P. Bland, *China under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzu Hsi* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1910), 135.

¹³⁷*The North China Herald*, April 22, 1922, 254.

¹³⁸Bastid, “Official Conceptions of Imperial Authority at the End of the Qing Dynasty,” 169.

succession according to propriety and ritual. Wu Kedu was, if you may, a progressive Confucian ideologue in that unlike Zhang Zhidong and Zuo Zongtang, he believed that well-intentioned bureaucrats like himself could point out irregularities in imperial succession for correction. Most late Qing literati-bureaucrats failed to reconcile professionalism with sentimentality; Wu Kedu had to commit suicide to merge the two and to serve his cause of checking the arbitrary power of the empress dowagers.

As for western observers, they had long perceived and depicted the late Qing as a period of imperial decadence, decline, and depredation. Their interpretations of Wu Kedu's suicide betrayed their low regard for China and its politics. From their perspective, the exceptionally altruistic and loyal Wu Kedu had no place in the Chinese political structure, a sign that he had failed to become one of the new-style intellectual-officials who were beginning to form the majority of the late Qing bureaucracy.

THE AFTERLIFE OF A CORPSE (MYTH)

At the turn of the twentieth century, political martyrdom in the cause of nationalism and republicanism was in vogue in China. Leaders of the Tongmenghui and later the Kuomintang purposefully merged nationalism and republicanism in their call to overthrow the Qing regime, which toward the end of the nineteenth century had increasingly failed to defend Chinese interests against foreign encroachment. They commemorated, publicized, and glorified the “heroic” deaths of followers who died in resisting the Qing authorities.¹³⁹

Insignificant lives became significant when linked to the “revolutionary enterprise” (*geming shiye* 革命事業) against the Qing regime in their termination.¹⁴⁰ Magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets frequently carried sensationalized reports of assassination-cum-suicide attempts on the lives of Qing high-ranking officials and Republican-era warlords, generating public opinion on what constituted a moral death or murder.¹⁴¹ The “new youths” (*xin qingnian* 新青年) of the May Fourth generation, at least discursively, viewed the fear of death for a political cause as an effrontery to their standing as the new Chinese intellectuals who dared to challenge and subvert traditional thinking and old modes of government. Some killed themselves to force their demand for popular political participation on the various Chinese states emerging after the Qing collapse, which according to these young intellectuals were staffed by self-serving bureaucrats.¹⁴²

¹³⁹David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 241.

¹⁴⁰Hai Qing 海青, “Zisha shidai” de lailin? Ershi shiji zaoqi Zhongguo zhishi qunti de jilie xingwei he jiazhi xuanze “自殺時代”的來臨? 二十世紀早期中國知識群體的激烈行爲和價值選擇 (The coming of the age of suicide? The extreme actions and value judgment of Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2010), 1–57.

¹⁴¹For case studies of such assassinations, see Pan Chong 潘崇, *Qingmo wu dachen chuyang kaocha yanjiu* 清末五大臣出洋考察研究 (A study of the five ministers who led diplomatic missions to Europe in the late Qing) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2014), 89–204; and Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁴²Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

As for the former bureaucrats of the Qing, extremely few of them felt compelled by the Chinese precept of loyalty to commit suicide for their fallen dynasty, which was a far cry from the sensational martyrdoms of the Ming. Many former Qing bureaucrats chose to assume Sima Qian's role of the record-keeper, writing newspaper articles and popular novels that explained and rationalized for themselves why the Qing dynasty fell. Even Liang Ji's 梁濟 (1859–1918) suicide, which the practitioner himself claimed was for the Qing dynasty, was perhaps more “a kind of Confucian conscience at work [to exert moral influence on society] in the midst of deep cultural crisis” than a political statement made in the name of ideology.¹⁴³

Liang Ji, like Wu Kedu, left a final testament when he killed himself. Liang Ji and Wu Kedu's final testaments were a form of autobiographical mythologization in that the authors reworked their prior lives to make them, in Paul A. Cohen's words, “coherent and congruent with the changes in self-conception,” which in their cases, were linked to but not wholly explicable by their allegiance to the Qing throne.¹⁴⁴

Still a more powerful form of mythologization, as Cohen observes, in etching images of the past in people's minds was found in literary works dealing with historical subject matter.¹⁴⁵ Since its occurrence, Wu Kedu's corpse admonition had been most often consumed as a historical event in the satirical “fiction in chapters” (*zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說).¹⁴⁶ In the years surrounding the Qing demise, satirical works emerged to offer historically interpretive accounts of how China remained economically and militarily weak in the face of foreign imperialism. Many of these works, a mix of facts and fantasy, were written by former Qing bureaucrats or their descendants who claimed to possess the insider information to correct misrepresentations of the Qing regime in print media. Coincidentally, Cixi was the main antagonist in them.¹⁴⁷ Because their seemingly misogynistic authors were highly critical of the Qing regime and claimed to expose its ugly secrets, these works were known as “novels of exposure” (*qianze xiaoshuo* 譴責小說). The disintegration of the late Qing bureaucracy was held responsible for the Qing collapse, as Li Boyuan's 李伯元 (1867–1906) *Guanchang xianxing ji* 官場現形記 (*The Bureaucrats*) had sought to convey.¹⁴⁸

More specifically, these satirical writings alluded to the Tongzhi reign and Cixi's regency as the beginning of the end of the Qing, assuming a gender slant as they cautioned readers about having a woman in political control of the Chinese nation.¹⁴⁹ Cai

¹⁴³Lin Yu-sheng, “The Suicide of Liang Chi: An Ambiguous Case of Moral Conservatism,” in *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China*, edited by Charlotte Furth (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 151–68, and see p. 155.

¹⁴⁴Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 216.

¹⁴⁵Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 216.

¹⁴⁶On the revival of the “fiction in chapters” genre in the Republican period, see Yang Tianshi 楊天石, “Zhong yu lishi de ‘yanyi’: Du Cai Dongfan he ta de lishi xiaoshuo” 忠於歷史的“演義”: 讀蔡東藩和他的歷史小說 (True to history: Cai Dongfan and his historical novels), in *Cai Dongfan yanjiu* 蔡東藩研究 (A study of Cai Dongfan), edited by Chen Zhigen 陳志根 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2005), 39–41.

¹⁴⁷On the fiction and legends about Cixi, see Keith McMahon, *Celestial Women: Imperial Wives and Concubines in China from Song to Qing* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 218–23.

¹⁴⁸On the theme of the breakdown of the Qing bureaucratic system in *Guanchang xianxing ji* 官場現形記, see Donald Holoch, “A Novel of Setting: *The Bureaucrats*,” in *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century*, edited by Milena Dolezelova-Velingerova (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 76–115.

¹⁴⁹On such literature, see Li and Zurndorfer, “Rethinking Empress Dowager Cixi through the Production of Art,” 1–20.

Dongfan 蔡東藩 (1877–1945), a former Qing official who was appalled by the corruption and nepotism in bureaucratic circles and quit office to concentrate on literary writing, wrote *Cixi taihou yanyi* 慈禧太后演義 (*The Romance of Empress Dowager Cixi*), an unflattering account of Cixi that attributed the downfall of the Qing to her megalomania and usurpation of imperial power, which demoralized honest Qing bureaucrats and hindered their work. Although Cai Dongfan gave credit to Cixi for the suppression of the Nian (1851–68) and Miao (1854–73) rebellions and for identifying and recruiting capable ministers, he depicted her as being later misled by sinister sycophants who protested the Hundred Days' Reform of the Guangxu emperor and contributed to the collapse of the Qing. Comparing Cixi with Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang 孝莊皇太后 (1613–88), who retired from politics after securing the Qing regime for her grandson Kangxi, Cai Dongfan explained that Cixi had accrued too much power for herself, unrestrained by any person or institution (*furen ke xiaozhi, bu ke dashou* 婦人可小知, 不可大受). According to Cai Dongfan, his objective in writing *Cixi taihou yanyi* was thus to prevent the (re)emergence of female authority (*fangfan nüquan* 防範女權) in China.¹⁵⁰

In the 120-chapter *Qingshi tongsu yanyi* 清史通俗演義 (*The Popular Romance of the Qing*), in which each chapter ended with his own commentary, Cai Dongfan elaborated on that theme in the second half of the work by emphasizing Cixi's rise to power despite bureaucratic and popular resistance to her rule in the context of imperial decline. In Chapter 53, Cai Dongfan first described Wang Ding's corpse admonition as a futile attempt to curb the excesses of Mujangga's power and reverse the Qing's war fortunes against the British, calling it a display of "foolish loyalty" (*yuzhong* 愚忠).¹⁵¹ In contrast, in Chapter 80, which focused on Wu Kedu's corpse admonition and Zuo Zongtang's military expeditions to Xinjiang, Cai Dongfan viewed Wu Kedu's suicide in a more favorable light. While regarding Wu Kedu's memorial as pedantic, Cai Dongfan respected his candor in a court staffed by docile, obsequious bureaucrats who looked after only their own interests. Cai Dongfan concluded that the Qing declined as a result of the "deaths of straight-talking [like Wu Kedu] and experienced [like Zuo Zongtang] officials" (*zhichen wang, laocheng xie* 直臣亡, 老臣謝). In the case of Wu Kedu, his corpse admonition was a futile gesture, because officials did not dare to band together and challenge the authority of the empress dowagers with their lives.¹⁵²

Without referring to Cai Dongfan's works, Liang Qichao's protégé Huang Jun 黃濬 (1891–1937), who seemed oblivious to the suicides that were happening around him at the time, suggested that Wu Kedu's corpse admonition encapsulated a spirit of martyrdom that the Japanese had acquired but the Chinese had abandoned. Speaking for the Republican period, he uncannily shared Cai Dongfan's opinion that China's chronic weakness as a nation stemmed from a consistent lack of people who were willing to sacrifice themselves for their ideals and fellow countrymen like the sacrifice made by Wu Kedu.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰Cai Dongfan 蔡東藩, *Cixi taihou yanyi* 慈禧太后演義 (*The romance of Empress Dowager Cixi*) (1918; Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1980), preface.

¹⁵¹Cai Dongfan 蔡東藩, *Qingshi tongsu yanyi* 清史通俗演義 (*The popular romance of the Qing*) (Shanghai: Shanghai huiwentang shuju, 1916), 358–59.

¹⁵²Cai, *Qingshi tongsu yanyi*, 551.

¹⁵³Huang Jun 黃濬, *Huasuiren sheng'an zhiyi* 花隨人聖盒摭憶 (*The writings of Huasuiren*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 192–93.

At around the same time, or even before *Qingshi tongshu yanyi* was published, Lu Shi'e 陸士譔 (1878–1944), whose grandfather and father had served as minor Qing bureaucrats, wrote the 140-chapter *Qingshi yanyi* 清史演義 (*The Romance of the Qing*), which faithfully documented both Wang Ding and Wu Kedu's corpse admonitions without author commentaries and major changes to the historical plot. Published in 1913, *Qingshi yanyi* was, like the later *Qingshi tongshu yanyi*, a colloquial rendition of Qing history intended for mass readership. In the preface, Lu Shi'e rejected any cosmological explanation for the Qing collapse, arguing that it was more than just a loss of the Mandate of Heaven (*xingwang qi jin guan tianming hu* 興亡豈盡關天命乎). Mentioning in passing Sima Qian and Qu Yuan, who strove to remonstrate with their rulers through their works, Lu Shi'e hoped that his book could enlighten modern bureaucrats on how to govern by avoiding the pitfalls of Qing rule. He believed that the rise and fall of regimes were not preordained and could be altered in their trajectories, for better or for worse, by human action.¹⁵⁴

Another Republican Chinese writer, the less well-known Li Botong 李伯通 (?–?), wrote *Xi taihou yanshi yanyi* 西太后艷史演義 (*The Scandalous Romance of Empress Dowager Cixi*), a largely fictitious account of how Cixi satisfied her carnal desires by sleeping with young men.¹⁵⁵ In his less popular account of Qing history *Qingchao quanshi yanyi* 清朝全史演義 (*The Complete Romance of the Qing Dynasty*), Li Botong distinguished his description of Wu Kedu's suicide from that of Cai Dongfan's and Lu Shi'e's works by highlighting the Qingliu faction. He mocked Qingliu members for not expressing support for Wu Kedu while erroneously suggesting that Qingliu members did not even whimper (*lian ge pi dou bu ceng fang* 連個屁都不曾放) in the succession crisis and the event of Wu Kedu's suicide. He was disappointed with the supposedly righteous Qingliu members for their timidity under imperial pressure. He concluded his chapter on Wu Kedu's corpse admonition by saying that while it irked Cixi, it did little to challenge her power and had even justified her decision to indirectly and posthumously depose the Guangxu emperor and install Puyi as the Xuantong emperor.¹⁵⁶

As former Qing bureaucrat and Republican-era journalist Xu Binbin 徐彬彬 (1888–1961) pointed out, the agnatic line of the Daoguang emperor had long been broken with Xianfeng's death: "Guangxu" literally means "continuation of the [Dao] 'Guang' line" and "Xuantong" literally means "agnatic adoption of 'Xuan' [zong]" (Xuanzong was the Daoguang emperor's temple name). Guangxu and Xuantong, as Prince Chun's son and grandson respectively, were not direct descendants of the Xianfeng emperor. By her violation of the law of filial succession and choice of successors after the Tongzhi reign, Cixi had severed the agnatic line of the Daoguang emperor in practice while maintaining it in name.¹⁵⁷ Considering how easily Cixi had appeased the

¹⁵⁴Lu Shi'e 陸士譔, *Qingshi yanyi* 清史演義 (Shanghai: Dasheng tushuju, 1913), 1–2.

¹⁵⁵Li Botong 李伯通, *Xi taihou yanshi yanyi* 西太后艷史演義 (*The scandalous romance of Empress Dowager Cixi*) (Changchun: Shidai wenyi chubanshe, 2001).

¹⁵⁶Little is known about Li Botong. His account of Wu Kedu's corpse admonition is found in chap. 106 of Li Botong 李伯通, *Qingchao quanshi yanyi* 清朝全史演義 (*The complete romance of the Qing dynasty*) (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1928), vol. 2, *juan* 3, 47–50.

¹⁵⁷Xu Binbin wrote under the pen name Lingxiao. See Xu Binbin 徐彬彬, *Lingxiao hange biji* 凌霄漢閣筆記 (*The jottings of Lingxiao*), in *Wan Qing minguo shishi yu renwu* 晚清民國史事與人物 (*The events and*

bureaucrats in the succession crisis, Xu Binbin argued that Wu Kedu had “made too much of a minor issue” (*xiaoti dazuo* 小題大做).¹⁵⁸

The Republican-era satirical works on Qing history offered, with the benefit of hindsight, convenient, simplistic explanations of why Qing China could not survive in the age of western imperialism by scapegoating and vilifying Cixi, who was only part of the problem (that is, if she was any problem). Nevertheless, these popular portrayals of Cixi’s rapaciousness and Wu Kedu’s heroism revealed that corpse admonition, hijacked by the idea and aspirations of the modern nation, had become part of the cultural and historical repertoire of Chinese suicides in the Republican period. Unlike Wu Kedu’s contemporaries, the authors of novels of exposure perceived little meaning in his corpse admonition other than serving as a sensational instance of how Cixi ignored, manipulated, and suppressed bureaucratic opinion to the peril of the Qing regime. That said, they still respected Wu Kedu for what they perceived as martyrdom for the Chinese nation: Wu Kedu’s final testament was reproduced in full in all these satirical works on Qing history. In something like a literary campaign against (female) authoritarianism (I have no evidence that they were alluding to the Nationalist regime at the time), they believed that the fall of the Qing stemmed from bureaucratic disintegration, which resulted from Cixi’s political domination; the bureaucrats themselves, save for Cixi’s nodding sycophants, were absolved of most responsibility for dynastic collapse.

Widely perceived at the time to be a sympathizer of the Qing, Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) drowned himself in Kunming Lake in 1927. Wang Guowei’s suicide fascinated his contemporaries and later scholars: was it an act of anguish because Wang Guowei was disillusioned with the cultural and historical crises in China, or was it for more trivial reasons or personal difficulties? David Der-wei Wang interprets Wang Guowei’s suicide as a result of “radical incompatibilities between the public and private projects of modernity” that Wang Guowei had progressively foreseen, arguing that Wang Guowei exercised his modern freedom negatively in a willful act of self-annihilation.¹⁵⁹ The “macabre tradition” of suicidal literati and their self-destruction continued to wield significant power over Republican Chinese writers and thinkers, to whom suicide served as a “powerful means of critiquing or probing the troubled Chinese soul trying to survive in a modern world.”¹⁶⁰

Observers linked Wu Kedu’s and Wang Guowei’s suicides and called the latter a “corpse admonition,” which Wang Guowei used to renounce the non-monarchical Chinese world in an act of Qing loyalism.¹⁶¹ However, a small caveat is in order. As Wu Kedu did, Wang Guowei perceived an irreconcilable mismatch between his aspirations and the circumstances at the time. Unlike Wu Kedu, however, Wang Guowei was no bureaucrat at the time of death, and Republican Chinese writers wishing to offer a historically interpretive account of his suicide glossed over the precise meaning of

personalities of the late Qing and Republican periods), edited by Cai Dengshan 蔡登山 (Taipei: Duli zuojia, 2016), 46–47.

¹⁵⁸Xu, *Lingxiao hange biji*, 50.

¹⁵⁹Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 225.

¹⁶⁰Wang, *The Monster That Is History*, 226.

¹⁶¹Luo Jizu 羅繼祖, *Ting wen yi lue: huiyi zifu Luo Zhenyu de yi sheng* 庭聞憶略: 回憶祖父羅振玉的一生 (Some familial instructions: Recounting Luo Zhenyu’s life) (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1987), 98.

“admonition” (*jian*), which should be used only to refer to an official’s contribution of his opinion on a matter to the emperor for the latter’s reference and consideration. As Cohen elucidates, mythologizers of the past were generally uninterested in the historical accuracy of events. These observers were no exception, having established nebulous links between Wang Guowei and Wu Kedu, simplified their suicides as an act of martyrdom for the falling/fallen Qing, and glossed over the complexity of their respective circumstances, motivations, and objectives.¹⁶²

CONCLUSION

During the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition, despite widening *yanlu*, literati activism did not actually broaden bureaucratic participation in imperial policymaking. While local literati and non-degree holders seemed less restrained than before in exercising their control of cultural, religious, social, and even military matters at the provincial and county levels, bureaucrats, in our case, censors, remained consigned to the whim of their ruler. Non-degree-holding literati could seek to influence imperial policymaking by privately courting allies in the bureaucracy to speak for their interests or by assisting (or resisting) local officials in their administration. Nevertheless, non-office holders, even more than low-ranking bureaucrats, lacked the direct, imperially endorsed channels to address their concerns to the monarch and his ministers, even as they became more pronounced in their local functions and jurisdiction after the Taiping Rebellion.

Bureaucratic opinion and literati activism, often confused with each other because they were sometimes embodied in the same person, were thus distinct in their modes of expression and historical trajectories. In rhetoric, bureaucrats could petition the emperor, who openly encouraged them to fulfill their moral duties of advising him to aid in government as true, non-partisan Confucian scholars. In practice, however, the emperor could either adopt or reject advice as he deemed fit and was not obligated to open any case to broad political discussion. Seen in this light, Wu Kedu’s corpse admonition was an epochal event in that Cixi, the *de facto* ruler of the late Qing court, had to call for inquiry into it and adopt the mainstream bureaucratic opinion that the heir to the throne would become the adopted son of Tongzhi once the Guangxu emperor had decided on his choice of successor. Given that bureaucratic opinion in general, and censorial opinion in particular, were largely dormant in effecting political changes in much of the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was remarkable that Wu Kedu’s suicide had at least enlarged political participation, vented bureaucratic frustration, and stabilized the court. By invoking Confucian precepts, historical precedents, and most importantly his own suicide, Wu Kedu changed the performance of the censorial role in the late Qing.

That Wu Kedu could achieve so much from his dramatic act of protest stemmed from Cixi’s vulnerable position in the late Qing political configuration. Like Heshen and Mujangga, Cixi was a political hegemon around whom bureaucrats gathered for power and status; a hegemon’s position was tenuous and subject to a delicate equilibrium of political forces. For ruling behind the curtains and adopting agnatic seniority as the principle of imperial succession, Cixi defied Confucian prescriptions and Qing precedents,

¹⁶²Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, xiv.

and sought to mobilize bureaucratic opinion in her favor against possible detractors, be they Han or Manchu.

By ratifying Cixi's choice of Guangxu as the emperor, Qingliu bureaucrats legitimated if not augmented her power. It was not a zero-sum game; both autocratic and bureaucratic powers increased and checked each other for the rest of the Qing. The petitions that supported Cixi's position in the succession crisis signaled the ability of bureaucratic voices to be heard and introduced the "Qingliu" faction as a potent political force in the late Qing. Qingliu censors rose to impeach "Self-Strengtheners" such as Li Hongzhang, Guo Songtao 郭嵩燾 (1818–91), and Chonghou 崇厚 (1826–93) whenever the latter faltered in diplomacy and war. At times like this, Cixi was the ultimate arbiter of the conflict, playing one faction against another and saving everyone's face and life while preserving her rule.¹⁶³ Li Hongzhang might well have preferred Cixi's centralization of power and direction under which new-style, professional intellectual-officials could strengthen China with their technical expertise. However, with traditional scholar-officials still resisting radical changes of China and their own transformation, Li Hongzhang and his protégés could not deliver the full potential of their newly acquired institutions and technologies.

Yet, the voices of remonstrance were not all a cacophony. They constituted a force that paved the way for fulfilling the constitutional agenda that linked the Ming and Qing dynasties with the modern age. Concerns with the ideal extent of state power and how relations between the ruler and the ruled should be structured and conducted continued into the Republican era, when Chinese intellectuals, informed by new concepts of nation and revolution, viewed Wu Kedu's corpse admonition as a feeble, futile attempt to gain political concessions from a traditional mode of government. While they respected the spirit of his "martyrdom," they no longer saw it as radical, given that suicide had become a common mode of expressing political dissent in their own times. From their perspective, Cixi lost the legitimacy to rule behind the curtains not because of a loss of cosmological underpinnings but because of her perfunctory treatment of censorial opinion; the bureaucratic opinion she had mustered to ratify her choice of emperor remained, at least prior to Wu Kedu's event, a sinew of her autocratic power. Republican-era interpretations distilled censorial opinion from bureaucratic opinion and rendered it a metaphor for the voice of conscience for political change. Back in the late Qing, change was imminent but not immediately apparent, as seen in the somewhat contradictory reactions of Qingliu members toward the event, who were simultaneously Cixi's supporters and Wu Kedu's patrons. It was nevertheless clear to both Wu Kedu's contemporaries and the intellectuals of later generations that despite their different interpretations, the floodgates to a truly broader political participation, which included that of bureaucrats and censors, were opened thereafter.

¹⁶³Folsom, *Friends, Guests, and Colleagues*, 186–87.