

**THE IDEA OF FEUDALISM IN CHINA, AND
ITS APPLICABILITY TO SONG SOCIETY**

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An attempt to analyze the applicability of the idea of "feudalism" to China is perhaps best begun with a look at its use by historians from the People's Republic. It is there, after all, that the term has by far its widest currency. Yet it must be said that the bulk of this body of historical writing is of little use in attaining clarity about the concept. A set, orthodox scheme of historical progression - whether one calls it Stalinist or Maoist - has been required of Chinese historians since 1949. Primitive, slave and feudal society are universal stages of development for all human societies. The direction of development of all feudal societies (including China's) is towards capitalism (Mao's emphasis on this helped to generate the 1950's literature on "the sprouts of capitalism" to be found in Ming and Qing China). Late nineteenth and early twentieth century China was "semi-feudal and semi-colonial". Within such a framework many specific points of detail or particular episodes might be investigated, often in surprisingly traditional terms. The evidence might be gone through for progressive technical and social developments, often in a highly nationalist spirit. But it is not surprising that in more general discussion of the history of society, much of what was written in the first decade or so of the regime is in fact scholastic debate over the timing of turning points.¹

After a period of more than a decade of silence or propagandist distortion, serious historical work has revived in the People's Republic since 1977. The effects of long isolation from colleagues both inside and outside China have been very apparent in what has been produced in this time.² And despite a good deal of discussion of general categories and ideas in the writing of social history, the orthodoxy of the fifties still acts as a further limitation

on the range of historical ideas which can be developed.

The necessity of conforming to a formula which requires acknowledging a very long feudal period in Chinese history has led to the category "feudal" itself becoming increasingly irrelevant for serious historical study. Used as rough shorthand, or defined extremely vaguely, the "feudal" label often offers almost no guidance to the contents of the historical bottle. Nevertheless, the historical world in China has not been without attempts to provide more adequately specified - and conceptually defensible - accounts of the term. The problem was recently addressed by one of the foremost social historians of China, Fu Yiling, in terms which seem to me to be of considerable general interest:

Foreign scholars have raised the question of the definition of the term "feudalism". In their view, the concept of "the feudal system" does not have to do solely with the economy, but includes within its scope notions to do with politics and law, such as the dispersal of political and administrative power, the warrior tradition, relations of dependency between lords and their followers, the concept of vendetta, and so on. Accordingly, they propose that we should speak of "traditional society" rather than a long-lasting "feudal society" in China.

In my opinion, when Chinese historians use the term "feudal society", they are generally considering matters from the point of view of the ownership system. They mean to refer to a set of production relations established by a situation in which the landlord class owns the land - the means of production - and the peasants own no land. Such a feudal society is marked, basically, by a natural economy. At times, commodity production for commercial exchange may exist, but it is secondary, acting as a supplement to the economic system of the landlords. Chinese historians are generally in agreement in using such a concept to mark out feudal society. There are still many points of debate, however, because the concrete phenomena of China's historical development are complex, and the stages of development of various economic and social factors cannot be separated from each other.³

There are some very noticeable oddities in Fu's proposed analysis of feudalism. Neither "natural economy", nor a situation in which a landlord class owns all the land and the peasants none, corresponds to the situation which obtained in China after the tenth century A.D. Fu Yiling's own work has helped to make these points clearer, and one wonders whether his definition is offered seriously. With some adjustment for these objections, however, Fu suggests a definition which seems to me to be quite clear and consistent: the term refers to a society in which land, as the major productive resource, is worked by peasant cultivators most of whom do not own more than a portion of their land but rent it, or farm it subject

to considerable compulsory dues payable to landowners. There may be some doubt about applying such a definition to China at some periods (between the sixth and eighth centuries, for example). It is quite certainly applicable to others, and especially to the period from 850 to 1950. The problem of course, is that it is also applicable to a large number of other societies as well, a number so large, indeed, as to make its value as a term of historical analysis rather doubtful. The scale, the form and the distribution of landownership, as well as its connexion with the rest of the social and political order vary so widely across such societies that landowning of itself provides only a very imprecise classification. As a result, a model based on it will carry little explanatory value.

On the other hand, the various legal and political criteria Fu cites from his foreign sources have their own problems. If we take them singly, "dispersal of political and administrative power" clearly covers too many systems (does federalism qualify?), as does the notion of a warrior tradition. If we link them, putting together for example military tradition, dispersal of power and landowning to give us the specific form of the fief, or in a similar way specify vassalage as a key element, then we will exclude many societies of Europe which are normally accepted as feudal by historians.⁴

Two conclusions, neither of them very startling, seem to me to emerge from a cursory consideration of various suggested definitions of "feudalism". The first is that any adequate definition will be one which recognizes that the term as used for European societies refers to a range of "family resemblances" rather than to a single determinate criterion. A warrior aristocracy, vassalage and the fief, strong gradations of social status, the exercise of judicial and administrative power by the lords of estates, a manorial form of landholding and serfdom, or at least large estates and a very unequal distribution of landownership, an economic order which gives a large place to local farming for consumption locally without trade - none of these formulations will do by itself, but a society which can be characterized in a number of these ways will normally be accepted as feudal. Such indeterminacy may be messy, but it seems indispensable in the characterization of European feudalism. This leads me to my second conclusion. This is that the plausibility of various models purporting to explain all the features of feudal society in terms of one or two of those I have mentioned comes from the fact that, in the varied societies of feudal Europe, varied ranges of these features did go together. Of course, there are good reasons for this to be so. There is a degree of coherence about them, and some overall historical influences were at work. Yet none of them, it seems to me, can in fact be derived from another.

What went together in Europe did not necessarily go together in China. The differences are what seem to me to explain the difference between Fu Yiling and a British Marxist historian like Rodney Hilton in their analyses of the Marxist use of *feudalism*.

Hilton explains the sense of the term as used by Marx and his followers. This is "to describe a whole social order whose principal feature was the domination of the rest of society by a military landowning aristocracy" and to understand "the essence of the feudal mode of production" as "the exploitative relation between landowners and subordinate peasants, in which the surplus beyond subsistence of the latter ... is transferred under coercive sanction to the former. This relationship is termed 'serfdom' ...".⁵ Others must comment on the adequacy of Hilton's formulation. I simply want to emphasize that his analysis of the term includes elements which come from particular conditions in Europe. Fu Yiling's definition does apply to the later Chinese empire: Hilton's does not (no military domination, no aristocracy and in my opinion no widespread serfdom either).

A cluster of family resemblances, associated together in groupings derived from the specific histories of Europe and its regions: is there after all much reason to expect that such a concept will prove especially illuminating for the comparative study of other regions and cultures? Other societies, we may decide, shared enough of the characteristics of European feudalism to make the concept useful as a classification, and thus also as the beginnings of an explanatory model. Zhou China could possibly be thought to fall into this category: Japan before the Meiji period seems to do so more unequivocally. (If one holds the view that what made Europe feudal in the mediaeval period led to capitalist industrialization in modern times, the Japanese case might seem particularly important, but this proposal seems to me to have little concrete to recommend it.)

Yet, is a search to find candidates who will fit a particular concept of this kind - what one might call the Cinderella's slipper strategy - a sensible mode of procedure for comparative study? It may well be thought that more abstract kinds of conceptual models - from economic theory, symbolic anthropology, organization theory, let us say - may be of more use than one whose features are so clearly derived from the particular experience of one group of societies. Yet one of the attractions of terms like "feudalism" - where they are used as more than rhetorical figures, "trope or discourse" - is paradoxically their combination of concreteness and generality. They identify not only a range of institutions and structures across society but also ways in which such institutions and structures cohere, form intelligible complexes. "Feudalism" as applied to Europe is far from being unusual in being imperfect both in its social coverage and in its coherence. Provided the term is not taken as some kind of standard of judgement, there may be some illumination to be gained from taking its elements, the range of characteristic social patterns it identifies, as setting an agenda of problems for the study of societies outside its original reference. In what ways can we see similar functions being performed: are there structures with some comparable features to those observed in Europe: what kinds of coherence can be

found among these elements to match that of feudal Europe? The risks - Procrustean distortions either gross or subtle, failure to attend to the specifics of our evidence in its original context - are clear enough. Yet it may well be argued that just such a use of the notion of feudalism and the concomitant comparison with Europe has in fact informed some of the most useful modern attempts to analyze Chinese society of the later Empire, and especially its formative period in the centuries from the mid-Tang through the Song. This applies not only to generalized schemes but also to the work of more scholarly Chinese historians like Quan Hansheng and Fu Yiling and to the great Japanese historians like Katō, Niida, Sudō and Miyazaki.

The dominance of Japanese scholarship has been especially marked in the interpretation of the evidence on Song dynasty society. It is to this period that I would now like to turn, to give some concrete content to what has so far been an extremely abstract argument. Until very recently, Western writing on this subject has been very heavily dependent indeed on the Japanese historians I have mentioned, and their successors. It would be possible for me to offer here a review of the directions which this Japanese scholarship has taken, and a summary of the relevant conclusions which such work has come to. An important part of such a review, I am convinced, would be to show how general notions of feudal society, or contrasts to it, have stimulated debates and research on the Chinese sources and their interpretation. But in fact, there is already available a small number of very competent works in English which review, or base themselves on, this literature.⁶ What is more, it seems to me that conclusions which have been too readily detached from their context of evidence, interpretation and argument have vitiated much of the comparative historical writing I am acquainted with. If we treat a body of scholarship simply as a source of "data" we run the risk of ignoring the problematic quality of the process by which its generalizations and conclusions have been obtained. If we were to overcome such a risk, we might involve ourselves *à la Borgès* in reproducing verbatim the entire body of scholarship to be reviewed as well as the entire body of surviving evidence. All the same, though most of what I have to say will inevitably be generalization, based on secondary work, I prefer to present it in the form of an attempt at reviewing the sorts of evidence which are available.

I start with a paraphrase of an account of a rather trivial law case:-

Around 1235 A.D., a dispute over the ownership of some land was brought to the magistrate's court of an unnamed county. One of the parties, Wu Chun, accused a certain Mr Wang of damaging the site of the Wu ancestral graves by digging, cutting down trees and filling in gravesites. His opponent, Zhuo Qingfu, accused Wu Chun and his brother Wu Hui of assaulting a workman, fencing gravesites belonging to Zhuo family, smashing a gravestone and not allowing a burial to take place - in effect, of continuing trespass

on the land used for burials by the Zhuo family. Since the matter had proved too difficult to resolve at the level of community arbitration, and since the evidence which the two parties brought to court was not sufficient to settle the matter, the court was compelled to undertake an on-the-spot investigation before making a decision on the claims which each side had presented. The county registrar travelled to the area involved, the group of hills known collectively as Daguang. In his report, he noted the general topography, the major landmarks and the location of the Wu and Zhuo family properties. The land in dispute was in the north of the Daguang hills, just to the south of a point where there was a branch in a stream.

In Zhuo Qinfu's statement, which he supported by documents, he asserted that in an earlier generation of Wu Chun's family, two of its members, Wu Wusi and Wu Nianqi, had been tenant farmers on Zhuo family land. In 1196, as the result of a request made by these two members of the Wu family, who had no land where they could bury their grandfather, the Zhuo family had given them one gravesite, just to the east of the hill on which there were the Zhuo family's own ancestral graves. The agreement had spelt out that there were to be no encroachments beyond the plot that had specifically been assigned to the Wu's.

Wu Chun countered by presenting a land-deed (*qi*) in the name of Wu Cheng, which recorded a payment of two strings of cash for the purchase from a certain Jian Yan of a tract of hill land, described in terms of landmarks which certainly made it relevant to the area in dispute. A map was produced to back up this document. Wu Chun claimed that in the time since this sale - more than half a century - five of his forebears had been buried there, and the proper graveyard trees had been planted and grown to maturity.

When the country registrar arrived in the area, his first move was to call together the headmen of local "watches (*bao*)". Then, with the litigants, the whole group climbed the hill to investigate the facts about the site in dispute. It was found that on the northern hills of Daguang, there was one Wu family grave. Some thirty metres to the east, there was one old grave, with a newly-dug grave agreed to have been put in by Zhuo Qingfu close to its eastern side. For about twenty metres around the Wu family grave, there was no trace of anything which could have been five more graves, and also no gravesite which had been filled in. This impression was confirmed by careful questioning of the local people, whose account of things was unanimous. Wu Chun maintained that these witnesses had been bribed by the Zhuo family. When he suggested his own close neighbour, Wei Qiqi, as the only trustworthy witness, the registrar had him brought. His answers proved to be in accord with those of the other witnesses. In the registrar's view, the Wu brothers betrayed themselves at this point by exchanging guilty looks and breaking into a frightened sweat.

After his report on the investigation on the spot, the registrar submitted his opinion on the case. In it, he begins by making clear how much he dislikes people like the Wu brothers, whom he sees as *nouveaux riches* prepared to use their new resources for entirely mercenary and unprincipled ends. For the prospering Wu's and the declining Zhuo's, "landlord and tenant have reversed their relative status", and the Wu brothers have planned a series of usurpations, quite without regard for the favour that Zhuo Qingfu's scholarly (*ru*) and humane (*ren*) ancestor once did for their family. Reversal of fortunes is of course simply the way things happen, and had the Zhuo family not had the foresight to keep officially stamped documents, there would have been no case to bring to court. But once investigated, the case shows clear evidence of fraud by the Wu's. In fact, it is plain that the whole of Wu Chun's case is a tissue of lies. On his map, he has switched the cardinal directions and distorted distances, as may be found from checking it on the spot. He has lied about his ancestor, claiming he was a watch headman, and not a tenant of the Zhuo's, and about the grave, which he claims is purchased family property rather than a gift. As for his claim that the land has been in his family for more than fifty years, this is not convincing even for the land the family does seem to have title to. The only date on the deed of sale between Wu Cheng and Jiang Yen is 1223, the date of the official tax receipt which has been stamped on it. Are we to believe that the document existed, but was unvalidated, for some forty years? And in any case, the boundaries described in the document (west to county sheriff Zhuo's land, south to the ospath and sheriff Zhuo's hill) do not include the disputed land.

The registrar's report concludes with his recommendation about the decision in the case, which was to be made formally by the magistrate back in the county seat. All the disputed land with the exception of the single Wu grave should go to the Zhuo's to be divided among descendants in accordance with normal inheritance rules. Wu Hui and Wu Chen are guilty of assault causing actual bodily harm, trespass and interference with another family's graveyards, disrespect for the social order, and an attempt to deceive the court with the false map. They should each be sentenced to sixty strokes of the heavy bamboo, they should forfeit the money they put up as pledge when they first brought the case, and if they again brought an ill-based case to court, their record should be held against them in any assessment of penalties.

This report was submitted to Magistrate Zhao at the county *yamen* (office). After writing a brief review of the case, including some details different from those found in the registrar's report, he commended the accuracy and detail of the registrar's work and proceeded to give his judgement. The Wu brothers were guilty of trespass and assault as defined by the statutes, and were to be given sixty strokes of the bamboo, as was appropriate to the "light penalty" areas of the empire [the actual number of strokes given will have been much smaller, probably thirteen]. For the

rest, the advice given by the registrar was followed.⁷

This small piece of evidence, of course, is of little use on its own. But nevertheless it does provide some pointers on a number of relevant themes. First and perhaps most obvious is the exercise of judicial and administrative authority by the magistrate and his subordinate. Regulations governing the functions of the magistrate (subprefect) are preserved both in edited form in historical works and in contemporary administrative documents and handbooks issued by the central government. They were entirely civilian officers appointed centrally, their terms were normally from three to five years, and the regulations provide that their judicial administration was to be subject to quite close supervision. They were responsible for general administration of their areas, and in particular for tax-collection, judicial affairs and keeping the peace, this last with the aid of a patrolling police officer and a small squad of troops. General treatments of the judicial functions of the imperial magistrate often suggest that disputes of a civil kind - the sort represented by the case under discussion - were very rarely brought to the magistrate's court, and were settled instead, often relying on local custom, by such local figures as lineage or village heads. In this period (Song) there is enough evidence to show that the courts expected to, and did, hear considerable numbers of cases of this kind, and that mediation regularly proved ineffective. It is worth noting that neither in this case nor in any other is there question of any court other than that of the magistrate or his superior at the prefectural capital being involved with the case. The law which was administered was that laid down nationally from the centre, and if I read the evidence rightly, the magistrate is rather more careful than the registrar in citing the statutes which he applies in this case. In terms of the formal structure of administration, the whole system clearly represents a strong contrast to the characteristic decentralized pattern associated with feudalism, a pattern in which a multiplicity of courts existed, in which a good deal of the law administered by many of them derived from custom rather than from national legal enactment, and in which the keeping of the peace was a matter directly for the local lord rather than for an appointed official.

Song centralization was real, but it had its limits. In this case we find the registrar - one of only five or six centrally appointed officials in the county - making his own journey to the hills to check the facts and consult the local people. It needs to be borne in mind that the case is drawn from a collection of model decisions by famous judges. Personal attention of this kind could not have been provided regularly by the ranking officials from the county town. For the regular conduct of official business, the magistrate had to depend on a far larger group of people than simply his colleagues in the national civil service. And the human resources available to these men consisted entirely of local people. There was an office staff, numbering up to a hundred or more, men whose

posts were often handed down from father to son and who lived by small administrative fees and bribes. Handbooks of advice to local government officials include investigation and control of the *yamen* staff as a first priority, and it was clearly a difficult task. When the Southern Song writer and official Ye Shi (1149-1223) writes, "Nowadays people say ... 'There may not be *fengjian* ('feudalism') for the ranking officials, but there is for the office staff, and they're right",⁸ his meaning is simply the permanence and hereditary quality of so much of the subordinate clerical staff, despite their low official status. Nevertheless, his comment should alert us to the danger of confining our attention to formal administrative structures when considering the relation between centrally and locally defined systems of power.

Local influence of course went far beyond the indispensable *yamen* staff and its ties of influence and corruption. For a range of local tasks - keeping tax registers and collecting tax, keeping the peace on the very local level - only people in the countryside itself rather than the county town were of use, and differing systems of local servicemen and village heads were used. Posts such as village head were ambiguous for those concerned. A certain degree of power and standing, the possibility of a strategic position linking *yamen* and village, had to be set against the personal liability which could, for example, spell ruin if the tax demands from the county seat failed to be met. The posts were meant to go to the wealthier households on the local scene. Of course, those with real wealth, landlords with land enough for hundreds of tenant families, would never find themselves in such positions, though they did pay substitutes to free them from such service. Their wealth gave them other sources of influence, and their responsibilities were negotiated at a higher level. Two poems from different periods on country life help to set this scene:

Pressing for taxes, Fan Chengda (1126-1193)

The taxes are paid, receipts brought home: now the county
is pressing for more.

The village head comes lurching up to bang at the door.

Papers in hand, he's a mixture of bluster and smiles:-

"I've just come to find a drink or two."

At the head of the bed, a money-jar the size of a fist:

It's broken open - just three hundred cash.

"There's not enough here for us to get drunk on;

I can pay you enough for the wear on your shoes!"⁹

Village magnate, Mei Yaochen (1002-1060)

Every day the harvest drum beats:

It's a great year, he keeps on saying.

Newbrewed wine is poured in floods

And the grain fills up his river barges.

His daughter's hairdo's full of silver clasps:

His son's fur coat is soft and new.

No questions for him from the village wardens -

To deal with him, who could trust in government powers?¹⁰

For the magistrate and his colleagues in local government, office staff and village functionaries were of course inferiors to be controlled, rather than associates. The natural social reference group for magistrates in local society were the prominent local families. If we are to believe a constant refrain through Song writing on social subjects this did not mean those whose attention went directly to money-making - Mei's village magnate, or those engaged in "land-grabbing (*jianbing*)". It certainly did mean those with enough landed property for a respectable leisured life-style and the acquisition of cultural capital. Under the last two imperial dynasties, from about 1400 on, formal government recognition of literary learning through the empire-wide examination system gave such immediate access to powers of social command that graduates of the higher examinations who had never held office could nevertheless gain a fair proportion of their livelihood by taking positions of local leadership and managing or directing local bodies and activities. Under the Song, the examinations were less systematized, though examination progress was still followed with great attention by upper class families. Despite evidence of a fair degree of general social mobility, it is also clear that the position of some powerful families able to exploit some combination of land, commerce and educational tradition was strong enough to be preserved for centuries.

The administrative system was itself at the opposite pole from feudal decentralization. The laws and regulations it enforced were enacted and regularly revised at the centre. The interests of the state and its servants by no means always coincided with those of the locally powerful. Yet the local staff and their mode of operation, and the social context within which the magistrates related to local society, made for a much stronger tug toward locally established social position than the formal administrative structure suggests.

A marked emphasis on divisions of social status runs through a good deal of Song comment and enactment on social matters. The very small section of the population which belonged to "official families" were the chief beneficiaries, but there was a more pervasive sense of social rank. One clearly should not exaggerate this. The emphasis given in the case of "Wu vs. Zhuo" to the importance of status relations between tenant and master obviously implies no permanent system of aristocratic - nor of serf-like - rank. Nevertheless, it is common enough for relations between tenant and landlord to be referred to in terms of the proper subordination of servant to master. Though neither servants nor tenants carried any legal stigma which might be considered comparable to unfree status, there was clearly a marked emphasis on superior and inferior social rank in Song society as there was on authority relations within the family. One may question, perhaps, the degree of deference which existed among tenants to be made

for landlord-tenant relations as well. By 1090, formal reduction by one degree from the normal punishment was enacted for all killings of tenants by landowners save deliberate homicide. Tenants killing a landlord were to have their punishment increased by one degree. Such differences were widened by later legislation, and to them were added laws setting heavier penalties than normal for servants or tenants having sexual relations with members of their master's or landlord's family. There has been a good deal of debate among historians about the significance of these enactments and about the degree to which they were put into practice, and the evidence does not seem entirely conclusive.¹¹

Taking all in all, there is much clear evidence of the reality of concepts of social ranking in Song society. Yet equally clearly one's ranking was not lifelong or inescapable, a good deal of social mobility was taken for granted, and the legal differences and privileges incorporated in the formal code were important, but much too specific and limited to constitute a "society of orders".

Not a great deal about the crucial question of landed property can be gleaned from the case of Wu vs. Zhuo. But it does make clear that there was a general recognition of strong property rights in land, transferable by sale, and a system of official registration (and taxation) of contracts for private dealings in land, which served as the basis for the legal settlement of disputes. Neither in this case, nor in any others dealing with land transfers, is there any mention of the persistence of any dues or payments, the rights to which are not transferred along with the sale of the land itself. This excludes, of course, national taxes, which were paid to the local government offices or to the village headmen. They were usually, though not invariably, assessed on, and paid by, the landowner. Owners of even moderate-sized estates, however, often had their taxes paid by agents, and collusion between these agents and the local *yamen* staff could mean that people supposedly acting as tax collectors lent their support to the machinery of private rent collection.¹²

The question of the landed estate is one of the more difficult ones in interpreting the sources on Song society. It is quite clear from both particular cases and the surviving census figures that there was a substantial number of small farmers owning their own land. These families might have more than one plot or combine working their own land with renting an extra amount where they had enough labour to do so. This pattern in outline is familiar from what we know of the last centuries of the prerevolutionary land system. One of the clearest achievements of Japanese scholars, especially Kato Shigeshi and Sudo Yoshiyuki, however, has been to demonstrate the very high frequency of large, sometimes very large, holdings of land, regularly known as *zhuangyuan*, in the Song and the immediately preceding period. *Zhuangyuan* is a word which suffers badly from the problem of translation. First, the word was taken over very early by the Japanese, pronounced as *shoen*, to denote a form of landed estate

which, while in its origins and its internal organization it had many similarities with Tang-Song *zhuangyuan*, took on a very different character because of its role in the decay of central government authority and the rise of the local military. Then, when acquaintance with European history brought the need for a word to translate the English *manor* and its European equivalents, it was naturally *zhuangyuan* or *shoen* which was chosen.

The word *manor* is often used to imply that the estate concerned is organized as a unit, both geographically and in terms of the management of production. It is as well to remember that this was not so in Japan, and that in the opinion of many historians it was perhaps exceptional in European feudal society as well. In the words of Postan, "In fact, the only European region in which the feudal landlords operated as largescale producers was eastern Europe of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries".¹³ In the case of Song China there is a great deal of disagreement in the literature precisely over the questions of how far the *zhuangyuan* is properly to be seen as one consolidated holding, and of how far it is true to say that it was worked as a productive unit. Kato and Sudo see Song *zhuangyuan* as consisting mainly of such geographical and organizational units, and the best-known study in English on this subject follows their lead to such a degree that its author entitles his account "Manorialism without Feudalism".¹⁴

Questions of this kind (what pattern was predominant?) can hardly be answered by anything but a complete survey of all our evidence, and quite possibly not even then. For a number of reasons, there is far less surviving evidence on the management of private landholdings in China than seems to be available for some European mediaeval and early modern societies. My own impression leads me to agree with the critics of Sudo's and Kato's view of the *zhuangyuan* as a productive unit. It is not difficult to find accounts of *zhuangyuan* which were not under a unified management: neither is it difficult to find records which clearly show a dispersed pattern of landholding. It is a good deal rarer to find unambiguous records which demonstrate the existence of "manors".

In the essays of the Northern Song statesman and author Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) there is the following passage:-

Nowadays, one household whose holdings reach one hundred qing [13.9 acres to the qing: 100 was a moderately large holding for [the] Song [period] and would have been a very large one indeed in later periods] may have around fifty tenant families. Those among them who work the owner's fields, using their own or the owner's ox and dividing their return with the owner will number perhaps a dozen or so families. The rest are all "floating tenants" [*fuke*, used to refer to tenants who have brought no resources of their own]. These live on the landlord's land, paying a fixed rent, and some of them will be farming poor land. These

families have never been wealthy enough to amass reserves. When they are not able to pay for marriages, funerals or the spring and autumn festivals, or are unable to cope with famine or taxation, they borrow from the landlord, sometimes at 100 or 200 per cent interest. At harvest time, once seed and tax are deducted, the crop is divided up, and sometimes the whole of a tenant's crop is not enough to pay a debt contracted at 200 per cent. He may finish threshing the crop in the morning and have his family going hungry that same evening. So he takes another loan. In winter or spring he borrows so as to have food, pledging to repay wheat in summer. When his wheat all goes in repayment, then in summer or autumn he pledges to repay rice in winter. Families like this eat only by borrowing. And so the produce of a hundred *qing* goes to the landlord's family alone.¹⁵

It is apparent that this was not the result of a statistical survey of rural conditions. Ouyang's picture is an attack on the accumulation of land by the wealthy (*jianbing*) - a constant theme among reform minded Confucians from his time on - and it is part of a general essay on "three abuses" (too many soldiers, too many monks, too much *jianbing*). Nevertheless, it is clearly meant to be understood as referring to what Ouyang took to be a typical estate, and it is not one in which the landlord is playing any entrepreneurial or managing role beyond provision of an ox, perhaps tools and seed - and loans. If such an estate happens to be geographically united, this does not change the fact that it is worked entirely as a collection of small household farms. And, in fact, specifications of landholding in private estates for which we have records show many examples of estates in which the parcels of land were dispersed, if not to the extreme degree which became common in some areas later.

There certainly do exist records of continuous landholdings - some of them being of very great size indeed. There are also a few direct references to smaller estates being worked on as units, where particular circumstances existed - on lakeside land which needed regular labour for drainage, for example. And the organization of local canals, irrigation ditches, dams and the like may have been handled by landlords or their agents in some places. The main body of evidence which has been presented to show overall management of estates, however, is the very large number of references to estate supervisors and agents in a variety of sources. These men, called by various names but, by Southern Song times known generically simply as agents (*ganren*), were a major presence on the Song rural scene. They were indispensable to the landlords - especially the fair proportion of them who lived in town - though their own status in relation to the landlord himself was not very much higher than that of the tenants. The sources detailing their activities are very disparate. They are shown collecting rents, "supervising the harvest" (probably in particular

checking the crops of sharecroppers), arranging for tax collections, organizing the transport of rent grain to warehouses and supervising its storage, organizing the shipping of grain out to market. If this is what is understood as "managing the estate as an economic unit", then the complexity of the tasks the agents undertook is probably enough to justify the term. But such "management" is quite compatible with a view of the typical Song estate as an agglomeration of peasant households, paying rent in kind, using such common facilities as irrigation channels and threshing floors, but planning their own plantings, directing their own labour force, and using their own profits, if they were fortunate enough, to acquire land themselves or to move into trade - in short, running their own small household economy.

It may well be that neither feudal Europe nor Song China had many estates on which "management" went much beyond the sort of role played by the Song "agents". The landed estates of both societies, in any event, were capable of supplying a commercial market on some fair scale, and of specializing when economic opportunity presented itself. Given the nature of Chinese agriculture - the much smaller place it gave to animals, the intensive quality of rice-farming, the use of silk or hemp (not yet cotton) as textile fibres - specialization did not require or often produce entire estates or areas in which a single commercial crop dominated production completely, though lacquer and tea plantations certainly existed.

On the whole, the scale and distribution of landed property, though not perhaps its form, in Song China bears far more resemblance to that of feudal Europe than might be suggested either by the much less uneven distribution of land in later periods in China, or by an oversimplified notion of European "manorialism". In Europe, the pattern of great estates persisted for many centuries. In China, the productivity of small-scale labour-intensive rice-farming, the ability of the state to limit and manage local social position and the lack of primogeniture all influenced development toward dispersal of large holdings over the centuries after the thirteenth century, as the population grew.

Over one particular element in the pattern or relationships within the Song *zhuangyuan* there has been an extraordinary amount of debate among historians. This is the question of whether Song tenants were comparable to serfs, how dependent and unfree their social position was. Its importance for Japanese scholars has come about partly because they have seen it as crucially relevant to assessing the so-called "Naito hypothesis": that Song China saw a great shift in the direction of "modernity". Debates between historians associated with the "Kyoto School", supporting Naito, and the "Tokyo School" who opposed him, have managed to define social and economic issues which have given much fuller meaning to the original rather vague suggestion by Naito Torajiro. The question of tenancy was developed and debated in this context. Serf-like conditions - "feudal subordination" - were clearly not

compatible with "modernity", whether that notion involved replacing "personal coercion" by the cash nexus, or substituting "contract" for "status".

As happens often enough, the course of the debate has made clear that the specific points which remain at issue will not really bear the significance that has been attributed to them. As I have already mentioned, it is generally agreed that there was a strong sense of social hierarchy in Song society, and that this was embodied in the law covering criminal offences between landlords and tenants. But it is also agreed that the inferior status of servant or tenant (both of whom were legally classified as "honourable (*liangmin*)") was not a permanent or hereditary legal condition. Contracts of tenancy and loan agreements - sometimes very harshly enforced - are recognized as having been the means by which landlords extracted income from their tenants. Yet the high rates of rent and interest, the lack of sources of livelihood other than farming, and the costs of mobility made it difficult for tenants to break away from economic dependency. Security of tenure was the concern for many, perhaps most, rather than the right to leave one's landlord. The exhortation to the peasants by a county magistrate, which I have quoted above, admonishes tenants:

You must not defy your landlord, or detain him against his will, for thus you will avoid having people come to inspect your affairs when the harvest is over and the time has come when tenants may move. This is the way for you to care for your family.¹⁶

Different historians give different emphasis to these points. A more persistent disagreement over the evidence concerns the question of whether tenants were legally bound to the land they farmed - or perhaps in some cases even to its owner. The original disagreements in this case also have been narrowed by the course of the discussion. It is pretty generally accepted that regional differences, which were always recognized as existing, are crucially important in analyzing the terms of tenure. A quite substantial part of the empire is acknowledged to have been placed fairly early in the dynasty under a regime which explicitly permitted tenants not only to move, but to move, once the harvest was in, without the papers from the landlord which had "previously" been required. It is the extent to which the law was put into practice which is debated, though I must mention that the assumption that the "previous" régime was one in which the landlord had an acknowledged right to give or withhold *permission* to his tenant seems very unconvincing to me. In any case, it is also acknowledged that there are a fair number of later references to tenants leaving their landlords' land, which envisage no restrictions beyond the satisfactory completion of the harvest and the payment of rent. In some major areas, then, over some considerable period, no legal condition of being "bound to the soil" was recognized.

Beyond this point, the disagreements persist. My own position

is generally one of agreement with those who are skeptical about the arguments for widespread serf-like tenancy. One whole category of official regulations which has been cited in support of those arguments, for example, seems to me to need considerably less dramatic treatment. These are the rules set to govern the terms under which tenants who had left their landlord could be legally compelled to return, and the period which was to elapse before the rights of the landlord expired. The term used of such tenants - *taowang*, to escape or abscond - was in regular administrative use at this and earlier periods for households which had migrated to evade taxation responsibilities. This should be considered together with the frequent mention of *contracts* in the material about such "absconding" tenants - sometimes originally refugees from war or famine. The question was whether a tenant's contract had been honoured, not simply whether he "belonged" to an estate or a landlord. Unfortunately, no tenancy contracts from this period survive. If those from the immediately preceding and following periods are an indication, however, Song contracts may well have carried no indication of the period to be covered, unlike those of the Qing and the Republican periods. If this could be shown to be so, it would not imply that the contracts were generally seen as *permanent*, as is shown by the material which does exist concerning a tenant's right to move. In fact, a general expectation that contracts would last a long time may have to do as much with the tenant's need for security as with the landlord's. There was a term in regular use - *chandian* - to indicate eviction of a tenant in favour of one prepared to pay a higher rent, and the practice was subject to official restriction. In such a situation, it is perhaps not surprising that it is hard to get a completely clear picture of how tenants' obligations might be terminated. But official efforts to give legal and administrative form to the position of tenants in this matter read far more like efforts to remedy abuses than attempts to alter an entire system, to "free the serfs".

There are some pieces of evidence which are hard to square with a picture of the Song tenancy order in which there are no elements of personal service or subordination. There are quite enough records, too, to demonstrate that there was often harsh exploitation. But it is no longer really possible to portray Song tenancy in bald terms of serfdom and bondage to the soil, as did Mark Elvin in 1973, in his widely-read *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* - making his own task easier, it must be said, by tendentious translation of standard terms for "tenant" as "tenant-serf".¹⁷

On the place of trade in Song china, matters are simpler. The scale and sophistication of commerce were simply of a different order from those of Europe in a roughly contemporary period (tenth to thirteenth centuries). The surprise and admiration of Marco Polo on visiting the cities of South China, and especially the former capital of the Southern Song, known to him as Qinsai and to the Chinese as Xingzai or Hangzhou, is well-known testimony

to this. It is sometimes suggested that the great cities of imperial China owed their size and wealth solely to the presence of the institutions of the imperial state itself, that they functioned economically merely as settings for palace, barracks and bureaucracy. Such a view could not survive the briefest acquaintance with the sources available on the Song capitals and their provincial counterparts. Their markets and their extensive commercial and financial quarters were dominated by private traders, and were linked with the rest of the empire and beyond in a variety of ways. Bianliang (Kaifeng) and Xiangzai, as capitals, of course benefitted greatly from spending and building by the central government, but both would have been major commercial centres without the presence of the court. Hangzhou, indeed, had a population of seven to eight hundred thousand (compared to around one and a half million later) before the fall of Bianliang to the Jin in 1127. The figures for commercial tax collection confirm that this population derived from Hangzhou's position as the major commercial city of the empire after the capital. The population of other towns is hard to estimate, but at least two other towns in the lower Yangtze valley alone had populations in the hundreds of thousands in the twelfth century. Neither had been even in the top dozen commercial cities of the empire in the trade tax statistics collected in 1077.¹⁸

The bulk of trade was done at a fairly local level, through the growing network of market towns. Beside the old trade in spices, pearls and other precious items, however, there had grown up a substantial bulk trade in grain and in other items of daily use - timber, metal goods, ceramics, writing materials as well as other foodstuffs. The scale of this commerce was regional, national and in some cases international, with a substantial quantity of exports to south-east Asia, Japan and Korea as well as overland. Commercial organization, in particular partnerships, brokerage, warehousing and wholesaling, and the provision of credit, were all well developed. A quantity of reliable material is available in English on this subject, especially the work of Shiba Yoshinobu, and it is not necessary to review it further here.¹⁹

Song trade, of course, had its limitations. It was built on a productive, but labour-intensive, agriculture which combined very readily with a high level of household production of such everyday needs as textiles. Its capacity to organize and coordinate production seems to have been confined to a few items like ceramics. While the imperial state was not hostile, palace and bureaucracy undertook a good deal of their own procurement and working of goods, and channelled and circumscribed some of the richest commercial areas - in the salt and tea trades, for example. In any case, while the west European feudal economy never matched the scale of Song commerce, this may not have been true of the later east European feudalisms, which operated in a very different context. And Tokugawa Japan, while sharing many of the other social features of the "feudal" grouping, most

probably had a structure of commerce which took considerably more goods into higher-level trading centres than did that of Song China.²⁰ "Feudalism" as a syndrome does not necessarily include anything approaching a "natural economy".

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I hope I have conveyed the impression that a general notion of feudalism, as a possible source for comparative approaches, has been quite useful in directing attention to a number of important issues in analyzing Song society. (In some cases - like that of serfdom - it seems to me to have been over-enthusiastically applied.) On the whole, though, the range of questions the comparison has raised has been answered in ways that demonstrate the value of contrasts as well as resemblances. Song society does not seem to me to have had nearly enough of the characteristic patterns the term covers for there to be much sense in calling it "feudal", but of course this is an entirely trivial observation.

The goal of providing an agreed and settled taxonomy of social types, and then assigning societies to those types, does not seem to me to be a useful one to set for comparative history. Comparisons of the kind I have been trying to conduct in this paper are as useful as any other coherent strategies for interrogating the evidence we have available on historical societies. Where a concept, however generalized, has proved as productive and flexible as has "feudalism" for its original area of application, we may have a fair idea that it will raise interesting questions in another area. But of course such an approach has no privilege at all over any others we might adopt. Theoretical economics, location theory, organization theory, anthropological theories of kinship, symbolism, political and social exchange all may have their own validity as conceptual tools to compel our evidence to speak beyond its own terms, and in fact we may need such concepts even to identify what those terms are. By now, historians of Song society may be ready to discard "feudalism" as their mentor. They may learn more by attending, as some historians both of China and of Europe are already doing, to different, perhaps newer, guides. But none of these latter themselves can be conclusive, and they will distort if they are taken as representing or reconstituting a definitive reality. The value of "social science" for history is to provide coherent and revealing concepts and questions, not to codify answers. For this purpose "feudalism" seems to me to have shown that, provided it is not abused, it can be a serviceable and workmanlike tool.

NOTES

1. On the work produced in this period see especially two articles by Feuerwerker, A.: "China's History in Marxian Dress", in his *History in Communist China*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968; and "From 'Feudalism' to 'Capitalism' in Recent Historical Writing from Mainland China", *Journal of Asian Studies*

- XVIII, 1, 1958, 107-116.
2. In the field of Song social history, discussed later in this paper, a recent set of papers from a conference held in Shanghai in October, 1980 (*Songshi yanjiu lunwen ji*, Shanghai 1982) contains some interesting essays, thoroughly documented from a range of Song sources. None of the writers portrays any awareness of the formidable body of work on this subject done in Japan, nor of the controversies over interpretation which it contains.
 3. "Wo duiyu Zhongguo fengjian shehui de zai renshi", *Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, 1983, 1, 32-36, at page 32.
 4. The problems involved in defining European feudalism, or building an acceptable model for it, are explored in a posthumously published paper by M.M. Postan, "Feudalism and its Decline: A Semantic Exercise", in T.H. Aston and others, eds., *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton*, Cambridge 1983.
 5. "A Note on Feudalism", in his Introduction to Paul Sweezy and others, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London, 1978; page 30.
 6. D.S. Twitchett, *Land Tenure and The Social Order in T'ang and Sung China*, London, 1962; D.S. Twitchett, "The Composition of the Tang Ruling Class: New Evidence from Tunhuang", in Wright, A.F., and Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the Tang*, New Haven, 1973; Elvin, M., *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Stanford 1973, and a review essay by R. Myers, "Transformation and Continuity in Chinese Economic and Social History", *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIII, 2, 1974, 265-277; Golas, P., "Rural China in the Song" (a long review of the "state of the field", with a very full bibliography), *Journal of Asian Studies* XXXIX, 2, 1980, 291-325. Another full survey article, from a rather different perspective and embodying challenges to accepted interpretations, is R.M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political and Social Transformation of China 750-1550", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42,2 (1982).
 7. *Qingming ji*, (photographic reproduction of Song edition with preface dated 1261, held in the Seikadō Library, Tokyo), Tokyo, 1964, 378-386 (1848-1888).
 8. *Ye Shi ji*, Beijing 1971, 808.
 9. Fan Chengda, "Cuizu xing", *Songdai wenxue zuopin xuan*, Jilin 1981; 195.
 10. Mei Yaochen, "Cunhao", *ibid.*, 118.
 11. *Zuoyi zizhen*, *Sibu congkan* edition, 32B. This is part of a small series of such exhortations, including one to landlords to "keep to the contract" with tenants, but also another insisting that punishment will be meted out to people who disturb their neighbours by over-loud swearing.
 12. Brian E. McKnight, "Fiscal Privileges and the Social Order", in J.W. Haeger, ed., *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China*, 86-93.

13. Postan, "Feudalism and its Decline" (see note 4); 85.
14. M. Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Stanford 1973, chapter 6.
15. *Ouyang Yongshu ji*, *Guoxue jiben congshu* edition, II, 614.
16. *Zuoyi zizhen*, 32B, as cited in note 11. For the meaning of *daiyao yiqi*, which I paraphrase by "when the harvest is over and the time has come when tenants may move", see the text cited in note 34 on page 72 of Kusano, Yasushi, "Sodai minden no tensaku keitai", *Shiso (Historical Essays)* 10, 1969, 12-112.
17. Elvin, 70ff. In the document from Zhu Xi translated on page 70, the terms translated as "tenant-serfs" are *dike* and *zuke*. The difference between them is suggested in the passage from Ouyang Xiu given above (see note 26), and it is analyzed in section 2 of the article by Kusano cited in note 16.
18. Shiba, Yoshinobu, "Urbanization and the Development of Markets in the Lower Yangtze Valley", in J.W. Haeger, ed., *Crisis and Prosperity in Song China*, Tucson, 1975: 24-26, 34.
19. See the paper by Shiba cited in the previous note (this paper has an especially full and useful set of citations) and also the reliable English translation-summary of Shiba's major work, translated by Mark Elvin, *Commerce and Society in Sung China*, Ann Arbor, 1970 (Original: Shiba Yoshinobu, *Sodai shogyoshi kenkyu*, Tokyo, 1968).
20. Rozman, G., *Urban Networks in Ch'ing China and Tokugawa Japan*, Princeton, 1973, shows that this was the case for the Qing period. While the Song trading network was less "bottom-heavy", it does not seem to have been qualitatively different from that of the Qing. See the frequency distribution for commercial tax in 1077 given on page 25 of Shiba, "Urbanization" (see note 18).