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State making, political sustainability, and critical crisis: a historical and theoretical perspective from Qing China

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Abstract
This article aims to strengthen the link between history and theory by contributing to the scholarly conversation on "an integrated historical social science." By examining the case of Qing China, it introduces a historically oriented and theoretically informed research agenda and toolkit for studying state making through the interactive lens of political sustainability and critical crisis. Using two historical upheavals as a prism, this article shows how destructive crises can have the unintended consequence of facilitating empire building and fostering political sustainability. Furthermore, it draws on theoretical insights from political science and sociology to construct a general framework for measuring the sustainability of political development and explaining the complex role of great crisis. This interdisciplinary model not only sheds new lights on the causative role of event, conjuncture, and structure but also enriches existing approaches to comparative historical analysis in general and state making in particular.

Keywords: Conjuncture; crisis; historical causality; political sustainability; state making; state–society relationship

China's political development has charted a unique and intriguing trajectory over its extensive history. For more than two millennia, this foundational civilization had built and rebuilt one of the oldest, largest, and longest-lived empires in human history; yet the country faced great difficulties in its modern transformation, ultimately becoming one of the youngest nation states on the planet. Throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China's pride in its past glories was overshadowed by a series of domestic disturbances and foreign aggressions that tormented its last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912), and its first Republic. Despite inheriting and absorbing nearly all the territories of its imperial predecessor, the modern incarnation of the Middle Kingdom suffered a "century of humiliation," which made its transition to nation state a slow, tumultuous, and agonizing experience.

To understand this troubled process, it is crucial to examine China's enduring monarchical-bureaucratic system and its underlying logic, dynamics, and paradoxes. Focusing on a turbulent period in Qing history, this article delves into the interlocking processes of state making and crisis management through the innovative lens of political sustainability. By appropriating methodological insights from political science and sociology, moreover, it advances an interdisciplinary analytical framework that I call "all-encompassing contentious crisis" to assess the sustainability of state building and political development during times of great upheaval. My overarching goal is to promote "an integrated historical social science" (Steinmetz 2008, p. 535) by developing a historically oriented and theoretically informed research agenda and toolkit that help elucidate some of the complex challenges facing humanity in the past, present, and future.[1]

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[1]I borrow the phrase "an integrated historical social science" from George Steinmetz's discussion of William H. Sewell's book *Logics of History*.

Introduction

Around the turn of the nineteenth century, a wave of revolutionary movements was sweeping across many parts of Europe and the Americas. Meanwhile, the Manchu-ruled Qing empire was also facing serious problems and on the verge of collapse. Emperor Jiaqing (r. 1796–1820), who had just taken the throne from his eighty-five-year-old father Qianlong (r. 1736–1796), was dealing with a cascade of uprisings and protest that spread throughout the empire.[2] The two most significant crises were the White Lotus rebellion (1796–1805), led by China's most formidable sectarian organization, and the pirate attacks along the southern coast, partly sponsored by Vietnam. While the former was the largest rebellion in Qing history before the Taiping uprising (1850–1864), the latter became one of the most severe maritime threats the dynasty faced. Adding to the turmoil, Britain launched two unsuccessful naval expeditions to occupy Macao in 1802 and 1808 (Antony 2003; Dai 2019; Dutton 2006; Murray 1987).[3] Despite this "perfect storm" of internal and external crises, the Jiaqing government did not crumble like other regimes, such as the French monarchy. Instead, the emperor turned the upheavals into an opportunity for political reform, which enabled the dynasty to overcome the challenges and gain a new lease on life (Wang 2014).

This article takes the White Lotus and piracy upheavals as a prism through which to view how seemingly disparate crises of social protest had the unintended consequence of fostering political sustainability and facilitating empire building. It consists of two major parts. Part one proposes a conceptual strategy to evaluate the general process of state making, which emphasizes a balanced and compatible relationship among the state's major functions and performance arenas. It also introduces the underexplored category of "sustainable political development" as an indispensable precondition for successful state making while highlighting the general logic, tensions, and dilemmas of imperial Chinese politics. Part two first briefly reviews the analytical schemes of major social science theories on crisis, rebellions, and revolutions. It then synthesizes and historicizes them in order to elaborate on my methodological apparatus of "all-encompassing contentious crisis" that I outlined elsewhere (Wang 2014, pp. 6–10; 2017, p. 753).

This expanded framework combines multiple empirically grounded case studies with theoretically informed analysis, which facilitates a closer dialogue between historical and social science research while addressing their respective deficiencies. Historians, with their focus on the diversity of historical particulars, often miss their broad theoretical implications and explanatory potential. By contrast, social scientists have a tendency to overemphasize the universal applicability of their analytical and theoretical models. This is often due to their focus on identifying overarching regularities about human behavior, which can come at the cost of adequately considering individual agency, historical causality, contingency, and complexity. For this reason, Theda Skocpol claims that some social scientists seem to "practice what C. Wright Mills (1959) decried as 'abstracted empiricism' tempered with flights of artificially generalized 'grand theory'" (2003, p. 407).

To overcome the above limitations of different research traditions, it is crucial to build "an integrated historical social science" that can elucidate the general and particular features of events, processes, and structures, as well as their larger causal interplay and theoretical significance. This cross-fertilization involves mediating and integrating different approaches to amplify their explanatory potential and maximize their temporal–spatial validity. In pursuit of this goal, this article employs a synthesized analytical framework that utilizes enhanced conceptual apparatus, as well as detailed historical evidence derived from in-depth cross-case studies. It first presents a more empirically grounded theorization of "crisis" and "sustainability" that highlights their interactive implications in specific

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[2]Emperor Qianlong abdicated his throne on the lunar New Year's Day of 1796, but he continued to hold power for the next 3 years largely through his untitled "regent" Heshen as will be explained later.

[3]The White Lotus rebellion and South China piracy were just the climax in an escalating wave of social protest that tormented the Qing empire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Other major upheavals include the Wang Lun uprising (1774), the Lin Shuangwen rebellion (1787–1788), and the Miao uprising (1795–1797).

settings, which offers a fresh avenue for interdisciplinary research and a new touchstone for trans-national comparison.

To effectively analyze real-world phenomena, it is crucial to employ an interpretative approach that can account for the inherent complexity and causal interrelationships of the systems being studied. This means that the value of any explanatory method should be assessed based on its ability to elucidate and accommodate the complexity of the phenomena in question (Hall 2003, p. 399). My model of all-encompassing contentious crisis provides an interactive apparatus for reconstituting the tripartite framework of structure, conjuncture, and event in order to offer an enhanced mode of causal interpretation for key historical changes. This model is useful for understanding how complex conditions combine to produce large-scale outcomes, such as state formation and social transitions. It emphasizes the importance of short- and mid-range causal factors, which are often overlooked but can have a significant impact on long-term changes. The resulting integration of empirical findings and theoretical reflection complements the agendas of related research fields and analytical traditions, including comparative historical analysis (CHA) and its representative approach of critical juncture. CHA is a major methodology within contemporary social science that seeks "historically grounded explanations of large-scale and substantively important outcomes." It can help identify factors and patterns that contribute to the emergence of critical junctures, which refer to key transitional situations that bring about rapid and discontinuous changes with lasting causal significance (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, p. 4). To strengthen both modes of analysis (CHA and critical juncture approach), this article calls for a stronger integration of history and theory by combining empirical particularity with structural regularities and theoretical applicability.

Reassessing state making and political sustainability

Over the past two decades scholars have been rethinking the chaotic transition from the Qianlong to Jiaqing reigns (1780s–1810s) and the misconceptions surrounding its significance in Qing history. In my previous work (2014), I have offered a major reassessment of this crisis-ridden period by examining the constructive impacts of the White Lotus rebellion and south China piracy. My central argument is that these two extraordinary upheavals of popular protest did not signal the beginning of an irreversible decline in Qing empire building, as traditional literature suggests. Instead, these crises prompted the Jiaqing regime to undertake a series of policy and institutional reforms that created a crucial turning point in the relationship between state and society. While these reforms were relatively modest in nature, their timely implementation initiated a strategic retreat that redirected Qing empire-building away from the pattern of excessive control and centralization, which provoked social protest and bureaucratic resistance, toward a more balanced and sustainable path of development. This increased emphasis on political sustainability allowed the Manchu-ruled dynasty to recover more quickly from the global unrest of the time than many other powers. Although the Jiaqing reforms were ultimately unable to prevent the Qing collapse a century later, they represented a constructive and enduring approach to the structural problems (both internal and external) that were confronting the Manchu and Republican regimes. From this perspective, the endogenous drive toward pragmatic state making and sustainable political development should be taken as one of the native origins of China's modernity (Wang 2014, p. 6).

Integrated criteria for Qing empire building

Looking at the Qianlong–Jiaqing transition through the dual lens of crisis and sustainability, therefore, helps us better understand the last century of Manchu rule and its troubled transition to modern China. This approach provides a fresh perspective on how to conceptualize Qing empire building, which can be applicable to similar cases in world history. Traditional state building theory emphasizes the process of establishing systems, bolstering institutions, and implementing policy reforms in order to extract resources and provide services that meet the government's major objectives and the society's

basic needs. This complex process involves a dynamic interaction between various functions, dimensions, and sub-mechanisms within the broader framework of state–society relationships (Pomeranz 1993, p. 14). These changing interplays and configurations, influenced by different internal and external circumstances, not only lead to the rise and fall of various crises but also impact the sustainability of all political systems.

In his book *China Transformed*, comparative historian R. Bin Wong explores the similarities and differences between state making at both ends of Eurasia. He introduces four analytical categories – challenges, capacities, commitments, and claims – that are helpful for examining this complicated and diversified process. "Challenges" represent fundamental and deep-seated problems that a state tries to address, while "capacities" refer to its ability to mobilize resources and deploy services to solve these problems. Both concepts emphasize the structurally determined features of state making, which are difficult to change in a short period, such as during the transition from the Qianlong to Jiaqing reigns. The other two categories, by contrast, are more flexible and subject to negotiation. "Commitments" refer to the responsibilities that the regime defines for itself toward society, while "claims" denote societal demands for specific state services and bureaucratic expectations of political treatment. These two categories are directly influenced by changing imperial inclination, evolving public opinion, and short-term political calculations. Hence they are easier to adjust according to the actual conditions of state–society interactions, which in turn can impact the political sustainability underlying these interactions (Wong 1997, pp. 82–83). By highlighting the adaptable nature of "commitments" and "claims," I hope to incorporate a stronger sense of contingency and agency into my model of all-encompassing contentious crisis. By doing so, this article challenges the determinist bias of those traditional interpretations that emphasize a highly structuralized relationship between state and society.

Although Wong's four concepts emphasize different aspects of state making, they all derive from this same universal experience in human society, thus making them value-free and applicable to various spatial–temporal contexts. When woven together, they provide a comprehensive and dynamic yardstick to assess state making in both historical and contemporary contexts. For a sustainable political order, it is crucial for the central government to adapt its "preferences for certain styles of rule" (*commitments*) to the evolving societal *challenges* and changing state *capacities*. Additionally, the government should negotiate mutually acceptable arrangements with key social groups and its own officials in response to their diversified *claim*-making. By adjusting and balancing the four major aspects of state building, even a hard-pressed regime can ensure its continued reproduction despite its delegation of certain power to local society or diminished abilities in performing some traditional functions. When assessed against this integrated criteria, the Jiaqing state actually performed better than most historians have acknowledged (Wang 2017, p. 750).

In his study of state making in late Qing and early Republic China, Kenneth Pomeranz identifies two additional variables – resource extraction and service provision – and emphasizes the importance of their dynamic balance (1993, p. 271). In both periods, the financially strapped authorities often increased their squeeze upon the taxpayers without improving services for local communities, which was a sure recipe for social protest or even state breakdown. By contrast, the Jiaqing regime did not fall into this convenient trap of unsustainable empire building. Due to mounting challenges and declining capacities, the stressed administration had no choice but to reduce some of its traditional services (like granary support and water control), and delegate them to local communities and private organizations.

This forced retrenchment in public managerial activities, however, was not accompanied by an expedient strategy of increasing resource extraction or heightening political control on the part of the state. On the contrary, the Jiaqing court not only granted numerous tax reductions or exemptions to crisis-torn regions but also introduced an empire-wide cut in custom duties. As a result, the early nineteenth century saw the lowest point in Qing state extraction (Sng 2011, pp. 45, 51). This withdrawal from paternalistic Confucian tasks should not be seen as a hallmark of Qing decline. Instead, it represented a strategic state retreat aimed at fostering political sustainability by creating a

more balanced and compatible relationship with the expanded and agitated society. This pragmatic pull-back by the central government not only helped deescalate the mounting wave of popular protest but also magnified the mediating role of local elites in late Qing politics and society, paving the way for the rise of the self-government movement during the late nineteenth century.

This revisionist perspective suggests that what appeared to be a decline or retreat of the state actually paved the way for subsequent Qing reforms and restoration. To understand this complex process, it is important to move beyond a one-dimensional view of the crisis-ridden Jiaqing era and examine its dynamic links to both the preceding reign of Qianlong and the succeeding reign of Daoguang (r. 1820–1850). Each stage of this century-long evolution built upon the socio-political and institutional heritage of previous generations, while also influencing later ones. These cumulative changes had interconnected effects which shed new light on the complex set of conditions that defined the historical options available to different strategic actors. By studying this historically grounded process of state making, one can gain a better understanding of what different Qing monarchs were able to achieve and what limitations they faced.

To illustrate the gradual evolution of this process and its changing impact on political sustainability, I have identified two interdependent and mutually transformative stages: the "period of political dividend" and the "period of political debt." The former denotes the optimal phase of state making, exemplified by the Qianlong reign, where a favorable combination of structural and conjunctural conditions maximizes the potential for sustainable political development. In contrast, the latter stage, represented by the Jiaqing reign, is far from ideal as its room for sustainable politics is extremely limited due to the unfavorable historical legacy left by previous rulers, worsening structural transformations, and/or a deteriorating geopolitical environment (Wang 2014, pp. 8–9). To overcome this difficult period of empire building, it is necessary to restore the balance between state and society through top-down political reforms and/or bottom-up social protest, which can create conditions for a new period of political dividend. The mutual transformation between these two stages is an ongoing process that is influenced by a multitude of domestic and external factors; it often represents a crucial juncture that can directly impact the state-making process and its ability to sustain itself over time.

The Qianlong emperor was a capable and fortunate ruler throughout most of his 60-year reign. He inherited an impressive legacy of achievements from his Manchu predecessors, which he skillfully utilized to propel the dynasty to even greater heights of prosperity. For instance, Qianlong presided over the most affluent period in Qing history, thanks partly to the fiscal success of his grandfather Kangxi (r. 1662–1722) and father Yongzheng (r. 1722–1735) who had set the economy on an upward trajectory. Their effective administrative reform and institutional building further enabled Qianlong to establish a highly centralized bureaucratic state that not only enhanced imperial power over the officialdom but also strengthened state control over the society. These developments laid the groundwork for Qianlong's epochal conquest of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia, which became one of the biggest territorial expansions in world history (Wang 2014, pp. 21–27).

These remarkable successes in empire building, nonetheless, became increasingly unsustainable as many of them were achieved at the cost of overexploiting already strained state resources and antagonizing restive local communities.[4] As a result, the state's capacity to control the expanding society and its unresponsive officialdom began to wane in the late eighteenth century. During the last 20 years of his reign, probably due to a sense of urgency and pride, the aging Qianlong emperor became increasingly fixated on gaining short-term political gains and implementing his personal agenda. This self-indulgent change had significant negative consequences for Qing empire building as it not only increased the cost of political operations but also interfered with the state's ability to maintain a stable and balanced relationship with society. The best example is the emperor's steadfast patronage of the unscrupulous minister Heshen as well as their joint enrichment through the infamous practice of

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[4]State resources were strained mainly by the worsening ratio of political resources to population size as will be seen later.

self-assessed "fines" as will be explained later. These dilemmas foreground a basic flaw at the heart of late Qianlong empire building, which is the vital problem of sustainability that could no longer be ignored by subsequent Qing rulers (Wang 2014, pp. 21–22).

Sustainable political development

In comparison with "crisis," the term "sustainability" is relatively new and has only come into general use in recent decades. It may seem anachronistic to apply it to an imperial Chinese context, but I find the term relevant and useful because it conveys a sense of rational, pragmatic, and forward-thinking that has become increasingly important in early modern and modern world politics. By examining sustainability as a universally applied criterion, we can gain a better understanding of the tempo and nature of state making in diverse historical settings.

Despite its increasing use in academic discourse, "sustainability," like "crisis," remains an ambiguous and underdeveloped concept in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars have proposed various definitions of the term (Sarr 2018, pp. 39–40; Willis 2006, pp. 8–12), but the most commonly cited definition comes from the 1987 Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (UN 1987). According to this influential report, sustainable development seeks to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition prioritizes the prospective impact of current actions on the future, making it the core meaning and guiding principle of sustainability. However, research on sustainable development has predominantly focused on its two main pillars – ecological stability and economic growth – with limited attention paid to other aspects of human and state activities.

To enrich the understanding of this key concept, I have attached great importance to its political dimension, which represents an indispensable condition for any long-term success of state making. Unlike its ecological and economic counterparts, political sustainability has less to do with human's relationship with their resource bases or the natural environment that supports them. Rather, the primary issue is optimizing the state's relationship with society by minimizing the operational costs of the involving systems and their mutual interaction over a prolonged period. This can be achieved by creating or recreating a dynamically stable and functional set of relations among the key socio-political forces. As described later in this article, sustainable politics presents a challenge primarily for state leaders, who must ensure effective collaboration among officials at various levels by motivating them to work toward common purposes, managing their existing tensions, and achieving cost-efficient resolution when serious conflicts arise (Wang 2014, p. 6).

In addition to effective intragovernmental coordination, sustainable political development also depends on a compatible relationship among the major functions, performance arenas, and submechanisms of state making, as outlined by various scholars such as R. Bin Wong, Kenneth Pomeranz, Sidney Verba, Jack Goldstone, and Theda Skocpol. While two historians (Wong and Pomeranz) have been discussed briefly, part two will explain how the views of the three political scientists and sociologists contribute to my approach of all-encompassing contentious crisis.

The essence of political sustainability, simply put, lies in maintaining a balanced and compatible relationship between the state and society over a prolonged period of time. The Qing dynasty faced a major bottleneck in achieving this sustainability during the late Qianlong reign as the outbreak of a series of rebellions marked the grim transition from the "period of political dividend" to the "period of political debt." This crisis-ridden period saw an overloaded state under the threat of an ungovernable society, both of which had become "a system working near the limit of what was possible by premodern means," as noted by Mark Elvin (1973, p. 309). Since the Tang dynasty (618–907), China's imperial government apparatus had been a minimalist one vis-à-vis its expanding population, society, and territory. This structural limitation was largely due to the long-standing influence of Confucian state ideology, which emphasized the importance of small government and low taxation. It was also exacerbated by a series of trans-dynastic social-economic changes, like demographic growth, commercialization, migration, and frontier expansion, that interacted and reinforced one another. By the late

eighteenth century, these large-scale and deep-seated transformations had created proliferating complexity that not only overwhelmed the organizational capacities of the Qing state but also strained the basic bond and livelihood of local societies. The most precarious problem was a long-term downward shift in the ratio of resources (both natural and political) to population. Land shortage, in particular, contributed directly to growing immiseration and instability in the rural areas (Jones and Kuhn 1978, pp. 107–8; Wang 2014, pp. 6–7).

Tensions and dilemmas in imperial Chinese politics

To address the worsening structural dilemma mentioned above, Qianlong resorted to extreme measures in his later reign that proved counterproductive and unsustainable. On the one hand, he pursued heavy-handed social control through a series of draconian policies and misguided campaigns that overtaxed the state's limited resources and overburdened its minimalist governing systems. For example, his relentless and unrealistic efforts to eradicate heterodox sects (such as the White Lotus), secret societies (such as Heaven and Earth/Triads), salt smugglers, coin counterfeiters, and maritime bandits only served to radicalize these anti-state or non-state groups, making them even more powerful and dangerous (Wang 2014, pp. 6–7). Under such circumstances, as sociologist Ho-Fung Hung points out, the last third of the Qianlong reign was characterized by a sharp increase in "state-resisting violence" and a corresponding decrease in non-antagonistic "state-engaging protest" (2011, pp. 102–3).

In addition to strengthening his grip over a restive society, Qianlong also tightened his hold on the increasingly entrenched and unresponsive bureaucratic machine by exercising his capricious imperial power. To understand this complex relationship between monarch and officials, it is necessary to unpack some of the underlying tensions and latent dilemmas that drove traditional Chinese politics. As suggested earlier, Confucianism played a major role in shaping imperial China and its political culture. This predominant ideology emphasized the importance of a unified, centralized state led by a wise and benevolent monarch who has a mandate from heaven. The ideal state was believed to be one where the sage ruler was assisted by loyal and virtuous scholar-officials, who would work tirelessly with the "Son of Heaven" to ensure the smooth functioning of the government and the well-being of the people. The reality of politics, however, was much less harmonious as the emperor and the officialdom were often locked in a "silent struggle" fueled by the hidden tension between arbitrary monarchical power and routine bureaucratic authority. This symbiotic yet fraught relationship was further complicated by the ambiguous nature of both imperial and bureaucratic power, which shared a fundamental ambivalence toward formal administrative rules, as will be explained below. As a result, officials often pursued their own interests and agendas, which could conflict with the goals of the emperor and his state. Conversely, the emperor could act capriciously and pursue personal desires unless effectively advised or compelled by the bureaucracy to act otherwise. This dynamic created a delicate balance of power, where both sides relied on the other to maintain stability but also constantly jockeyed for greater influence, autonomy, and control (Kuhn 1990, p. 220).

Therefore, China's imperial system was based on a complex mechanism of checks and balances, which posed an ongoing challenge for the throne due to the thorny principal–agent problem. While the "Son of Heaven" was generally above the law and political institutions were too weak to restrain him/her, it is a myth to believe that Chinese monarchical power was unchallenged and unchallengeable. After all, the throne had to rule through the officialdom and was thus limited in what he/she could achieve by the sheer size and complexity of the political system. Simply put, emperors built up the bureaucracy as their tool for government administration. However, when the bureaucratic machine was firmly established, it only needed an institutionalized sovereign to act as its top official (Huang 1981; Lui 1990, pp. 19–20; Wang 2014, p. 117).[5]

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[5]In general, the officialdom had a built-in proclivity to oppose imperial autocracy, incompetency, and nonaction due to their higher duty to defend the Confucian society, state, and civilization.

Due to this structural issue of principal–agent control, emperors often had to navigate between two competing identities or rulership styles that epitomized the ambivalence at the heart of Chinese court politics. On the one hand, they were despotic rulers with absolute, arbitrary, and unfettered power in name, aspiring to exert strong and complete control over the officialdom. On the other, in reality, they were often institutionalized beings and frustrated rulers, whose authority was circumscribed by their own bureaucratic system. This deep-seated paradox created two interlocking spheres of government power – the inner court and the outer court – which interacted with the throne in different ways. The outer court was the formal top of the central bureaucratic system, overseeing major departments and regular agencies that handled the massive, routine business of governing the empire. This vast standardized system of central officialdom operated according to established tradition and clearly written regulations, which contributed to the precedent-bound, predictable yet slow-moving administration that limited the monarch's exercise of free will (Bartlett 1991; Wang 2014, pp. 117–18).[6]

To avoid the bureaucratic challenges of the outer court, Chinese dynastic rulers often relied on their most trusted confidants and advisors in the inner court. This small and informal group of imperial relatives and loyal ministers provided personal consultation on all important state affairs, assisting in monarchical control in a highly efficient manner (Bartlett 1991; Huang 1974; Wu 1970). They acted as the throne's "private" bureaucracy and personal agents of absolute rule, overseeing and counterbalancing the vast outer court. As a result, the inner court enjoyed the unique "extralegal" privilege of operating confidentially beyond the reach of regular legal restraint and routine administrative supervision. Created by the heightened demand of monarchical control, the tension between inner court and outer court was a key dynamic and hallmark of Ming–Qing court politics. In short, most emperors sought to enhance their arbitrary monarchical rule by using their empowered inner court to overcome the restraining influence of the outer court (Miller 2000, p. 28).

Such a convenient effort of imperial control reached its peak during the late Qianlong reign, which saw an unprecedented concentration of power in the emperor's hands as well as its autocratic use by his most trusted confidants. The most notable example is Heshen, probably the biggest political upstart in Qing history. Within a period of 6 months in 1776, he ascended from a minor Manchu bodyguard to become Qianlong's personal favorite and later his untitled "regent." Since then, the aging emperor had turned increasingly to this Manchu minister to readily translate his personal goals into outcome. This convenient strategy backfired disastrously, however, as it led to Heshen's notorious abuse of imperial power that not only disrupted the dynamic balance between inner court and outer court but also alienated the throne from his officialdom and populace. Heshen's hegemony thus exposed a structural challenge and a constitutional dilemma that plagued China's imperial system: the difficulty of delineating the parameters of inner-court power, whose expansion under imperial support might actually undermine the monarchical rule it was supposed to safeguard. His meteoric rise also highlights a paradox of Qianlong's emperorship: the throne's obsession with ad hoc, personal goals like power concentration often ran counter to the long-term, systemic requirement for dynastic stability and state reproduction. These two different yet intertwined predicaments developed to such an extent that they pushed both the state–society and emperor–bureaucracy relationships beyond their sustainable limit in the late eighteenth century (Wang 2014, p. 9).

As the monarch struggled to balance his routine and arbitrary authority, bureaucrats were also caught in the deep-seated tension between formal and informal power. On the one hand, they operated according to an elaborate system of official rules and administrative procedures that gave them routine bureaucratic authority. On the other, they also belonged to various loyalty groups defined primarily in terms of kinship, territoriality, and academic connections. These groups used rewards, symbols, and sanctions to induce or "coerce" members to follow their own rules of the game, which often contradicted official laws and state regulations. This led to dubious practices such as patronage, faction-building, and corruption, which gave bureaucrats extralegal sources of power but also made them susceptible to informal rules and non-official responsibilities. Deeply rooted in the larger social

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[6]It should be noted that the distinction between inner court and outer court was by no means clearly cut and absolute.

system, these practices were generally accepted as part of official life and a structural feature of traditional Chinese politics. Rather than being seen as a dysfunctional aspect of the imperial state from a Weberian perspective, patronage, factionalism, and corruption can be viewed as essential lubricants that moved the rusty wheels of the bureaucratic machine forward. In fact, these practices played an important role in ensuring the operational sustainability of the bureaucracy. Therefore, paradoxically, the remarkable longevity of China's imperial system was a consequence of the very factors that made it often inefficient and prone to periodic crisis (Metzger 1973; Wang 2014, pp. 199–20).

Viewed from this perspective, a realistic goal of imperial control was not to eliminate these dubious practices altogether, but rather to limit and manage them in a way that maintained a balance between formal and informal forces within the bureaucracy. Both the emperor and officials exercised different but complementary types of power and sought to harmonize them, similar to the *Yin–Yang* interaction described in the Confucian Classic *Book of Changes*. In his work *The Internal Organization of Ch'ing Bureaucracy*, Thomas Metzger also acknowledges this complex relationship but offers a different interpretation. He emphasizes the importance of what he calls the "probationary ethic" as an integral part of Chinese political culture and monarchical control system (Metzger 1973).

The essence of imperial control, as Philip Kuhn claimed (1990, p. 191), lies in the distinction between "official crime" and "administrative failure." This distinction was not clearly specified by the Chinese rulers, however, due to their personal desire and institutional need to discipline officials and punish those who were on their "black book." Due to this intentional ambiguity, the former could easily moralize the latter's petty administrative mistakes into major political crimes, thereby injecting them with a constant sense of uneasiness or panic. In the reality of Chinese imperial politics, moreover, almost no official could forestall the imperial charge of malfeasance, factionalism, or corruption, given their prevalence and structural nature as explained earlier. To relieve their inescapable psychological stress, the bureaucrats felt compelled to atone for their "original sin" by providing loyal service and other forms of repentance. In doing so, they fostered a political culture of caution and risk-aversion that encouraged bureaucratic inertia and hindered administrative innovation. Without a basic sense of security in imperial politics, most officials had little incentive to excel in their position or improve the system. Instead they focused on maintaining a delicate balance among his formal and informal relationships while resorting to compliance and mediocrity. The logic was clear: without political loyalty and equilibrium, there was no safety, harmony, or promotion. Metzger's category of probationary ethic calls attention to this uneasy interaction between the throne and his bureaucracy. For the sake of political survival, most bureaucrats embraced this ethic and internalized it as a heightened sense of obligation to the throne. This cost-effective mechanism of self-discipline helped ensure a docile and loyal officialdom under imperial control through most of Chinese history (Metzger 1973; Wang 2014, p. 176).

To fully understand the probationary ethic at play, it helps to introduce the infamous practice of self-assessed "fines." This semi-confidential system of imperial "extortion" was created and implemented by Heshen with Qianlong's support. Its "prime target" was the high-ranking officials in charge of the empire's most profitable positions, such as maritime customs, salt monopolies, and textile factories. As the emperor saw it, these officials in "fat" positions were privileged and resourceful but needed to be closely watched. Hence they were compelled to confess and repent, "voluntarily" offering large cash contributions as punishment to alleviate their guilty conscience for past offenses or even future crimes. Essentially, these self-assessed fines were bribes paid by officials to protect their political careers, a form of institutionalized corruption that produced widespread demoralization within and beyond the officialdom. Payments of such fines inevitably raised the cost of local governance, which could only be covered by increased exploitation and heightened corruption (Wang 2014, pp. 176–77).

Qianlong's emphasis on strong monarchical control through inner-court hegemony and heightened extractions disrupted the dynamic balance of Qing political system by polarizing the dual character (formal and informal) of imperial power and bureaucratic authority. In response, uncooperative officials entrenched themselves further in bureaucratic protection by intensifying their practices of

patronage, factionalism, corruption, and power abuse to deflect excessive pressure from the throne and its agents. These subtle acts of self-preservation or resistance eventually weakened or nullified the time-honored structures, institutions, and values that had previously encouraged compliant behavior from officials and the populace. As a result, the state's internal cohesion began to erode, and the traditional strategies of moral persuasion and psychological discipline, including the "probationary ethic," lost their effectiveness in regulating bureaucratic behavior and sustaining political cooperation (Metzger 1973). The deteriorating civil administration, combined with misguided imperial policies, provoked a wave of social protest that increased in frequency and severity during the late Qianlong reign. The hard-pressed regime responded with an intensifying series of repression campaigns that turned out to be both ineffective and wasteful. Furthermore, these campaigns stretched the Qing military beyond a breaking point, forcing the court to enlist the help of local militia for the first time in the dynasty's history (Wang 2014, pp. 7–8).

Consequently, the cost of political transaction and imperial control appeared to have reached unsustainable heights by the Qianlong–Jiaqing transition. This was evidenced by the increasingly expensive anti-rebel campaigns, particularly the White Lotus War, which was the most expensive Qing military operation before the Taiping uprising in the 1850s. The Board of Revenue, the Qing's accounting office, estimated that as much as 100 million taels of silver were allocated for the first 3 years of the White Lotus campaign. To put this in perspective, it amounted to about two-thirds of the *total expense* for Qianlong's "Ten Great Military Campaigns" over the course of his 60-year reign. Additionally, almost half of the military funds were used for illegitimate purposes, exacerbating the regime's financial strain (Wang 2014, p. 141).

Another example of rampant corruption and misappropriation is the unwarranted bestowal of military awards, which peaked in the campaigns against the White Lotus rebels and south China pirates. This dramatic combination of popular protest presented a grave threat to the Jiaqing regime, requiring a resolute response from both the emperor and his officials. Nevertheless, they had somewhat different interests in this contentious process of crisis management, resulting in distinct mindsets and strategies as my previous research suggests (Wang 2014). Simply put, the upheavals not only led to military confrontations through much of China but also triggered secret struggles and hidden negotiations among political actors at various levels of the government. Much needed and hard to replace, frontline officials and generals gained more strategic importance during such exigent circumstances, which gave them more bargaining power compared to the distant throne in Beijing. Their ad hoc decisions and emergency measures were not only more tolerated but also had a greater influence on the state–society relationship than during peaceful times. This situation is an example of what political scientists Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen have termed a "substantially heightened probability" in their studies of critical junctures, which refer to highly fluid moments or contingent situations that can lead to long-term institutional or policy changes (2007, p. 348). Not surprisingly, the campaign officials sought to maximize their interest by expanding their discretionary power while minimizing the risk of failure by underreporting or withholding problems. Some went even further and fabricated success by exaggerating their contributions and victories. Then they used this manipulated information to request more military funding and administrative honors in the name of rewarding brave soldiers or meritorious aides. When their demands were not met, these officials would often slow down their suppression efforts by "playing with the rebels." In face of this "veiled threat," Emperor Jiaqing had little choice but to grant most of their requests. According to his estimate, no more than 10 percent of the awardees in the White Lotus campaign deserved the honors they received (Wang 2014, p. 143).

The institutionalization of the so-called "military allowances for nourishing virtue" was another indication of the escalating costs associated with the Qing empire-building and war-making efforts. Emperor Qianlong introduced this supplementary stipend in the 1780s to improve the morale of his expanding imperial forces. However, this move added an annual expense of 3 million silver taels to the already overstretched military budget, which ultimately weakened the court's long-term financial stability. Together the above changes suggest that the dynasty's survival was increasingly dependent on its ability to use expedient measures such as material incentives and political rewards

to reduce grievances among its agents and ensure their compliance with government objectives. They also suggest that conventional methods of bureaucratic control had become increasingly difficult for any Qing monarch to maintain, further exacerbating the persistent problem of principal–agent control (Wang 2014, pp. 33–34).

Apart from undercutting bureaucratic compliance, Qianlong's aggressive empire building also reduced the court's ability to affect positive changes in local society. The minimalist Qing state, like its Republican counterpart in the early twentieth century, depended upon a variety of sub-bureaucratic functionaries like clerks and runners to carry out its vital duties in grassroots communities. Yet, paradoxically, the authorities struggled to control these informal low-level agents as they were not on the government payroll. To make ends meet, not surprisingly, they frequently engaged in abusive behavior and terrorized local communities. Qianlong's stringent campaigns against anti-state and non-state groups only served to exacerbate the situation by providing opportunities for the corruption and extortion of these agents. The outcome was a vicious cycle of predatory state making and escalating social protest, fueled by mounting tension between the state and society, as well as between the emperor and bureaucracy. This dual impasse ultimately led to the Jiaqing reforms, which aimed to address the above issues and restore the balance of power.

Compared to his father, Jiaqing faced more urgent challenges with limited resources to address them and little room to maneuver. This is a common dilemma confronting all state leaders in the gloomy period of political debt. To save the dynasty from collapse, the hapless emperor reversed the radical efforts of the previous reign which had exacerbated the principal–agent issue and pushed Qing empire building beyond sustainable limits. Using crisis as an opportunity for political change, Jiaqing forced Heshen to commit suicide immediately after Qianlong's death in 1799 and, furthermore, abolished his malpractice of self-assessed fines. Most importantly, Jiaqing implemented a series of moderate reforms that aligned the regime's functioning with changing societal *challenges* and *claims* as well as shifting state *commitments* and *capacities*. These reforms included more accommodating policies toward non-state and anti-state groups, as well as pragmatic institutional modifications to restore the balance between inner court and outer court. By doing so, Jiaing traded some of his own arbitrary power for a wiser exercise of routine bureaucratic authority, which helped the dynasty to overcome a looming "constitutional" crisis (Wang 2014, pp. 9, 119, 254).

By initiating a process of state and monarchical retreat, these timely reforms not only lessened the mounting tension within the expanding society but also lowered the undue pressure placed on the minimalist government structure. Together, they enhanced political sustainability by reducing the cost of administrative operation while promoting more balanced state–society and emperor–bureaucracy relationships. Consequently, the Jiaqing period saw a quiet eclipse of Qing emperorship vis-à-vis the officialdom and a retreat of central state authority vis-à-vis local societal power. Both changes diluted the autocratic aura of monarchical rule and might be considered harbingers of late Qing constitutional reform at the turn of the twentieth century (Wang 2014, p. 256).

All-encompassing contentious crisis and its approaches

Looking at the Qianlong–Jiaqing upheavals through the fresh lens of political sustainability not only provides a new perspective on empire building, it also offers a fertile ground for interdisciplinary theorization of crisis, reform, and change. My explanatory framework of "all-encompassing contentious crisis" shows how major upheavals like popular protest affect sustainable politics and vice versa (2017). This synthesized model provides an integrated and interactive perspective on key processes of state making, social mobilization, and cultural change, which should be useful for comparative scholarship based on empirical findings in China. It also aims to illuminate complex causal mechanisms at different spatial–temporal levels, emphasizing the explanatory significance of both macro-structural conditions and historically embedded events and conjunctures. Simon Backovsky claims that "multiple causal narratives" and "event-structure analysis" provide "the most promising tools hitherto developed on the path toward a 'historical social science'" (2014, p. 14). My approach of "all-encompassing

contentious crisis" offers an example of how this important endeavor can be achieved through an intermediate framework of historical–theoretical reference.

As another widely used term in popular discourse and scholarly literature, "crisis" is an important but often "unreflectively deployed concept" in humanities and social sciences (Volpi and Gerschewski 2020, p. 1030). It encompasses a wide variety of events, processes, and structures that differ greatly in their specific impacts, causal mechanisms, and patterns of evolution. I have explored two critical episodes of crisis (White Lotus rebellion and South China piracy) that served as a major catalyst for historical change. These crises can also be viewed as brief moments of fluidity or short-term situations of uncertainty in which conflict and change can take different directions, which exemplifies the agency of strategic actors under study. Moreover, examining the notion of crisis from the underexplored perspective of sustainability can enhance our understanding of both concepts. When put into dialogue, they can contribute to CHA by deepening studies of critical junctures and serving as an important touchstone for effective comparison. Both concepts are mediated through critical struggles and accommodations in shifting spatial–temporal arenas of state–society interactions; one should thus examine them in the larger context of this relationship and across multiple time periods (Wang 2017, pp. 746–67). The following sections will discuss how several social science scholars explore the different sites of interaction mentioned above.

Comparative politics and comparative sociology

Comparative politics is a subfield of political science that seeks to understand political development and its institutional bases from a comparative perspective. Over five decades ago, a group of influential scholars, including Sidney Verba, studied the role of crises in shaping political outcomes and published their articles in an important volume titled *Crises and Sequences in Collective Theory Development* (Binder et al. 1971).[7] This book is organized around five "problem areas" that can undermine a government's decision-making capacity and lead to crisis situations. Verba defined these areas as follows (1971, p. 299):

(1) Penetration: the level of effective control that the central government has over societal forces and the degree to which the latter conform to state policies.
(2) Participation: the involvement of various actors in the process of making governmental decisions.
(3) Legitimacy: the basis and extent of acceptance of government decisions by societal forces.
(4) Distribution: the (re)distribution of various benefits in society through government decisions.
(5) Identity: the definition of the set of individuals who fall within the scope of the government's decision making.

From the top-down perspective of the state, Verba defined "crisis" as a situation where conflict arises in one or more of the five problem areas outlined above. These conflicts and crises go beyond routine policy making and implementation; they require ad hoc institutional innovations for a government to manage them, thus providing important dynamics for political change (1971, p. 302). The five domains of decision making coexist and interact with one another, meaning that the state's performance in any one of them can be influenced by its conduct in the others, much like the problem of economic growth among various sectors. The key point is coordination, compatibility, and balance. Without them, crises of various sorts can occur simultaneously along different interconnected dimensions at different paces. For instance, Emperor Qianlong's aggressive efforts to exert monarchical and social control created a *penetration* crisis that challenged the *legitimacy* of his regime and weakened his own authority. Furthermore, his self-indulgent empowerment of the inner court enhanced the political

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[7]These scholars of comparative politics include Leonard Binder, James S. Coleman, Joseph LaPalombara, Lucian W. Pye, Sidney Verba, and Myron Weiner.

participation of a few most trusted confidants at the expense of the vast outer court bureaucracy. By doing so, he tipped the balance between the two main spheres of government power and created a crisis in both *distribution* and *identity* (Herr 1980, p. 303; Wang 2017, pp. 749–50).

Jack Goldstone, a comparative sociologist, also emphasizes the importance of balanced and compatible development. In his book *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*, Goldstone proposes an integrated model of state breakdown, highlighting the multidimensional nature of uprisings and their interrelatedness. He identifies three types of crises – government fiscal problems, severe elite divisions, and widespread popular mobilization – as the underlying structural conditions for state breakdown in the early modern world. Goldstone argues that rapid and unsustainable population growth was the root cause of these crises, leading to food shortages, rising prices, and elite factionalism, which in turn paved the way for collective violence. Demographic expansion, therefore, is the central variable for explaining the trajectory of social, economic, and political change. It exerted tremendous pressure on the inflexible institutions and structures, rendering them unable to coordinate effectively. Without decisive state intervention to reduce the pressure and restore balance, systemic crises of catastrophic proportions would converge, resulting in the downfall of the old regime (Goldstone 1991).

In her book *States and Social Revolution*, sociologist and political scientist Theda Skocpol delves into three specific cases of state breakdown – the revolutionary crises in France (1787–1789), Russia (1917), and China (1911–1916) – by comparing their diversified origins, goals, and impacts. Adopting a "nonvoluntarist, structural perspective" (1979, p. 14), she accentuates the significance of the autonomous state (vis-à-vis societal groups) and its international context. In her view, revolution is primarily a crisis of the state dictated by its structural position in the evolving international systems and its institutionalized relationship with the dominant class. As this cross-pressure built, some old-regime apparatus became so overburdened that it began to fragment, thus opening the way for class-based uprisings. Some of these rebellions ended with the revolutionary reconsolidation of state power by a new elite, which constituted an event–structure sequence at work in all three cases of revolution mentioned above. Skocpol believes that revolution is the perfect storm of politico-military crises in conjunction with various forms of social revolt. Therefore, the state is more the cause of revolution than its outcome.

The very brief summary above certainly does not do justice to the complexity and richness of the three scholars' arguments; but it highlights their acute attention to the complex, multifaceted nature of crises and their varying impact on state making. Like comparative historians Wong and Pomeranz, all of them propose value-free and universally applied concepts that challenge the oversimplified dichotomy between traditional China and modern West. Focusing on macro issues of conflict and change, their works tend to analyze crises from a top-down, structural point of view. More attention needs to be given to the various components of both state and society, their close, contingent interactions with one another, the agency of individuals and groups involved, as well as their ideologies, interests, and aspirations that drive these complex interactions. Therefore, a more nuanced approach is necessary to fully understand the intricate relationship between state making and great crises (Collins 1990, pp. 111–35; Wang 2017, p. 6).

In order to develop a more historicized and less deterministic theorization of extraordinary upheavals, I have analyzed the White Lotus rebellion and south China piracy as two interconnective *events* of "all-encompassing contentious crisis" that precipitated key *structural* changes at a vital *conjuncture* of Qing history (2014). By "all-encompassing contentious crisis," I refer to a particularly grave type of situation arising from a complex and systemic failure in the relationship between state and society. At the core of this conceptual framework is a multifaceted relational field that involves various conflicts, negotiations, and compromises at different temporal–spatial levels. It is necessary to stress the constructive implication of such extraordinary crises because they not only lead to danger and chaos by disrupting the routine, balanced tension between state and society; they also offer opportunities for different social, political, and cultural forces to contend, negotiate, and reconcile with each other (Wang 2014, p. 10; 2017, pp. 753–54). This heightened interaction often culminates in a

"decisive intervention" (Hay 1999, pp. 317–18), like top-down reforms and bottom-up revolutions, which presents many possibilities for historical change. In many cases, such interventions precipitate a new sequence of state–society relationship with greater potential for sustainable development; by doing so, they will also initiate a new cycle of state making by presaging and propelling a transition from the period of political debt to that of political dividend.

This expanded model, moreover, provides an event-based, temporally oriented and negotiation-centered approach to the study of crisis and its management, treating both as a *constructed*, *transactional*, and *historically contingent* process that forms the axes around which state–society relations revolve. The power of the state "resides not only in the ability to *respond* to crises, but to *identify, define* and *constitute* crisis in the first place" (Hay 1996, p. 255, emphasis in the original). Viewed in this vein, crisis does not just reflect the "objective" fact of social, political, and economic dislocations; it can also be constructed by different strategic actors to be a particular kind of acute problem that fits their own best interests (Blyth 2002). The framework of all-encompassing contentious crisis thus offers a more elaborate theoretical platform and empirical grounding for unpacking events into smaller sites of conflicts and changes over a variety of key issues, such as Verba's five problem areas, that connect with and affect each other to propel historical changes. This model offers several advantages for interdisciplinary and comparative research. It formulates a flexible social theory that subsumes a wide array of contentious actions under diverse temporal–spatial conditions, much like Goldstone's state breakdown. Furthermore, this model brings the central state, local society, popular culture, and elite ideology into a common discourse while searching for new elements of dynamism in their complex interactions. It integrates various facets of history in a richer way than traditional top-down and bottom-up models, providing a conduit for their intensive interaction and dialogue between different dimensions of crisis (Wang 2014, p. 10; 2017, pp. 754–56).

Despite its general applicability, my framework of all-encompassing contentious crisis is not a grand model or universalizing approach for studying all incidents of social protest or other upheavals. Not all crisis scenarios can be characterized as a critical juncture, and many of them end up to be "lost moments of history" when decisive and lasting change was possible but did not materialize for all sorts of reasons (Trevor-Roper 1988). By focusing only on pivotal *events* in crucial *conjunctures* and their profound influences on *structure*, my selective approach provides a useful framework for studying momentous crises across different temporalities. This sheds light on how the Braudelian tripartite framework of event, conjuncture, and structure and William H. Sewell's similar conceptual trinity of event, trend, and routine fit together under extraordinary circumstances. Fernand Braudel (1980), a pivotal figure in the Annales School of history, advocated a hierarchical model of analysis based on the three durations of historical change mentioned above. He emphasized "structure," the deepest level of analysis that explains the *longue durée*, while regarding "event" as insignificant phenomena on the surface level. In contrast, Sewell reconceptualizes event as "sequences of occurrences that result in transformation of structures," offering a more robust theorization of event and its undervalued significance (Sewell 1996, pp. 841–81; 2005, pp. 197–99, 223–27). Other comparative historical analysts, such as James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, also seek to incorporate the temporal–causal considerations of events and junctures into explanations of large structures and big questions. However, they face the common challenge of accommodating studies that focus primarily on micro-level units, such as individuals or small groups, "within the macro-oriented field of comparative historical analysis" (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, pp. 4–11). Similarly, Stephen Skowronek and Matthew Glassman question "how to keep the actor center stage" while maintaining a broader perspective on the larger whole and, moreover, "assess[ing] changes effected in the moment against the standards of the *longue durée*" (2008, p. 2).

To address these analytical challenges, it is necessary to place watershed events at the center of analysis and explore how they interact with "structure" through the intermediate role of "conjuncture" while precipitating changes on different levels. My approach recognizes these events as critical junctures of heightened indeterminacy where a combination of individual and collective conditions, interests, and decisions can exert a decisive impact on the trajectory of historical development. A good

example is the all-encompassing contentious crisis, like the White Lotus and piracy disturbances, which can shape the direction of social, political, and cultural changes by acting as a pivotal "hinge" that constitutes conjuncture which in turn modifies structures. This framework of integrated agency and interactive contingencies, specifically, elucidates how a fortuitous combination of contentious events constitutes a critical juncture of sociopolitical fluidity while illuminating their complex causal relationship with structure. To fully understand this framework, it is important to consider the dual neologisms of "structure of the conjuncture" and "conjuncture of structures." The former, coined by Marshall Sahlins, refers to the specific micro-conditions that shape events, while the latter, proposed by William Sewell, describes the conjoining of different structures in a given situation that generates events and affects their dynamics (Sahlins 1991, pp. 37–100; Sewell 2005, p. 227). Other scholars, such as Giovanni Capoccia and H. Soifer, have further analyzed critical junctures and their "causal logic" in identifying moments of structural contingency and opportunities for change (Capoccia 2015; Soifer 2012, p. 1572).

Instead of giving explanatory priority to any single temporal parameter, it is important to investigate how these parameters interact with each other to make history while creating structural constraints and conjunctural possibilities for different strategic actors within diverse settings (Wang 2017, p. 757). Furthermore, it is necessary to examine how these actors adapt to challenges and seize on opportunities as well as their contingent impacts on the state–society relationship. Similar to Daniel Little's paradigm of "conjunctural contingent meso-history," my synthesized approach of all-encompassing contentious crisis seeks "a middle way between grand theory and excessively particularistic narrative" by merging the deep bone structure of macro-change with fast-moving accidents and kaleidoscopic anecdotes (Little 2000, p. 90; Wong 1997, pp. 208, 293). This can be achieved by promoting the studies of key junctures (like critical upheavals) as a pivotal, intermediate mode of explanation that intersects and enriches the other two mentioned above. By doing so, my methodological framework incorporates a diverse range of analytical possibilities which help to uncover the complexities of historical change, especially the uncanny interaction among events, conjunctures, and structures.

Moreover, my synthesized model integrates the three main competing approaches of comparative politics into a common framework of crisis studies: the structuralist approach emphasizes means and institutions; the rational choice theory prioritizes interests and conditions; and the culturalist frame examines ideas, norms, and identities. Together, they constitute the "trilogy of collective action" that directly shapes a multifaceted site of conflict and negotiation at the core of my model of all-encompassing contentious crisis. Various strategic actors enter into this multifaceted relational field, leveraging "political opportunities" and "mobilizing structures" to advance their urgent concerns through a "framing process" that promotes different patterns of change (Wang, 2017: 9-10; McAdam et al., 2001). This interactive model not only helps us understand how institutional arrangements, individual agency, and collective culture intersect to cause contentious action and crisis of various kind; it also provides a means for discovering self-adjustments and endogenous changes in the processes of state making and social mobilization. The model sheds light on how extraordinary upheavals lead to a sequence of interlocking conflicts and reforms that may foster political sustainability by creating a more balanced and compatible state–society relationship. This internally oriented approach is especially helpful for studying the endogenous dynamism of non-Western states and empires, such as Ming–Qing China, as they generally lacked the constant impulse for war making and multi-state competition that drove their early modern European counterparts (Goldstone 1991, p. 352; Huters et al. 1997, p. 4).

From the discussion above, one can see that the state–society relationship is a centerpiece in the studies of both political sustainability and all-encompassing contentious crisis. My analytical model provides a framework in which various segments of the state and society come into intense contact, resulting in conflicts, negotiations, and reforms that impact not only the trajectory of state making but also the potential for sustainable development. In the final section of this article, I will emphasize one key feature of the state–society relationship and how it contributes to my conceptual framework. Although scholars

have been familiar with this well-studied feature, few have explained it in relation to both sustainability and crisis, let alone examine its interactive significance for broader CHA that focuses on China.

The state-in-society approach

It is important to note that the state and society often operate in areas of overlap and interpenetration. During all-encompassing contentious crisis, this boundary becomes even more blurred as different components of the state infrastructure co-opt influential social groups and ally with powerful local forces. Joel S. Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue (Migdal et al., 1994; Migdal, 2001) have developed the "state-in-society" approach to analyze how the state's engagement with society transforms both entities over time. This interactive approach is based on the simple observation that the state is another "organization within society that coexists and interacts with other formal and informal" forces. It emphasizes the negotiating and interconnected nature of state power by situating it at numerous locations on different levels within the larger context of society, rather than solely at the political apex occupied by rulers and top officials (Bratton 1994, p. 234).

This widely accepted view is particularly applicable to traditional China, where the boundary between state and society was especially unclear due to the vital mediating role of local gentry elites. The efforts of the minimalist government to control an increasingly large territory and population further complicated matters. In his book on state–society relations in north China, Prasenjit Duara takes the state as just one player that governed rural life in the late Qing and Republican eras. He employs the concept of the "cultural nexus of power" to integrate the state and various societal forces (such as marketing networks, lineage organizations, and religious associations) into a "common frame of reference." This cultural nexus of power shored up the "protective brokerage" of local elites, a time-honored practice that limited both state intervention and popular protest in grassroots society. However, aggressive state-building initiatives from 1900 to 1942 undermined this long tradition of "protective brokerage" by delegitimizing and unraveling the "cultural nexus of power," which created conditions for the communist revolution in many marginalized rural areas (Duara 1988). Both Duara's conceptual scheme and the state-in-society approach, like other analytical insights discussed in this article, contribute to my framework of all-encompassing contentious crisis. They not only emphasize the mutually conditioning nature of state–society interactions but also explore the ongoing struggles and negotiations across different sites of contention.

For a better understanding of this intertwining and mutually transformative relationship, one can first disaggregate the critical components of state and society by using Joel Migdal's approach of historical anthropology. This approach explores how different socio-political actors/groups encounter pressures of varying forms and strength at multiple levels/arenas and, moreover, how they negotiate with each other to mitigate their pressures. In this way, one can understand how each segment "pulls in multiple directions leading to unanticipated patterns of domination and transformation" whereby their dynamics of change can be traced and understood (Migdal 2001, pp. 98–99). This contentious and contingent process not only reduces the state's ability to effect change in society but also results in a widening gap or even a disjuncture between various facets of state making.[8] If left unchecked, tension of various kinds would converge and escalate into all-encompassing contentious crises, which might in turn precipitate path-changing reforms that restore social order and political sustainability. Hence Migdal's approach of historical anthropology works best, in my opinion, in the study of such systemic crises at critical junctures of heightened uncertainty. To effectively use his approach, it is necessary to reconstruct the historical context of critical junctures, identify key

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[8]One can better understand the heightened pressures mentioned above by examining an inherent tension within the state, which derives largely from the incongruence between its idealistic image and actual practices. As Joel S. Migdal argues, the state contains these two interlocking elements that are at odds with each other most of the time. See Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How State and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16–17.

decision makers, examine the available choices, and analyze the potential consequences of alternative options for sustainable politics and state making, as Capoccia and Kelemen suggest (2007, p. 355).

Concluding remarks

The overarching goal of this article is to promote collaboration between historians and social scientists by enhancing the synergies between their research agendas and interdisciplinary methodologies. It proposes a historically grounded and theoretically informed understanding of "crisis" and "sustainability" before putting the two concepts in dialogue with each other to elucidate the diverse process of state formation. The key to understanding this process is to dissect it into multiple dimensions, sub-mechanisms, and problem areas in order to investigate their interplay and mutually conditioning influences. The degree of compatibility between these factors not only determines the sustainability of political development and state making but also shapes the emergence and resolution of crises in various arenas.

My analytical framework of all-encompassing contentious crisis provides new insights into the complex dynamic of historical change by delving into the interrelated processes of conflict and change as an integrated whole. It investigates how different patterns of human interaction intersect and impact each other during periods of great crisis and, furthermore, how this interaction triggers pivotal transitions that shape long-term trajectories of socio-political development. By doing so, my article not only reconceptualizes the explanatory role of event, conjuncture, and structure in historical causation but also reexamine the interplay among structural, rationalist, and cultural factors in social science studies. By illuminating how divergent research traditions can enrich one another, it provides integrations and correctives to existing approaches to CHA in general and state making in particular.

This article examines the White Lotus and piracy upheavals as two interacting episodes of all-encompassing contentious crisis that changed the trajectory of Qing empire building and shaped the last century of Manchu rule. By using crisis as a momentum for change, Emperor Jiaqing implemented a reform of retreat to restore the balance between state and society, as well as between monarch and bureaucracy. His far-sighted yet underappreciated approach to sustainable politics had a significant impact on subsequent Qing history, especially when the dynasty faced an even more precarious combination of domestic chaos and external threats after the first Opium War (1839–1842). In fact, the forward-looking principle and practices of sustainable development were one of the few positive elements of late Qing politics that allowed the ungovernable empire to survive until 1912. In this sense, they represent an indispensable foundation for Chinese modernity. The rise of modern China and its continual development, by implication, has been inextricably intertwined with its pragmatic effort to recreate sustainable politics as the young nation-state lurches forward from crisis to crisis. Understanding this dual process of state making and crisis management is a key problematic that still requires extensive research from different methodological and disciplinary perspectives. From a much broader viewpoint, the two closely related concepts of crisis and sustainability provide a revealing window into some of the mankind's most urgent challenges, both in the past, present, and future, demonstrating their enduring and global epistemological significances.

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