All-under-Heaven as the Primary Concern: The Construction of Institutional Order — Huang Zongxi's Political Vision in Waiting for the Dawn and Its Limits

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Abstract. Scholarly interpretations of Huang Zongxi's Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince routinely locate the treatise between traditional "people-as-foundation" (minben) teachings and modern democratic theory. Such an interpretive framing, however, risks treating modern institutional arrangements as the teleological culmination of political reflection, leaving unexplained why Huang could formulate an aggressive critique of political structures while concurrently retaining the imperial throne and governance by the literati. Focusing on how gong tianxia (the common good of all-under-Heaven) was to be instituted, this study examines pre-Qin ideas of moral virtue alongside Song–Ming Neo-Confucian discourses on Heavenly principle and human nature through close analyses of "On the Ruler," "On the Minister," "On Laws," "Establishing a Prime Minister," and "Schools." Far from supplanting virtue with mere institutional technique, Huang elevated the universal common good into the foundational criterion governing codifications of law, the distribution of responsibilities between emperor and prime minister, and deliberative processes in schools, thereby refashioning political publicness from an ethic of individual self-cultivation into an architectural feature of the state. Nevertheless, this institutional vision remained contingent upon the counsel of scholar-officials, operated through established bureaucratic channels, and preserved imperial authority, stopping short of locating political authorization in the collective will of equal citizens. The conceptual breakthroughs and the inherent boundaries of Huang's system thus sprang from the very same institutional logic. Examining his work from this perspective clarifies the position of Waiting for the Dawn in intellectual history while distinguishing Huang's original formulations from their late-Qing rearticulations.

Keywords: Huang Zongxi; Waiting for the Dawn; gong tianxia; people-as-foundation (minben) thought; institutionalization.

1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Scholarly opinion remains persistently divided on whether Huang Zongxi's political philosophy in Waiting for Dawn reflects traditional people-as-foundation principles or anticipates modern democracy. One line of interpretation underscores his continuous commitment to Confucian minben tenets and the imperial framework, whereas another accentuates his sharp assault on despotic rule and his advocacy for institutionalized collective discussion. Each camp marshals considerable evidence from the text. Fundamentally, this debate hinges on how one understands the relationship between intellectual persistence and departure, as well as whether modern democratic governance constitutes a suitable metric for assessing Huang's conceptual framework [1].

Instead of striving to harmonize minben with modern democratic models, the present study analyzes how Huang transformed the internal logic of the Chinese political tradition. This shift is characterized here as a structural reconfiguration—or "structural upgrading"—a concept employed in a purely analytical sense rather than as an assertion of an inevitable stage along an intellectual teleology; it designates a reconstituted alignment among overarching political goals, governing rules, public discussion, and the reciprocal offices of ruler and minister. Crucial to this effort was Huang's drive to institutionalize gong tianxia through tangible structural checks instead of trusting exclusively to moral exhortations directed at the ruler.

Huang's perspective on the ruler-minister relationship took shape during the catastrophic fall of the Ming dynasty and the widespread instability of its closing years [2]. After his father, Huang Zunsu, was killed through the machinations of the eunuch faction, Huang participated actively in resistance against the Qing prior to redirecting his efforts toward intellectual work and writing [3]. He completed Waiting for Dawn in 1663, which coincided with the second year of the Kangxi reign [4]. Invoking the exemplary governance of the Three Dynasties as a crucial standard, he analyzed the deep structural harm that arose when monarchs treated all-under-Heaven as their personal dynastic possession. Rather than focusing merely on the misdeeds of specific tyrants, his critique addressed why the monarchy, and its institutional apparatus had structurally abandoned the common good of all-under-Heaven.

Across "On the Ruler," "On the Minister," "On Laws," "Establishing a Prime Minister," and "Schools," Huang rigorously re-examines the functional justification for imperial rule, the proper allegiance of ministers, the public for whom legal codes are enacted, and the ways in which deliberation within the court and academies could constrain arbitrary imperial decrees. Although these proposals stayed grounded in Confucian moral philosophy and monarchical order, they relocated gong tianxia from an inward moral demand placed upon rulers and ministers to an objective criterion for evaluating institutional structures and administrative divisions. Both the scope and the limitations of this conceptual shift require careful scrutiny.

Accordingly, this study is structured around two interrelated inquiries. First, by means of what structural framework did Huang reconfigure the relations among ruler, minister, statutory law, and academies endow the ancient ideal of gong tianxia with institutional efficacy? Second, why did this institutional evolution remain grounded in elite scholar-official deliberation and the designated responsibilities of sovereign and prime minister, rather than developing into broader civic participation and modern principles of popular authorization?

This study contends that Huang's principal intellectual achievement was not the substitution of institutional mechanics for moral virtue, but rather the elevation of legal codes, shared deliberation, and defined administrative roles to a position of structural prominence alongside virtue. At the same time, the boundaries of his project were shaped by this specific institutional approach: deliberative power was restricted primarily to the literati; private interests were acknowledged yet never transformed into universal rights; structural processes functioned within conventional bureaucratic organs; and the imperial institution was circumscribed rather than overturned. Appraising both facets together yields a much more nuanced understanding of Waiting for Dawn within intellectual history than simply categorizing Huang as an early champion of democracy or an ordinary apologist for minben.

1.2. Core Concepts and Scope of Interpretation

Here, the term "structural upgrading" functions as an analytical heuristic to trace shifts in the way political principles were operationalized, rather than representing vocabulary drawn from Huang's own texts. Utilizing this concept neither suggests that previous Confucian scholars neglected institutional mechanisms nor assumes that historical developments necessarily culminated in modern democracy. To prevent teleological distortion, the analysis examines four distinct dimensions: foundational political aims, tangible institutional arrangements, bases of legitimacy, and the procedures used to adjudicate political right and wrong.

Clear continuity characterizes this reconfiguration. Huang consistently appealed to the Confucian canonical tradition and the legendary order of the Three Dynasties as his normative model, while also retaining the administrative roles of the emperor, prime minister, and educated elites. Consequently, his rejection of dynastic privatism (jia tianxia) should not be identified with modern doctrines of popular sovereignty, nor can his proposals regarding the schools and the office of prime minister be treated as modern constitutional devices [5].

This continuity, however, coexisted with profound internal realignment. Within "On Laws," the objective public intent of legislation supersedes the personal motives of the legislator; "Establishing

a Prime Minister" insists upon a shared executive mandate dividing power between the monarch and the prime minister; and "Schools" repudiates the ruler's prerogative as the Son of Heaven to define moral and political truth unilaterally. Taken collectively, these arguments assert that an ethical ruler alone is insufficient without statutory frameworks and official posts organized to prevent the state from being subordinated to the personal welfare of an imperial family [6].

Within this discussion, gong tianxia fundamentally signifies that the shared welfare of all-under-Heaven, as opposed to the private fortunes of a dynastic lineage, must constitute the guiding standard for governance. "Institutionalization" denotes the integration of this normative principle into formal legal codes, administrative offices, and deliberative arenas. This study investigates the theoretical structure of these normative claims, differentiating their internal logic from their actual historical realization. Concepts of modern civil rights and electoral mandates, which did not figure in Huang's thought, are employed strictly as comparative benchmarks to delineate the conceptual limits of his proposals.

1.3. Literature Review

The institutional blueprint in Waiting for the Dawn has already received extensive attention from scholars working with concepts such as classical constitutionalism, publicness, the boundaries between the public and private realms, and political engagement. Rather than pretending to unearth an overlooked structural element, this article engages with the work of Gu Jianing, Zhang Haiyan, Zhu Cheng, Ren Feng, and Lei Shengwei, whose scholarship examines institutional systems, consultative practices, administrative divisions, and participatory prerequisites. The unique contribution here is to elucidate how this structural reorganization unfolded in tandem with its intrinsic theoretical boundaries.

1.3.1. Huang Zongxi in the Perspective of Modern Popular Rights

From the late Qing era onward, opponents of imperial absolutism often drew inspiration from Waiting for the Dawn [7]. Liang Qichao famously praised the text, repurposing Huang's host-and-guest allegory to speak to contemporary political challenges [8]. While these late-Qing interpretations found some basis in the text, they reflect how Huang's arguments were co-opted for later political agendas rather than demonstrating that he had formulated an early theory of popular sovereignty in the seventeenth century [9]. Similarly, examining the affinities between Huang and later thinkers like Tan Sitong demands that one carefully distinguish among textual dependence, conceptual commonality, and post hoc historiographical synthesis.

Warning against superficial analogies between Huang and Rousseau, Mizoguchi Yuzo called for an investigation into the indigenous Chinese conceptualizations of the public and the private [10, 11]. In a comparable vein, Wm. Theodore de Bary noted that Huang's institutional limits on dynastic overreach and reliance on critical public discourse offer suggestive parallels with Western constitutional traditions [12]. Such functional resemblances, nonetheless, do not point to shared institutional lineages or philosophical foundations. Although comparative reflections can clarify analytical problems, they cannot substitute for sustained engagement with Huang's original texts [13].

Thus, while readings that evaluate the work through the lens of modern rights help reveal how later thinkers creatively reinterpreted Waiting for the Dawn, they remain methodologically vulnerable to projecting late-Qing political concepts back onto Huang's own intellectual horizon. Accordingly, this article regards such modernizing approaches as part of the reception history rather than as reflections of Huang's original thought [14].

1.3.2. Continuity and Disagreement within the Minben Tradition

Xiao Gongquan's survey of Chinese political thought famously classifies Huang as an heir to the minben lineage [15], a view echoed by Zhang Shiwei in The Limits of Minben, which situates Huang's proposals firmly within the traditional architecture of kingship [16]. In contrast, Li Cunshan maintains that Waiting for the Dawn transcended classic minben by instituting structural constraints on rulerly authority, thereby prefiguring a transition toward democratic thought [17]. The scholarly

divide thus turns not on whether Huang challenged autocratic dominion, but on the precise institutional import of that challenge [18].

Hence, one cannot simply charge commentators who emphasize Huang's minben heritage with privileging lineage while ignoring his structural critiques [19]. A far more productive problem is determining how his vigorous institutional reformism could be reconciled with continuing monarchical authority. Privileging his defense of the throne leaves his reimagining of legal governance and public discourse inexplicable, whereas reading his reforms as an anticipation of democracy obscures his fundamental views on the locus of authority and political subjecthood [20].

1.3.3. Conceptions of Public and Private and Institutional Constraints

Rethinking Huang's political philosophy through the polarity of the public and the private offers an escape from the binary of minben versus democracy. Crucially, the public interest does not demand the total eradication of personal pursuits. Huang's acknowledgment that individual interests possess legitimate standing alongside the welfare of all-under-Heaven demonstrates the sophisticated dialectical balance he established between both spheres.

Wm. Theodore de Bary's interpretation of *Waiting for the Dawn* underscores the institutional restraints imposed upon the sovereign, illustrating that Confucian political thought cannot be reduced to the monarch's internal moral rectitude. Nevertheless, designating such institutional mechanisms as constitutional requires showing how they differ structurally from modern arrangements premised on universal political agency and popular sovereignty [12].

Mizoguchi's investigations into Chinese conceptions of the public and private show that while Huang excoriated emperors who conflated dynastic gain with the good of all-under-Heaven, he affirmed ordinary people's right to seek welfare and avert harm [21]. Even so, recognizing personal interests does not equal formulating modern subjective rights. Shifts in the balance between public and private must therefore be evaluated in light of who possesses the legitimate standing to deliberate on all-under-Heaven and who wields supreme governing power [22].

Building upon these perspectives, the present inquiry engages scholarship on the public and the private while directing close attention to the structural proposals found in "On Laws," "Establishing a Prime Minister," and "Schools." Rather than remaining abstract concepts, the public and private are embodied in concrete institutional mechanisms; through codified laws and bureaucratic procedures, Huang seeks to prevent all-under-Heaven from becoming the private estate of a solitary imperial family.

1.3.4. Assessment of Previous Research and the Present Question

A substantial body of scholarship already addresses these dimensions: Gu Jianing investigates classical constitutionalism and the idealized governance of the Three Dynasties through "On Laws" [23]; Zhang Haiyan uses the interplay of public and private to interpret *Waiting for the Dawn* [24]; and Zhu Cheng examines the institutionalization and political expression of bureaucratic duties [25]. Formulating the concept of a "participatory *gong tianxia*," Ren Feng and Lei Shengwei argue that Huang extended political agency through functional competence and institutional responsibility, discerning an egalitarian ethos in his model [26]. This prior research precludes treating an institutional or systematic approach to Huang as entirely unprecedented. What remains unresolved, however, is whether expanding bureaucratic duties genuinely altered the foundation of ultimate political legitimacy, and how the consultative and educational role of the schools differs from equal citizenship within a polity.

1.3.5. Interpretive Approach

In conversation with these debates, this study adopts two comparative points of orientation: the pre-Qin Confucian reliance on moral character and the Song–Ming Neo-Confucian emphasis on Heavenly principle alongside inner self-cultivation. Against these baselines, it investigates Huang's reflections on rulers, ministers, legal norms, the prime ministership, and schools, delineating both the

operational scope and the structural limits of an institutionalized *gong tianxia*. Neither reference point is claimed to exhaust the multifaceted traditions of pre-Qin or Song–Ming thought.

The literature cited above exhibits deep divergences regarding the radicalism of Huang's proposals. Scholars advocating the model of a participatory *gong tianxia*, for instance, view him as expanding political agency well beyond the traditional confines of the literati. Yet while acknowledging the deliberative and educational expansions outlined in "Schools," this study insists that consultative standing, bureaucratic execution, and constituent authorization are conceptually distinct. As a result, transformations in administrative mechanisms and normative objectives must be separated analytically from the foundational axioms that legitimize and constitute sovereign power [27].

In methodological terms, this study rejects anachronistic teleologies that treat modern democracy as the natural culmination of Huang's thought, deploying contemporary concepts solely as heuristic contrasts to clarify institutional distinctions. The central task is to reconstruct, strictly from the internal logic of his writings, how proposals for public-spirited law, school-based deliberation, and power-sharing could be articulated within a system that remained tethered to the offices of the monarch and the scholar-official elite.

This orientation also prevents assessing an early modern thinker against an anachronistic ledger of contemporary institutions. The absence of notions that Huang never envisioned does not in itself constitute an intellectual failure; rather, it indicates an operative conceptual boundary only when that omission bears directly on the specific governance problems he aimed to resolve.

It is equally essential not to conflate the internal philosophical limits of a political doctrine with prevailing socioeconomic conditions. Whereas the former can be systematically derived from *Waiting for the Dawn*, the latter concern broader economic structures, institutional practices, and historical shifts that cannot be deduced from a single treatise.

Within this framework, this article proposes a focused and testable thesis: rather than replacing rulers and scholar-officials with an alternative sovereign subject, Huang repositioned the collective welfare of all-under-Heaven, objective administrative norms, and communal deliberation at the center of political life. This reconfiguration may be characterized as the institutionalization of *gong tianxia*. Its inherent boundaries become apparent primarily in defining who holds the authority of public evaluation, how private interests obtain political standing, how office-centered governance derives legitimacy, and how the monarch's enduring position is vindicated.

1.4. Research Methods and Analytical Framework

Methodologically, this inquiry combines conceptual analysis, close textual interpretation, and intellectual-historical contextualization. The conceptual analysis clarifies *gong tianxia*, *minben*, political legitimacy, and contemporary models of sovereignty. The textual analysis centers on the opening of five essays of *Waiting for Dawn*, read within their contemporaneous discursive milieu. Finally, intellectual-historical comparison draws upon ideal-typical categories to position Huang's ideas against early Confucian thought and Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism.

The discussion begins by clarifying the institutional implications and normative grounding of classical *minben*. It subsequently traces Huang's argument through his foundational treatises — "On the Ruler," "On the Minister," "On Laws," "Establishing a Prime Minister," and "Schools"—to show how he departed from earlier traditions in institutional design, political objectives, legitimating criteria, and mechanisms of public judgment. In conclusion, the study illustrates why this institutionalization remained bound to scholar-official deliberation, ruler-minister balance, and a holistic vision of all-under-Heaven, while maintaining a clear distinction between Huang's project and its later late-Qing appropriations.

2. The Institutional Ramifications of Dual Argumentative Modes in Traditional Minben Thought

Far from being uniform, traditional *minben* thought encompassed divergent intellectual strategies. For heuristic purposes, this study identifies two primary approaches to framing the public character of political rule: the pre-Qin emphasis on popular sentiment and the sovereign's moral virtue, and the Song–Ming focus on Heavenly principle and the moral mind. These paradigms should not be taken as chronological stages, nor do they imply that early Confucians ignored legal structures or that Neo-Confucians dismissed administrative systems. The central issue is how each supplied normative authority to political governance, and why neither could structurally prevent an autocrat from treating the empire as a private inheritance.

The idea of the "public" encompasses both the moral requirement that governing authority transcend personal gain and the institutional question of who possesses the standing to define, express, and protect the common welfare of all-under-Heaven. Pre-Qin thinkers addressed this public dimension by appealing to benevolent rules, the moral sentiments of the people, and the dictates of ritual and righteousness. Song–Ming scholars, by contrast, sharpened the public–private boundary through the notions of innate moral awareness and Heavenly principle. Huang's distinct contribution lay in demanding that the public serve not merely as an ethical aspiration for rulers, but as an enforceable institutional standard by which governing structures themselves must be measured [28].

2.1. Virtue and Popular Sentiment in Pre-Qin Confucianism

Mencius famously underscored the primacy of the populace, asserting that the people rank first, the altars of soil and grain come next, and the ruler matters least [29]. By tying political legitimacy to winning the people's hearts, he made the retention of the realm contingent upon popular endorsement. His critique of misrule went far beyond mild ethical admonition: by characterizing the execution of the tyrant Zhou as the punishment of a solitary "outcast," Mencius demonstrated that an oppressive sovereign could forfeit his legitimate status. Nevertheless, these ideas generated no formal mechanisms enabling ordinary people to take part in governance or legally authorize executive rule. Granting a populace ultimate moral significance is entirely distinct from conferring upon it modern sovereign agency.

Xunzi conceptualized the ruler–subject relationship through ritual propriety, righteousness, and formal institutional order, drawing on the boat-and-water analogy to highlight how political rule fundamentally depends on the populace. Given his detailed engagement with codified rituals, statutes, bureaucratic structures, and administrative jurisdictions, his political philosophy cannot be reduced to a mere faith in royal virtue. Though both Mencius and Xunzi maintained that legitimate rule must correspond with popular welfare, ritual standards, moral righteousness, and administrative performance, neither envisioned a political architecture grounded in universal popular consent. Clarifying this divergence offers a much more nuanced historical appraisal than simply writing off pre-Qin *minben* thought as an exercise in benevolent paternalism [30].

2.2. Heavenly Principle and Mind-and-Nature in Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism

Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism developed a more sophisticated philosophical vocabulary for delineating the boundary between the public and the private realms [31]. While the Cheng–Zhu tradition rooted the normative demands of socio-political order in Heavenly principle (*tianli*), the Lu–Wang school highlighted the cultivation of mind and nature alongside an individual's innate moral awareness (*liangzhi*) [32]. Neither intellectual stream abandoned institutional structures, yet both ultimately focused on whether rulers and scholar-officials possessed the capacity to grasp and realize principles serving the collective welfare. Moreover, given that Wang Yangming operated during the Ming dynasty, grouping the Cheng–Zhu and Lu–Wang traditions together under the monolithic label of "Song Confucianism" constitutes a historical error.

The moral and political teachings of Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism rested on a sharp demarcation between Heavenly principle and human desire. As evidenced by Zhu Xi's treatises on the investigation of things, personal cultivation, the rectification of the mind, and the remediation of royal errors, sovereign caprice was denied status as the ultimate measure of value; Heavenly principle functioned instead as an objective benchmark designed to restrain self-serving inclinations. At the same time, Zhu advanced tangible proposals concerning ritual manuals, local academies, and administrative regulations, demonstrating that institutional design and Heavenly principle were treated as complementary rather than incompatible [33].

Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming situated the wellspring of ethical action more squarely in the original mind (*benxin*) and intuitive moral knowledge. Translating this outlook to governance, they tasked political elites with identifying the distinction between private interest and public duty and committing themselves to the common good. Even so, their philosophy did not generate institutional arrangements under which political legitimacy derived from the shared consent of autonomous actors. Despite their theoretical disagreements, the Cheng–Zhu and Lu–Wang movements shared a fundamental premise highlighted by this comparison: that legitimate and righteous governance is rooted in the moral cultivation of the individual.

Acknowledging the shortcomings of an argument anchored in Heavenly principle and the nature of the mind does not suggest that such principles were purely theoretical or that Song–Ming thinkers overlooked administrative matters. The core difficulty is that even if the public good is normatively situated outside the ruler's personal will, such a foundation lacks concrete instruments to prevent the monarch from imposing a self-serving interpretation of public principle in everyday governance. Huang focuses his institutional critique precisely on this vulnerability.

2.3. Between Normative and Institutional Constraints

Several critical questions emerge from these two distinct lines of argument, demanding deeper examination.

First, although appeals to popular sentiment, moral virtue, and Heavenly principle offer ethical grounds for criticizing a ruler, normative appeals do not automatically create enduring restraints on political power. Subjecting a monarch to moral admonition is fundamentally different from establishing a permanent structural division of responsibilities capable of curbing sovereign discretion in judicial and administrative affairs.

Second, granting the people a central normative position within political rhetoric does not mean recognizing them as political agents whose direct consent confers legitimacy on the state [34]. While *minben* traditions from the pre-Qin period onward tied the fate of the realm to the well-being of the populace, the specific ways in which this concern was institutionalized through bureaucratic offices and advisory bodies require separate, critical evaluation [35].

Moreover, established political traditions certainly incorporated consultative mechanisms, including ministerial remonstrance, elite scholarly consensus, academies, and administrative bureaus. The central problem, however, is whether these arrangements could effectively resist the sovereign's autocratic will. The mere existence of official roles and advisory avenues does not guarantee that core political decisions were insulated from the personal whims of the monarch [36].

This historical context provides the framework for assessing Huang's institutional critique without dismissing earlier Confucian thought as mere moralizing. While continuing to champion the ideal of governing the realm on behalf of all-under-Heaven, Huang mounted a sharper offensive against regarding the imperial office as private family property, subordinating the realm to dynastic self-interest, and letting the ruler monopolize moral and political authority. In light of this, the following section examines the conceptual connections linking the core chapters of *Waiting for the Dawn*.

3. The Conceptual Trajectory of Gong Tianxia in Waiting for the Dawn

Waiting for the Dawn commences with five interrelated treatises: “On the Ruler,” “On the Minister,” “On Laws,” “Establishing a Prime Minister,” and “Schools.” Taken together, these essays construct a unified and systematic critique, even if each piece was not written strictly to resolve questions left open by its predecessor. Following their sequential order, this study investigates the political arguments, ethical principles, and institutional remedies presented in each chapter before examining their coherence as an overarching framework.

The sequence begins with the role and duties of the monarch, turns to the ethical responsibilities of ministers and the public character of law, and culminates in an analysis of the prime minister’s administrative mandate and institutionalized deliberation in schools. Yet, for all their conceptual harmony, these recommendations directly engaged contemporary historical crises and should not be misidentified as a fully developed, functioning blueprint for modern constitutional government.

3.1. “On the Ruler” and the Public Responsibilities of Rulership

In “On the Ruler,” Huang begins with the observation that individuals naturally pursue their own interests and harbor private desires. Although the common welfare must be fostered and shared harms alleviated across the realm, few are intrinsically inclined to undertake such responsibilities. In re-evaluating the fundamental rationale of royal governance, Huang argues that the ancient sovereigns were established not to amass personal advantages, but to advance the collective good of all-under-Heaven. Far from proposing a modern social-contract doctrine rooted in a state of nature, his analysis leverages the ideal of antiquity to challenge existing political arrangements. His central contention is not grounded in an abstract conception of human nature, but in the principle that occupying the throne never entitles a ruler to treat the realm as personal dynastic property [37].

Huang observes that in ancient order, the realm of all-under-Heaven was regarded as the host and the ruler as the guest, whereas in subsequent eras this relationship was inverted so that the monarch claimed host status and treated the realm as a mere guest. This distortion reinforces his conviction that rule must serve the collective benefit of all-under-Heaven, placing obligations on the sovereign rather than reducing the realm to an instrument for preserving an imperial dynasty. Huang vehemently denounces later monarchs who administered all-under-Heaven as their personal patrimony, observing that the emperor could easily become its greatest curse. Yet, while his critique targets the privatized nature of imperial authority and its structural consequences, this host-guest analogy must not be read as an expression of modern popular sovereignty [37].

3.2. “On the Minister” and the Political Responsibility of Ministers

Huang argues in “On the Minister” that the governance of all-under-Heaven surpasses the capacities of any single individual, requiring political authority to be distributed across specialized administrative offices. A bureaucratic appointment is accepted to serve all-under-Heaven and its people, not to advance the interests of the imperial family. This principle thoroughly redefines the ethical justification for public office: ministerial responsibility cannot be fulfilled through blind allegiance to the sovereign but must instead be judged by the higher standard of serving the public good of the realm [37].

In contending that ruler and minister differ in title while sharing an identical fundamental purpose, Huang does not dismantle established hierarchies of office and status; rather, he maintains that both figures share an obligation to act in service to all-under-Heaven [37]. While his analogy of co-workers hoisting a heavy beam underscores the necessity of cooperative administration, it cannot be interpreted as an embrace of modern egalitarianism [38]. Even though Huang repudiates the servile submission of ministers to the emperor, officials in his system remain administrative functionaries operating inside a traditional monarchical framework.

3.3. “On Laws” and Laws for All-under-Heaven

Turning to “On Laws,” the critique shifts to institutional arrangements and legal principles per se. For Huang, *fa* encompasses far more than statutory codes in the modern legal sense, embracing land-tax systems, fiscal policies, bureaucratic organization, and wide-ranging administrative practices [39]. The primary concern is not the technical precision or elaborate nature of statutes, but whether they are designed to promote the welfare of all-under-Heaven or merely to protect the dynastic interests of the ruling house [40].

Drawing a sharp distinction between the genuine laws of the Three Dynasties and the lawless statutes of later eras, Huang contrasts the ideal of “safeguarding all-under-Heaven within all-under-Heaven” with the mere “regulations of a single family.” In maintaining that effective institutional laws must exist prior to the appearance of capable administrators, he does not discard administrative capability or moral virtue but instead establishes the structural priority of sound institutions. Laws designed solely to defend the ruler’s private prerogative can never realize *gong tianxia*, however intricate or exhaustive their provisions may be. Huang thereby reorients political critique away from the sovereign's internal moral rectitude toward the institutional objectives embedded in the governing apparatus [37].

3.4. “Establishing a Prime Minister” and the Division of Responsibilities between Ruler and Prime Minister

Having established that legal structures must serve the common good of all-under-Heaven, Huang examines the overconcentration of autocratic power brought about by the abolition of the prime ministership in the early Ming. In “Establishing a Prime Minister,” he reaffirms that an isolated monarch cannot govern the realm alone, rendering the appointment of able ministers indispensable. Viewing ministers as the ruler's partners entrusted with specific duties, he advocates for the prime minister and top officials to take part directly in state policymaking. Far from creating an independent sovereign body outside the monarchy, the prime minister’s role in this proposal constitutes an internal restructuring of executive administration within the existing imperial framework [37].

Huang envisions administrative architecture wherein the Son of Heaven engages in joint consultations with the prime minister, heads of the Six Ministries, and remonstrators, alongside granting the prime minister a formal role in reviewing and authorizing policy memorials. These proposals manifest his ambition to disperse administrative authority and restrain monarchical unilateralism. Nevertheless, such arrangements must not be confused with a modern separation of powers, as they remain anchored in the tripartite relationship between monarch, chief minister, and the scholar-bureaucracy. Their historical significance lies not in abolishing the throne, but in destabilizing the emperor's singular monopoly over administrative supremacy.

3.5. “Schools” and Public Deliberation on Political Right and Wrong

In “Schools,” Huang confronts the fundamental question of who possesses the legitimate authority to evaluate moral and political correctness throughout the realm. Rather than serving purely as training grounds for future scholar-officials, academies are envisioned as vital hubs generating governance policies for all-under-Heaven. Contending that an action's moral status does not depend on imperial approval or censure, he insists that the monarch relinquish sole arbitral authority and submit these matters to collective deliberation within the academy. It is essential to recognize that the genuine phrasing is gong qi fei shi (“render public judgments of right and wrong”) rather than the frequently quoted paraphrase gong qi shi fei; the latter, though widely circulated in later summaries, cannot be treated as an exact citation [37].

Establishing public deliberation in schools strips the Son of Heaven of his unshared prerogative over political evaluation. By regulating the appointment of educational administrators and institutionalizing consultative debates among the literati, Huang carves out an arena of semi-autonomous political discussion within the dynastic educational and administrative matrix. These bodies cannot be equated with either modern autonomous public spheres or popularly mandated

representative legislatures. Their fundamental importance consists in embedding organized, institutional critique directly into the theoretical foundations of imperial rule.

Taken as an integrated corpus, “On the Ruler” and “On the Minister” rethink the mutual obligations between sovereign and officialdom; “On Laws” tethers the legitimacy of regulatory frameworks to their dedication to all-under-Heaven; “Establishing a Prime Minister” aims to distribute top executive responsibilities; and “Schools” broadens participation in adjudicating normative political values. Together, these writings shift gong tianxia from an abstract moral ideal into an actionable program of institutional reform. Yet whether such innovations genuinely reconstitute the political agent or the ultimate source of legitimate authority remains a question requiring nuanced distinction.

4. Four Dimensions of the Institutionalization of Gong Tianxia

The preceding discussion identifies four interrelated axes of structural transformation within Huang’s political theory: the conditions required to advance public welfare, the fundamental purposes of governance, the criteria governing legitimacy, and the mechanisms for arbitrating normative correctness. The designation “structural upgrading” highlights the conceptual unity linking these developments, rather than suggesting an outright substitution of modern institutional principles for classical political morality.

Although remaining anchored in Confucian moral metaphysics and the idealized Three Dynasties model—thereby maintaining the central standing of sovereigns and scholar-officials—Huang introduced an essential theoretical breakthrough. The realization of public-spirited governance ceased to depend solely on personal imperial self-cultivation; instead, formal statutes and ministerial responsibilities were themselves systematically evaluated through the normative lens of the public–private boundary.

4.1. From the Requirement of Virtue to Institutional Embodiment

Whereas pre-Qin Confucian invocations of virtue and the popular will, along with Song–Ming Neo-Confucian discourses on Heavenly principle and the human mind-and-nature, sought to constrain monarchical ambition morally, Huang emphasized the containment of autocracy through codified rules, distributed executive powers, and institutionalized deliberative forums. Far from viewing virtue and institutional mechanisms as mutually exclusive, his system accords organizational structures an indispensable role in securing the public political good.

In “On Laws,” sound legal systems are prioritized, with their merit gauged not by bureaucratic complexity but by their commitment to all-under-Heaven. Concurrently, “Establishing a Prime Minister” and “Schools” champion, respectively, divided executive administration and open scholastic deliberation. Yet this “institutional embodiment” neither assumes that public-spiritedness will flow automatically from revised structures, nor indicates that Huang discarded the need for capable and ethical rulers. Instead, institutional arrangements must themselves be judged against the dichotomy between public and private, thereby erecting durable defenses against the privatizing tyranny of any imperial house.

4.2. From Ruler-Centered Politics to the Primacy of All-under-Heaven

Traditional minben doctrines held that rulers must secure the people's well-being without establishing any mechanisms of popular sovereignty; Huang, by contrast, mounts a far sharper critique of dynastic appropriation by characterizing all-under-Heaven as the host and the sovereign as merely the guest. This inversion fundamentally reconceives the ultimate goals of governance without constructing a modern framework of popular sovereign power.

The legitimacy of both sovereign and bureaucratic duties is defined by service to all-under-Heaven and its populace, just as the collective welfare of the realm provides the ultimate standard for any political system. As a result, all-under-Heaven claims normative preeminence over the private

interests of any imperial clan. Nevertheless, tianxia remains essentially a holistic vision of the imperial community, distinct from a modern civic body composed of rights-bearing, equal citizens.

To avoid twin hermeneutic errors, one must recognize that Huang's retention of monarchical governance does not diminish the radical implications of his inverted host–guest model, nor does his veneration of all-under-Heaven constitute an endorsement of popular sovereignty over the state. His theoretical innovations and their structural limits function on distinctly different analytical levels.

4.3. From Evaluating the Ruler's Virtue to Testing Institutions against the Common Good

Without discounting the political importance of personal virtue, Huang elevated the shared well-being of all-under-Heaven into the primary benchmark for assessing institutional legitimacy. Merely invoking the rhetoric of all-under-Heaven cannot legitimize royal decrees that ultimately serve dynastic prerogatives. An analytical distinction between normative standards and institutional instruments is critical here: the realm's common good serves as the governing objective, while public-oriented laws, deliberative forums, and dispersed administrative authority provide the operational tools to realize and verify it.

Rather than replacing Confucian moral values with a modern utilitarian ethos, this perspective requires that statecraft assess institutional designs alongside their collective outcomes. Huang's condemnation of the "laws of a single family" does not challenge the validity of codified statutes as such; it indicts systems that reduce all-under-Heaven to a dynastic possession, thereby undermining the ethical basis of political authority.

4.4. From the Ruler's Judgment to Public Deliberation in Schools

Political critique was by no means novel when Huang wrote, given the established traditions of bureaucratic remonstrance, scholarly opinion (qingyi), and academies both imperial and private. His contribution lies in his categorical rejection of the emperor's sole authority to define moral and political rectitude, paired with his plan to accord academies a formal, structural place within imperial policymaking [41].

Because schools remained embedded within the imperial administrative-pedagogical order and discourse was largely confined to scholar-officials, they cannot be identified with an autonomous modern public sphere insulated from royal authority. Even so, replacing the ruler's unchecked imperial decrees with collective scholarly deliberation constitutes a dramatic transformation, demonstrating that political publicness requires not only pure sovereign intent and structural objectives, but also the institutional inclusion of multiple perspectives in normative judgment.

Although this framework of collective adjudication did not establish universal popular empowerment, it cast into relief the fundamental question of who holds the authority to define the realm's common good. Even as institutional designs can restrain factional self-interest, they must ultimately depend on situated political actors to carry out the necessary tasks of interpretation and political discernment.

4.5. The Common Character of These Structural Changes

Collectively, these four conceptual transitions represent the structural institutionalization of gong tianxia. By aligning ministerial roles, legal systems, collaborative sovereign-premier decision-making, and academic deliberation under the umbrella of the realm's public interest, Huang does not devise a "public-centered" paradigm unmoored from minben; instead, he reorders traditional political structures to advance the realization of the collective good.

This move toward institutionalization should not, however, be conflated with modern procedural governance. Huang sought to direct established offices toward the collective welfare of all-under-Heaven, rather than deriving political legitimacy from the democratic consent of equal citizens. Consequently, his theory can neither be reduced to institutional machinery supplanting virtue, nor retroactively claimed as an early modern precursor to democratic governance.

Such structural shifts naturally raise profound questions: who will sustain these institutional forms; on what grounds do literati claim to represent all-under-Heaven; how might private interests counter administrative overreach; and can legitimacy derive from authorities outside the sovereign-minister dyad? Grappling with these problems illuminates both the conceptual innovations and the structural boundaries of institutionalizing gong tianxia.

5. Structural Impediments to the Institutionalization of Gong Tianxia

5.1. Institutional Achievements and the Relocation of the Problem

Huang's institutional models provided no ready-made blueprint for modern democracy; their true significance lies in translating classical ethical mandates concerning rule for all-under-Heaven into operational systems of administrative law, ministerial responsibility, and structured deliberation. Statecraft is thereby elevated beyond the ruler's subjective righteousness, emerging as an organizational inquiry into how the emperor, prime minister, administrative bureaucracy, and schools ought to interact.

Nevertheless, institutional restructuring alone cannot ensure the realization of the public good. In defining what constitutes the realm's shared welfare, determining who is authorized to interpret it, and configuring bureaucratic checks against dynastic usurpation, Huang remains tied to all-under-Heaven, the literati, and the dyadic rule of sovereign and prime minister. While these ideas underpin his critique of monarchical proprietorship, they equally define the conceptual boundaries of his institutional imagination.

Rather than itemizing the democratic concepts absent from Huang's thinking, scholars must investigate his own theoretical framework to discern how he could simultaneously endorse universal statutes, school-based critique, and shared executive administration between monarch and premier without formulating an egalitarian doctrine of political authority. Far from marking a conceptual flaw, this boundary is indispensable for understanding the internal coherence of his political thought.

5.2. Why Institutionalization Still Has Limits

Such boundaries operate along four intertwined axes: who participates in public debate, how private interests are conceptually valued, where procedural norms derive their ultimate authority, and how the monarch's position is understood. Far from being a checklist of unobtained modern prerequisites, these dimensions constitute a unified whole.

5.2.1. Public Deliberation Remains Centered on Scholar-Officials

Within "Schools," Huang dismantles the Son of Heaven's monopoly over moral and political authority, integrating private scholars, school administrators, and grassroots ethical education into state governance. By attending to commoners, sub-official local deliberations, and elementary schooling, he makes clear that political engagement extends beyond palace officials, thereby supplying textual backing for interpretations emphasizing an enlarged participatory sphere. Nevertheless, expanding access to educational and deliberative spaces falls short of establishing an egalitarian and universal right of political authorization across the polity.

This is not to claim that Huang overlooked ordinary people or that his proposed educational framework was devoid of democratizing tendencies in civic discussion. His structural design, however, filtered public judgment chiefly through the gentry, educational officials, and bureaucratic administrators, never proposing a framework in which sovereignty originates from the equal franchise of individual citizens. The constraint identified here thus pertains to the fundamental grounding of political authorization, without denying the broader participation contemplated in his school reforms.

5.2.2. Private Individual Interests Do Not Become Universal Political Rights

Huang begins "On the Ruler" by acknowledging that human beings possess private interests and naturally pursue their own well-being; his critique targets sovereigns who conflate their colossal

personal desires with the collective welfare of all-under-Heaven. Consequently, he does not reject self-interest tout court. In fact, his efforts to abolish dynastic appropriations of wealth and authority suggest that every subject is entitled to an equitable portion of worldly resources.

Yet legitimizing personal interests falls short of enshrining individual rights as the foundation of the polity. Huang maintains the collective interest of all-under-Heaven as his primary standard for evaluating governance, stopping short of an egalitarian theory of political entitlement. A profound conceptual gap remains between acknowledging that individuals pursue self-interest and asserting that all citizens possess inalienable political rights.

5.2.3. Institutional Procedures Primarily Serve the Allocation of Official Responsibilities

Given that "Schools" establishes mechanisms for selecting school officials and organizing intellectual debate, while "Establishing a Prime Minister" outlines power-sharing between the emperor and the grand councillor, Huang's thought can hardly be considered procedurally deficient. What matters, instead, is that these procedures serve to balance the administrative responsibilities of monarchs, ministers, magistrates, and scholars, rather than deriving supreme sovereign authority from the universal consent of equal citizens.

Although such systemic arrangements can restrain autocratic impulse, their justification continues to rest on the substantive ethical imperative to realize the public welfare of all-under-Heaven. Huang relied on institutional constraints to check sovereign power, yet he still operated primarily within the conventional bureaucratic hierarchy to achieve that equilibrium.

5.2.4. The Ruler's Position Is Redefined but Not Abolished

By reproaching emperors who regard the realm as patrimonial property, Huang strives to reconstitute the throne as a public office dedicated to the common good of all-under-Heaven. Divesting the sovereign of proprietary dominion over the empire does not equate to the abolition of kingship—a distinction central to understanding the coherence between "On the Ruler" and "Establishing a Prime Minister."

Huang's reliance on schools, chancellors, and the civil bureaucracy to circumscribe imperial caprice underscores that the ruler remained an indispensable office in his institutional model. Denying a monarch's private ownership of the realm is qualitatively distinct from replacing monarchical rule with another form of government altogether. Likewise, that modern constitutional systems retain ceremonial monarchs does not justify straightforwardly categorizing Huang as a constitutional thinker. The core criteria remain the ultimate foundation of political authority and the substantive allocation of executive power [42].

5.3. Distinguishing Conceptual Limits from Historical Conditions

While the socio-historical conditions of the Ming–Qing transition conditioned the range of conceivable political thought, this study does not attempt a systematic causal analysis linking agrarian modes of production, status distinctions, and intellectual formulations. The existence of a peasant-based economy does not, on its own, justify concluding that democratic governance was unattainable. What can be more securely established are the internal theoretical limits of Waiting for the Dawn—namely concerning political actors, the status of self-interest, procedural norms, and the imperial office. External historical determinants warrant separate investigation.

5.4. Modern Reinterpretations and the Original Meaning of the Text

During the late Qing, thinkers reinterpreted Waiting for the Dawn to address contemporary political imperatives. Reformers searching for ways to constrain imperial autocracy drew heavily upon Huang's repudiation of dynastic patrimony, his advocacy of public-spirited law, and his scheme for institutionalized academic debate. Liang Qichao's renowned acclaim for the work epitomizes this modern appropriation. Even so, tracing the concrete textual channels through which particular writers invoked, disseminated, or modified Huang's formulations demands rigorous archival verification.

A text's subsequent historical resonance must not be confused with the original meaning intended by its author. While Huang did not possess the conceptual vocabulary of constitutionalism or democratic sovereignty, later generations adapted his text in response to new political circumstances. Distinguishing between these analytical levels allows us to recognize the work's modern impact while avoiding the error of reading a seventeenth-century political proposal as an embryonic constitutional document.

5.5. Summary

Both the theoretical breakthroughs and the institutional constraints in Huang's thought arise directly from his particular way of institutionalizing gong tianxia. He takes the public interest of all-under-Heaven as a paramount normative standard, reorganizes laws and official functions to curb the private appetites of the throne, and transforms schools into wider forums for civic deliberation. Even so, these arrangements were anchored in literati administration, the bifurcated authority of monarch and prime minister, and a holistic conception of the realm. Huang's enduring importance rests not on having anticipated modern democracy in advance, but on demonstrating the radical institutional critique achievable within imperial Confucianism alongside the systemic impasses it could not transcend.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Main Findings

By concentrating on how gong tianxia was translated into institutional forms, this analysis has examined discourses on political publicness spanning pre-Qin thought, Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, and Huang Zongxi. Rather than simply replacing moral virtue with institutional design, Huang affirmed moral agency while re-evaluating legal norms, the executive division between monarch and prime minister, and academy debates through the conceptual filter of the public-private divide. As a result, his condemnation of dynastic patrimonialism moved beyond moralistic censure into structural analysis: whether an institutional order permits the ruler to seize public wealth and monopolize moral authority.

Despite endorsing greater access to education and wider political debate, Huang's institutional framework relied ultimately on imperial offices occupied by rulers and scholar-bureaucrats. His proposals stopped well short of grounding sovereign legitimacy in the collective authorization of equal citizens. In the same vein, conceding that people naturally seek their own interests is not equivalent to modern concepts of individual political rights. Notable institutional innovations thus went hand in hand with distinct conceptual limitations.

Viewed in this light, "structural upgrading" neither marks an evolutionary bridge between minben and modern democracy nor presumes a teleological shift from imperial governance toward a democratic polity. Rather, it provides an interpretive lens for how Huang reconstructed the institutional mechanisms required to realize gong tianxia. This perspective captures both his roots in classical Confucian traditions and the incisive radicalism of his institutional proposals.

In modern studies, Zhang Shiwei's emphasis on the limitations imposed by conventional modes of thought and Li Cunshan's highlighting of Huang's innovative checks on monarchical power each grasp essential dimensions of his intellectual system. Drawing on both perspectives, this article has illuminated how retaining the imperial institution did not compromise Huang's contributions to legal governance and public deliberation, while demonstrating why these measures remained distinct from modern concepts of popular sovereignty and citizenship.

The lasting value of Waiting for the Dawn resides in its formulation of a fundamental problem in political thought: should the moral character of the monarch prove inadequate to secure publicness, what institutional regulations and consultative channels should be established in its place? Huang offered a powerful response, yet his proposals remained firmly bounded by the parameters of imperial rule and elite scholar-official leadership.

Late Qing reformers were able to deploy Huang's ideas in service of emerging notions of constitutionalism and civil rights, despite his never having articulated those modern principles. Sound hermeneutical practice demands that we distinguish between a text's original historical sense, its potential for hermeneutical reinterpretation, and its actual history of reception.

Consequently, "the institutionalization of gong tianxia" reflects Huang's theoretical enterprise far more faithfully than anachronistic designations such as "proto-democratic precursor" or the "zenith of minben." Instead of imposing contemporary conceptual frameworks onto his thought, scholarship must recover the internal coherence that unites his views on sovereigns, chancellors, legal frameworks, and academies.

6.2. Scope of the Study and Questions for Future Research

Confined to the first five chapters of Waiting for the Dawn and the dynamic between institutional design and normative values, this study does not address Huang's broader writings on classical commentary, history, or practical governance. Further analysis of his essays on land policy, revenue systems, and local administration will be required to assess the generalizability of this institutional interpretation of gong tianxia.

The analytical heuristic contrasting the pre-Qin emphasis on virtue with the Song–Ming preoccupation with Heavenly principle and mind-nature is an idealized typology. It cannot take the place of thorough investigations into Xunzi's ritual institutions or the statecraft thought of Song–Ming scholars. In addition, systematically comparing Huang with contemporaries such as Gu Yanwu and Wang Fuzhi remains crucial for situating his specific contribution within early modern Chinese intellectual history.

Conceptual analysis within political theory cannot, by itself, uncover the empirical realities surrounding the institutionalization of gong tianxia. Determining the practical feasibility of Huang's proposals for empowered academies and prime-ministerial constraints, along with the socio-structural barriers that hindered their adoption, remains a task for institutional and social historians.

Mapping the late-Qing reception of Waiting for the Dawn likewise calls for its own rigorous inquiry. Determining how circulating editions traveled, locating quoted excerpts, and analyzing how its themes became entangled in controversies surrounding democratic rights and constitutional reform ultimately demand detailed engagement with modern archival materials.

Whenever scholars draw comparisons to modern theories of checks and balances or the public sphere, they must carefully delineate the exact institutional frameworks and historical semantics of the notions under review, as conceptual equivalence cannot be inferred from mere surface-level institutional resemblances.

Huang's principal theoretical achievement lay in reframing gong tianxia, converting what had been an ethical demand on official comportment into a foundational premise for guiding public critique and structural institutional design. This momentous pivot within Chinese political thought—departing from ruler-centric virtue and minben morality to embrace institutional structure—deserves dedicated critical scrutiny in its own right.

Instead of fixating on whether Huang foreshadowed modern democracy, researchers ought to explore why statutory protocols, scholarly academies, and a shared administration between monarch and prime minister carried such profound institutional importance in his thought, while also discerning which social agents were meant to operate this machinery. Clarifying these two interrelated dimensions is essential if Waiting for the Dawn is to be properly positioned within the intellectual landscape of the Ming–Qing transition.

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