New development: Wang Anshi’s *Wanyanshu* as the origins of modern public management?

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A recent paper in this journal (Drechsler, 2013) traced the origins of modern Western public management to the Wanyanshu, a memorandum Wang Anshi submitted in 1058 to a Song Dynasty emperor in China. We raise doubts about the author’s assessment and claims about that still remarkable document about government human resource management, in part by citing Chinese historians’ ambivalence. Believing in the value of Sino-Western comparative research in public management, we push back the origins of Chinese statecraft by 2,000 years by suggesting further research into older and greater Chinese contributions to global public management.

Keywords: China; civil service examination; human resource management; international comparative public management; Wang Anshi; *Wanyanshu*.

Professor Drechsler’s article in the September 2013 issue of *Public Money & Management* praised highly a memorandum submitted in 1058 by Wang Anshi, a Chinese Song Dynasty official to the emperor, regarding it as ‘one of the key texts of Chinese public management’ and ‘one of the first texts of public management in the modern sense’ (Drechsler, 2013, p. 1). He further traced the origins of modern, presumably Western, public management to the *Wangyanshu*, as the memorandum is commonly known.* While we applaud Professor Drechsler’s recognition of Wang Anshi’s contribution, our research has found that Chinese historians are divided over the significance of that still remarkable document by a young local government official. We also raise doubts about the legitimacy of leaping from comparative research to a claim of origins, which would require stronger evidence of diffusion and influence of ideas.

In view of the scholarly and practical value of further Sino-Western comparative research, we suggest a research agenda that is promising in uncovering the origins of Chinese statecraft as a contribution to global public management.

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* Following convention, Chinese names in this article begin with the family name followed by the given name, i.e. Wang is Wang Anshi’s family name. The ‘Memorial in Ten Thousand Words’ is called here by its popular title of *Wanyanshu*, a term that consists of three characters *Wan Yan Shu* in Drechsler (2013).

**Wang Anshi’s Wanyanshu**

The *Wanyanshu* was in effect Wang Anshi’s mission report to the emperor. Calling it ‘a report to the Emperor Renzhong about current affairs’, Wang Anshi wrote it after serving six years as a local government official. Thus he had learned first-hand a great deal of the realities of what was going on in government and society, and accumulated many reform ideas to submit to the emperor and his ministers. The memorandum, therefore, was written to address specific issues of the time and to provide useful advice, in keeping with the Confucian tradition for officials to mind only their own business and referring to the wisdom of ancient sages.

We researched the original Chinese text of *Wanyanshu* and translated some key terms differently to better reflect what we regard as the intended meanings. Whereas the references to the *Wanyanshu* in Drechsler (2013) were based on the translation in Chapter VII of Williamson (1935), we analysed the original text in *The Collected Works of Wang Anshi*. We use the more specific ‘instruction’ instead of the more general ‘teaching’; ‘compensation’ instead of the more general ‘nurturing’; the more general process of ‘recruitment’, instead of the specific activity of ‘selection’; and ‘reappointment’ instead of ‘appointment’ to emphasize later personnel action.

For easier comprehension, we present the essence of the entire *Wanyanshu* in an uninterrupted passage below, instead of...
segments as appeared in Drechsler (2013, pp. 3–6):

The implementation of laws and rules requires competent personnel developed in advance. The development and management of human talents for government has four components: instruction, compensation, recruiting, reappointment.

Instruction: In order to better prepare candidates for government offices, there should be a system of local and national schools with qualified teachers and a practical curriculum. While the current system of civil service examination should continue, it should test the candidates’ specialized preparation for performing specific tasks in government (instead of reciting classics and writing essays). Furthermore, both civil administration and military training should be emphasized, as the purpose is to prepare competent personnel to properly manage the affairs of the state.

Compensation: The basic salaries of civil servants should be raised to adequate levels to make up for the differences from other types of employment, so that they would have sufficient financial means to support their families and maintain an appropriate lifestyle.* Furthermore, after they die their descendants should be supported by the state. These financial provisions should be complemented by measures to inculcate in them a sense of propriety, as well as penalties, including banishment, for those who disobey the rules. Officials of higher ranks should set an example for their subordinates, so that it would not be necessary to rely on punishment to enforce the rules of ethics.

Recruitment: The recruitment of civil servants should be done in a decentralized manner with nominations solicited from throughout the country for decision by the throne. Candidates should be evaluated on their basis of their character, knowledge and ability to perform by means of their words and deeds over a probationary period by more experienced officials. Successful ones would be appointed and be entrusted with the task of recruiting another generation of officials.

Reappointment: It is important to match ranks and positions with the candidates’ differing levels of character, ability and specialty. After they are appointed, government officials should be given long enough a period of time, such as three years, to demonstrate their abilities and show the results of their performance, or the lack thereof. The evaluation will determine their promotion with greater rewards, demotion or dismissal.

In conclusion, if we exercise strategic thinking, make calculations, implement the measures gradually, motivate people with rewards, and judge officials by results, it would be easy to increase the talents available to government.

The Wanyanshu can be better understood in the context of how government officials and civil servants were selected in imperial China. By the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), the practice of appointing government officials by means of examinations was firmly established since it was started in the Sui Dynasty (607 AD) and expanded during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). These examinations of various cohorts of candidates were authorized by royal decrees to be held in regional centres and eventually in the capital, with the finalists being examined by the emperor himself. Candidates were drawn from various strata of society throughout the country and were judged on the basis of their moral standing and command of the designated classics through a series of standardized tests. The classics were generally the Four Books and Five Classics. The Four Books containing the core of Confucianism are: Great Learning, Doctrine of the Mean, Analects, and Mencius. The Five Classics, ancient Chinese texts used as basis of studies by Confucians, are: Classic of Poetry, Book of Documents, Book of Rites, I Ching or the Book of Changes, Spring and Autumn Annals.

Since passing increasingly rigorous tests meant a greater chance of achieving higher ranks in the officialdom, participation and good performance in these examinations had a significant impact on the education of young men. Thus began the tradition that continues to the present day in China that the best students should become government officials. The saying ‘excellent students should become government officials’ perfectly captures the relationship between the academe and the officialdom, better termed the ‘mandarinate’ (Woodside, 2006). Furthermore, due to a fear that the generals might be disloyal, civilians were put in charge of the military, thus lowering the status of the military and the neglect of the art of war. These considerations led to periodic debates throughout Chinese history about the relative emphasis of various subjects, and which classics should be included in the official curriculum.

A critique of Drechsler’s claims

Drechsler has succeeded in demonstrating that Wang Anshi’s Wanyanshu has ‘contemporary relevance’, in that the following human resource
management practices contribute to good governance: quality teachers and curriculum to ensure technical competence, merit-based selection, recruitment from all levels of society and all parts of the country, adequate compensation to ensure decent living, sufficient discretion and a long period of time to demonstrate good performance. These ideas in the *Wanyanshu* have clearly stood the test of time and are common features of good management practices.

The use of the word 'origins' in Professor Drechsler's paper raises expectations about causal links, rather than mere association, between the *Wanyanshu* and modern public management. That *Wanyanshu* has 'contemporary relevance' (Drechsler, 2013, p. 1) is demonstrated. However, Drechsler entitled his paper 'Wang Anshi and the origins of modern public management in Song Dynasty China'. That leads us to believe that Drechsler sees Wang Anshi’s ideas in certain modern, presumably Western, public management practices cited throughout the paper. The implication is that the parallel occurrences of these ideas are more than coincidental, and that there is a relationship. But the paper does not make clear what kind of relationship exists, and no evidence is presented to show that the modern proponents of those practices were influenced by, or at least aware of, Wang Anshi’s ideas.

An examination of the Western public management literature has found no references to indicate the influence of Wang Anshi in general and his *Wanyanshu* in particular.* While we do not claim that our examination is exhaustive, we did survey an anthology (Shafritz and Hyde, 2008) which included 57 ‘classics of public administration’ covering the period from the 1880s to early 2000s, and a relatively recent handbook (Ferlie et al., 2005) that covers virtually all aspects of the field. We also analysed several intellectual histories of the public management discipline written by scholars of high repute (Frederickson, 1980; Ostrom, 1989; Hood, 1998; Lynn, 2005). In none of these could we find mention of Wang Anshi and his *Wanyanshu*. While one might believe that Wang Anshi or his *Wanyanshu* should have an impact on Western public management, the empirical evidence is lacking.

Furthermore, in our view, hermeneutics—the science of interpretation—is not an appropriate method for demonstrating the origins of an idea or a practice. Drechsler found that certain ideas and practices about human resource management discussed in modern public management had also been addressed in the *Wanyanshu*. He took this inter-temporal association as indicating ‘the origins of modern public management in Song Dynasty China’, specifically Wang Anshi’s *Wanyanshu*. Drechsler (2013, p. 1) states that his approach was based on Gadamer’s (1960) hermeneutics, and characterized it as saying ‘the full reconstruction of the meaning of the original, or of the author’s intent is impossible, even if such a meaning did exist’. Interpretation cannot substitute the identification of the mechanism by which the original idea or practice evolved over time and disseminated to other places, such as the *Wanyanshu* in 11th-century China to Western practices in the 20th and 21st centuries, even if both deal with identical or similar perennial issues of managing government personnel.

**Wang Anshi’s standing in the pantheon of Chinese statesmen**

Whereas Professor Drechsler assigned Wang Anshi the lofty status of ‘the great Song Dynasty statesman, philosopher and poet’ and the *Wanyanshu* a ‘global classic’, Chinese historians have more ambivalent and nuanced views about both the man and his document.

Thanks in part to Wang Anshi’s daring comprehensive reform, called ‘New Policies’, the *Wanyanshu* became well-known and some of his proposals were incorporated in his New Policies. In 1071, the national academy (or university) in the capital was reorganized and expanded, and schools were established in the regions. Training was provided in such specialized fields as military science, law and medicine. The structure and contents of the examinations were changed to place greater emphasis on current affairs, policy discussions and interpretations of classics (instead of poetry and rhymed prose) for doctoral examinations, and law was added as a new requirement for lower degrees (Liu, 1959, pp. 6–7). However, after Wang Anshi lost power and resigned, these educational and examination measures were rescinded by his opponents. In any event, the imperial examination system continued for the next 800 years in some fashion through succeeding dynasties until 1905, five years before the collapse of the Qing Dynasty under the heavy weight of the military and economic might of invading Western powers (Woodside, 2006; Zhou, 2008).

However, the *Wanyanshu* did not receive attention from the emperor or his ministers at

*In the historical context, the change from ‘public administration’ to ‘public management’ in the early 1980s is not significant enough to warrant the use of two terms. We use the term ‘public management’, and understand it as the present evolution of public administration.*
the time it was prepared. At the time the memorandum was submitted, it was virtually ignored. Wang Anshi was merely a 37-year-old local government official when he wrote the Wanyanshu to ostensibly report his personal experience in his latest posting. In addition, Deng, a well-known historian of the Song Dynasty, believed that there were three main reasons:

- It dealt narrowly with the issues of producing a large number of qualified government officials.
- Many of the proposals were speculative and not readily implementable.
- There was a wide gap between the proposals and the realities of the day (Deng, 2007, p. 37).

Furthermore, Wang Anshi’s ideas were overshadowed by other reform proposals made by equally, if not more, influential officials. In particularly, 15 years earlier, another official, Fan Zhongyan, had submitted a document entitled A Memorial of Ten Items to the emperor, covering some of the points that Wang Anshi subsequently raised. The Wang and Fan memorandums stood out in terms of their comprehensiveness among the many proposals made by scholars eager to reform the status quo or attract the favourable attention of the royal court. Together these Song scholar-officials were keenly aware of their obligation to improve the society (Qian, 1996, pp. 557–580), as captured in Fan’s famous saying: ‘It’s the scholar-official’s duty to be the first to worry—and the last to be happy—about the current state of affairs’.

Chinese historians hold ambivalent views of the contributions and significance of Wang Anshi’s Wanyanshu; these were largely overlooked in Drechsler (2013). On the positive side, historian Sah, asserts that ‘even though Wang had many writings, his [reform] proposals were all in the Memorial to Renzhong Emperor concerning current affairs’ (Sah, 2008, p. 346). Another eminent historian, Qian, credited Wanyanshu for putting Wang Anshi’s personal interpretation of Confucianism on the contents of civil service examinations, thus affecting the knowledge requirements of potential government officials for the next 1000 years. He elaborated Wang Anshi’s contribution to Chinese intellectual history:

There is a body of lofty ideals behind the political institutions proposed by Anshi’s New Policies, even though those policies failed. This idealism had its roots in profound sources, and was certainly not just responding to current realities or produced by a desire to promote one’s reputation. Lying behind Wang Anshi’s New Policies was ‘New Learning’. Even though Anshi’s New Policies failed, New Learning continued to be advanced. Zhu Xi appeared and his Four Books: Comprehensive Annotations became the standards for evaluating candidates for government offices during the 700 years in the Yuan, Ming and Qi three dynasties. Actually he followed the route of Wang Anshi’s New Doctrines and Principles. The idealistic political reforms of Fan Zhongyan and Wang Anshi failed in turn; the spirit and aspirations of their personal conduct and scholarly inquiry continued to be emulated by successive future generations in China until recently (Qian, 1996, pp. 579–580).

On the negative side was Xiao, who noted that the whole document dealt with one single topic of cultivating human talent:

Anshi’s reform was aimed at saving the poor and weak. Even though it emphasized institutions, from beginning to end it recognized the fundamental importance of human talent. Even though ‘Memorial Submitted to Emperor Renzhong’ had ten thousand words, actually it dealt with the single topic of cultivating human talent (Xiao, originally 1940, p. 304).

Liu (1987) went further than Xiao and called Wang’s proposal of ‘human talentism’ a failure. Ironically, Wang Anshi was himself a victim of the talents he sought to develop. According to Liu: ‘He used some people who were long on talents but short on ethics. His talented supporters had different ideas and were not united, and his followers could only help him with instituting new systems and lacked his idealism to achieve the ultimate goal of reforming social customs’.

Still, some historians of the Song Dynasty attribute little significance to the Wanyanshu in terms of its impact on broader government policy. Deng (2007, pp. 27–37) believed that due to its narrow focus on how to manage bureaucrats, the Wanyanshu was not blueprint for the New Policies, saying: ‘it could not be said that Wanyanshu had already produced a draft or a blue print for his New Policies later on’. Liang Ken-yao, a well known Song Dynasty historian from Taiwan, is of the opinion that the specific measures proposed in Wanyanshu had little direct relationship to the economic and fiscal measures in subsequent New Policies. Wang Anshi’s main interest was in creating a
pool of human talents as a favourable pre-condition for his reform agenda. He made some novel proposals, however Wang Anshi was not the only one to bring up this point—a notable example was Fan Zhongyan, who covered many of the same points 15 years earlier in a memorandum to Emperor Renzhong (correspondence with the authors, July 2013).

Conclusion and further research
In our view, Professor Drechsler elevated the stature of Wang Anshi’s Wanyanshu to a level not supported by its substance and historians’ opinions. Chinese historians, in particular, have shown greater ambivalence about the contribution of Wanyanshu to Wang Anshi’s New Policies reform, and its historical significance relative to other contemporary proposals. While he noted Wang Anshi was a Confucian and even a Neo-Confucian (Drechsler, 2013, pp. 1 and 2), Drechsler did not explain what that means or put Wanyanshu in the historical context of ancient Chinese public management. This deserves further research as described below.

Professor Drechsler’s claim that modern public management has its ‘origins’ in Song Dynasty China, specifically Wang Anshi’s Wanyanshu, is not supported by citations in the literature. While we also see some common elements between contemporary government human resource management practices and those recommended in Wanyanshu, the term ‘origins’ requires demonstration of an evolutionary link between the two phenomena. In the likely absence of documented cultural exchanges, especially among scholars and officials, between China and the West nearly 1000 years ago, the hypothesis of Chinese influences on Western political institutions hardly seems plausible.

Nevertheless, we regard Drechsler (2013) as a valuable extension to the literature of comparative public management, especially concerning China and the West, which holds both scholarly and practical significance. Academically, it would remind Chinese public management scholars of their own political cultural heritage even as they earnestly study all things Western for application in China. It would also extend the small, but growing, Sino-Western comparative literature (for example Hood, 1998; Frederickson, 2002; Cheung, 2010). In particular, Hood (1998, pp. 76–81) characterizes Confucian public management as hierarchical and bestows on it the honor of ‘the daddy of them all’, referring to other schools of the art of managing the state. The informal tone of the characterization leads us to speculate that Professor Hood probably was not asserting Confucian paternity for Western public management. Indeed, he was in fact advancing a cultural theory of global public management to take into greater account the societal context of public management. In this spirit Frederickson compares what he calls ‘bureaucratic morality’ in Western and Eastern thought, with Confucianism representing the latter.

We encourage others to pursue this line of research, and are ourselves studying the public management philosophy of the ancient sages invoked by Wang Anshi in the Wanyanshu. In addition to studying the well-known Confucius Analects and Mencius, as Creel (1970) and more recently Fukuyama (2011) did, we are tracing the intellectual history of Chinese public management to the even earlier Western Zhou Empire (1045–771 BC). The remarkable book Zhouli, which describes the political system and government structure of the Western Zhou Empire, stands out as a good Chinese candidate for a ‘global classic’ in public management—we share Creel’s assessment that it is the origins of statecraft of China.

Greater Western and global awareness of Chinese public management takes on practical significance as China rises as an economic power and the authorities reject a Western system of governance. For the past 200 years, the Chinese have attempted to catch up with the West (Schell and Delury, 2013). After making remarkable economic progress in the past three decades by opening up and creating a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, the governing party has steadfastly rejected the Western political model of multi-party constitutional democracy. The current leadership is working towards realizing the Chinese dream of restoring the historical glory of the Chinese nation. Confucianism has made a comeback (Bell, 2008; Jiang, 2013) as an alternative to the Western model. Chinese confidence seems bolstered as the USA and Europe, after falling into financial crises, are making painfully slow economic recoveries (Zhang, 2012), and as the general decline of the West is observed (for example Jacques, 2009; Friedman and Mandelbaum, 2011). Even such a strong advocate of Western values as Ferguson concedes ‘the great degeneration’ of the West by describing how its institutions decay and economies die (Ferguson, 2013). Yet, even as China goes global, it is still conflicted about its international identity as a role model for other
developing nations, let alone the West (Shambaugh, 2013). Against this backdrop, it is all the more important to find out how the Chinese manage the government of the most populous country and soon the largest economy in the world.

Acknowledgments
We thank Professor Liang Kenyao for granting us an interview in July 2013 and for answering our questions in writing. The research assistance of Wenxing Xu, Jack Yuanzhen Lyu and Jason Mian Luo is appreciated.

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