Week 17: Transforming Society Through Government

Section 1: Re-evaluating Government’s Role in a Changing World

Great changes in politics sometimes change how we think about the past, and this is what happened in 1978. Deng Xiaoping, who had been forced out by Mao Zedong, came back into power after Mao's death and changed the course of Chinese politics, society, and the economy. The China we see today is a rich, vibrant, expanding country. That's Deng Xiaoping's work.

But in 1978, some historians began to look at the past and change the way they thought about it too. And specifically, they changed their verdict on two of the people we'll be talking about today. Throughout the history of the People's Republic, Wang Anshi, a political reformer of the 11th century, had been regarded as the best of the politicians of the time, a man who was on the right track. And his leading opponent, Sima Guang, a conservative historian, was regarded as having been wrong.

Well, in 1978 historians began to write new kinds of articles that said maybe Wang Anshi was wrong and Sima Guang was right. We're not going to try to make a judgment about that, and we're not sure that the choice is really only between Sima Guang and Wang Anshi because there's another person we'll talk about today as well, Su Shi, who is both a politician and a poet. Let me tell you about what we want to do.

We want briefly to review the context in which this great political debate emerged because this debate about the role of government in society is a paradigmatic debate in Chinese history. And that's one of the reasons why it was so important in 1978 for historians to reevaluate it. What they were really talking about was what was the proper role for government in history. So we want to look at the context and then we want to look at what was at stake for Sima Guang, for Wang Anshi, and for Su Shi.

And I think you'll see that there are connections between the attitudes and aesthetics of those paintings and the people we'll be talking about today. We're also going to be able to go back and read some of the writings, both about politics and about literature and art and thought generally, that Wang Anshi and Sima Guang and Su Shi wrote at the time. You'll be reading them in English translation, but we have them available for you in Chinese as well.

Section 2: A Changing China, A Changing World – Song in 1050CE

Let's briefly review the context in which these new ideas about government emerged in the 11th century. Recall in the last sequence, we talked about the changes that took place in Chinese society, economy, in the world, in fact, that China inhabited between the eighth century when the Tang Dynasty was at the peak of its powers before the An Lushan rebellion and the 11th century.

The new dynasty, the Song Dynasty in this case, which was founded in 960 had now come to exist in a multi-state world. It wasn't simply that there was a Chinese dynasty and tribal peoples around the edges. Now, those tribal peoples had learned how to build states. And in the Northeast, there were the Khitans, who had created the Liao Dynasty, and in the Northwest there were the Tanguts, who had created the Xia Dynasty. Domestically, there had been great changes as well.
Now, 50% or more of the population lived in the South. And by the 1070s, probably the bulk of officials--certainly the bulk of officials who were making policy--were coming from the South. The South was different from the North, which had lost population. The South had a riverine economy, that is, water transport was easily available and cheap. It was commercializing and commerce was playing an ever-larger role. And in fact, in the Song Dynasty for the first time taxes on commerce start to become a larger share of government revenues than taxes on land.

It was a world socially without great clans. The aristocratic or state aristocracy that had come into existence during the medieval period and survived well into the Tang Dynasty to the very end had now disappeared for reasons we've already talked about. And instead, there's a new group of people. People we call literati, but importantly, people who are selected for government on the basis of learning.

The world had changed, and the challenge in mid 11th century was, what should government do in this very different world? I've said it was the people who replaced the great clans were people we called literati. That's how we translate the Chinese word "shi." It's a word we've come across a number of times since the times of Confucius. A word that has gone through Chinese history as the common term for the elite, for that particular top layer, small top layer of society that was both a cultural elite and a social elite and a political elite.

I've translated the term "shi" as literati because by the 11th century, a growing number of people are starting to see that what makes one a shi is not heredity, not the family you came from, which would have been true in Tang, but the learning you have acquired, learning that can be proven and demonstrated, and above all, tested. In the late 10th century, the government decides that given that there are no longer aristocrats, no longer families of long service to government, they're going to recruit officials through an examination called the civil service examination.

These would be people who entered government on the basis of learning and that learning would be tested by competitive examinations. And this is important to keep in mind because when Wang and Sima and Su passed, what the examination tested was, in fact, one's literary ability. The very first test in the examinations was a test of your ability to compose poems.

To give you some sense of how literatus saw themselves, let me tell you a joke, a literati joke from the late 11th century. Well, it doesn't make much sense to tell a joke without an audience so here we're going to show you a clip of how I told it once in class and you'll see how the class reacts to it.

So let me tell you a story, which I actually read in a book written around 1090 or something like this. And this story is of a prefect--remember, there are provinces, prefectures, and counties. A prefecture would be an area around the size of Rhode Island, for example. And the prefect is like the governor of Rhode Island--has just arrived at his post and he goes to the major Buddhist temple to say hello to the abbot, who is one of these Chan or Zen abbots.

And then the abbot receives him. The abbot is sitting up on a chair on the dais in the temple courtyard, and the prefect comes in, da dum, da dum, big retinue and everything. And the abbot says, hey, come on up, sit down. Doesn't go through a whole elaborate ceremony. And then they're chatting and then 50 minutes later some military guy comes in from the local garrison.

And the abbot gets off his chair, gets off the dais, walks down and bows and scrapes and goes through a whole politeness routine to this military guy. The prefect is really, really pissed off. And the abbot comes back, and he says to the abbot, how come when I came in you greeted me so impolitely? You just sat here, and now this lowly military man comes in and you do through this whole elaborate routine of politeness.

And the abbot says, oh, he says, you know, impoliteness is true politeness. Politeness is impoliteness, a really zen answer. And so the prefect goes over and starts to slap him upside the head saying, hitting is non-hitting. Non-hitting is hitting, right?
Well, every story has a point. There's no such thing as a free joke in a lecture. So what's the point? There are two implications to this. The first is the tension between military and civil. We had gone back to the period after the Tang Dynasty—military figures had the power. They may not have always had the cultural prestige, but they certainly had the power.

What's happened now is that our prefect, a civil official, is making it very clear to the monk that civil officials have precedence over the military. So that's a political change. Who controls power? What kind of government is this to be? It's going to be a civil government, and civil interests will triumph over military interests.

The second issue is ideological. The monk is being dismissed by the official on the grounds that he's just talking nonsense. He can't say what he's saying. The official doesn't say it. The official regards himself as a good Confucian scholar official. The monk is a Buddhist, a Chan Buddhist, a Zen Buddhist. Ideologically speaking, if we had gone back to the eighth century, really certainly the first half of the eighth century, the leading philosophical voices in society would have been Buddhist.

Today, in the 11th century, it's different. The leading voices now are starting to become Confucians, a new kind of Confucianism, which says our ideology, our ideas, ought to be guiding us as we take control of government and try to figure out what government should do. So the literati had started to think about their role in society in the 11th century, and I think that's the subtext of this joke I just told.

And they're asking how government can serve the common good. To be honest about this, we can trace these attitudes back to the Tang Dynasty. One of the first people to talk about it and talk about in a new view of government and the role learning should play was a man named Han Yu, who was known to us as the founder of the Ancient Style Movement, the ancient style in literature, turning back to antiquity to find models for the present and representing those models through your own literary style and the content of what you write.

Han Yu may not have had so much influence in his own times, but in the 11th century he became, in some sense, one of the most important of literary intellectuals. Ouyang Xiu, for example, whose works you're going to read in a second as well, turned back to Han Yu for a model. Liu Zongyuan, another Tang ancient style writer contemporary with Han Yu, also was influential in the 11th century.

Wang Anshi was one of the people recommended by Ouyang Xiu. Su Shi was one of the people recommended by Ouyang Xiu. And Sima Guang was a person who was deeply suspicious of all these literary types with their ideas of transforming the world through government and taking their models from antiquity. So we're going to stop now, and we'd like you to read some of the writings by Ouyang Xiu and Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, and tell us what you think about them.

**Section 3: Wang Anshi**

**1. Introducing Wang Anshi**

We turn now to Wang Anshi. Let's begin with Wang Anshi's biography. Well, the first thing to really take note of is he came from the south. From the county of Linchuan in Jiangxi Province, south of the Yangzi River, sort of towards the middle not on the coast. He came from a family that did not have a long career of government service. He did have some relatives in government, but few.

He entered civil service on the basis of his own merit. He passed the highest-level examination, the Jinshi examination. He spent much of his career in the provinces. He never really got to High Court position before he was called in to become prime minister or chief counselor. How did he become famous? If he
didn't spend time at court, if he wasn't an official in the provinces-- a magistrate, a prefect, and so on-- why
would he be called in to lead the government?

Well, it turns out that he was called in because he had become famous. And he'd become famous for his
writings in the ancient style, in the style of Han Yu and Ouyang Xiu. This wasn't just a matter of having a
style of writing, which was more amenable to writing about ideas. It wasn't caught up in rules of prosody
and parallelism. What it really had to do with was the idea of turning back to antiquity to find ideas that
could have bearing on the present that could guide us in the present to creating a better world.

And that was Wang Anshi's big selling point. In 1058, he writes a very long memorial called a "Ten
Thousand Word Memorial" to Emperor Renzong, and sets out his view of how government can transform
society. Let me go through the arguments he's making there because when he turns back to his ideas about
how government can transform social customs and establish institutions and models, he's also going back to
a reading of antiquity, the time at the Sages, the world of the classics, not an historical world so much as a
world that he knows by reading certain texts that idealize the former kings and the Sage kings.

So it was in 1058, 10 years before he was summoned to the capital to lead the government, and he writes
his long memorial. He says, look, I'm not telling you we should imitate antiquity. That's not my point. That
doesn't make any sense. The institutions of the distant past of 3,000 years ago, 2,000 years ago, they're not
for us today. But he said, what we should pay attention to are the intentions of the Sage Kings in antiquity.
What were they trying to accomplish? Are these things that are realistic for us to try to accomplish as well?
What was it that they were doing?

And he gives an answer that really makes government central to everyone's lives and certainly, the lives of
the literati, lives of the elite. Education, he says, should be the foundation. Not surprising coming from
somebody who rose to his position thanks to his education, thanks to his learning. Government, he says,
should be educating all the people, but we can just begin with the literati.

That's the first thing: create schools and educate people. The government should take these people who are
in school and give them gainful employment. Gainful employment, meaning, I think, that they're going to
be involved in making local government work. So the students in schools, the literati who are going to
schools, also become in some sense low-level local officials.

The best of them are going to be selected, brought to the capital, given further training. Those people are
going to be sent back to be teachers in the schools, to be local officials, and in fact, be people who make
policy. So it's going to be a self-sustaining system, and maybe I should emphasize that this is a system, but
it's a system capable of changing because it's always drawing in new people.

People are rising from below then as they rise, they go back below to provide new teaching, new
instruction. It's constantly evolving. It's not a rigid, static system.

Wang Anshi would bring this to his policymaking in government. And this happened—well, it began to
happen in 1067. A new emperor is on the throne. He's a teenager. I think he was around 17 then. He's read.
He's paying attention to currents in intellectual culture at the time. He's been reading books. He's anxious to
make his mark on the world. He wants to accomplish big things.

And he decides that he should try to find the two people, the most promising people, to ask them to become
chief counselors. And in China, you could have multiple chief counselors at the same time. On one side,
there's Sima Guang and I'll talk more about him later. On the other side, there's Wang Anshi. And he calls
them both in and he says, guys, I want you both to be chief counselors because you represent different
points of view.
And they say to him, no you don't. You can't do that. We do represent different points of view. They're incompatible points of view, and you have to choose between us. And the emperor chooses Wang Anshi.

Wang Anshi says to the emperor, I have some policies in mind, I have some things I want to accomplish and I think it would be wonderful for the country, but I have to warn you there will be people who oppose them. And so if we're going to undertake these policies, I need to know that you will stand behind me. And the emperor said, I'll stand behind you. I'll support you no matter what opposition comes along. Wang Anshi says there will be opposition, but once the policies are put into place, people will benefit from them and they'll accept them.

2. Wang Anshi’s New Policies

So we already know that Wang Anshi plans to change things. Let me tell you the first thing he does, a very clever move, fiscal policy, financial policy of the government, was run by a commission called the Finance Commission, senior officials, experienced people, people who are not anxious to change either. And Wang says, well, that's fine. We'll leave you in place, but we'll create another group called a Finance Planning Commission.

So the Finance Commission, their job will be to take the plans the Finance Planning Commission creates and put them into effect. And that Finance Planning Commission he staffs with his protégés-- young men, literary talents, people with grand vision, with high ambitions-- something that upset the older senior officials a good deal. He sends people out to the countryside as commissioners to look into conditions in the countryside to see what the government can do to help improve agriculture, to build infrastructure, projects that it should undertake and so on.

Let me turn now to the policies that he puts into effect. And what we're going to do is this. I'm going to lay out a series of policies as Wang Anshi put them forward. I'm not going to deal with all of them, but I'll deal with the major ones. And at the end of that, we're going to ask you to make an assessment of who would benefit and who would lose from these policies.

Now, the first policy is called the crop loans policy or the crop loans law. By the way, in your readings you'll see what I tend to call the new policies new laws. The word, fa, can be translated as law or policy. I guess my view of this is that a policy is created by the government, but it has the force of law. The first one of these laws, these policies, I want to mention is an economic one. It's called the crop loans policy.

This is the way it works. Traditionally, farmers need to borrow in the spring to buy new seed grain to hold them over after the winter. And at the end of the summer and the fall they pay back their loans when the harvest comes in. And typically, they would borrow that money from moneylenders, usually, wealthy families in the area. Interest rates were fairly high.

Wang Anshi comes in and says, well, we will use the government's granary reserves to provide loans to farmers from the government. We will not charge as much interest. We'll charge, let's say, 20%. And we will use that to make up for loans that fail, to, in fact, make more loans available, and this will make the lives of the farmers better.

Another economic policy, second policy I want to mention, is marketing controls. So we have a time where there's greater commercialization and the cities are growing, but goods have to move to the cities to feed and support the urban populations. This had been in the hands of large wholesale merchants and you could see that-- or the government could see that prices fluctuated a good deal. So they put in a policy called marketing controls, the marketing control policy or marketing control law, in which the government takes responsibility for wholesale purchases of goods and moving those goods to urban centers where they are then sold to retailers for distribution in the cities.
Let's turn to some policies that had to do with local government: the service exemption law. Now traditionally--and this you can understand how this would work in a non-commercializing economy, in more of a barter economy, in an agricultural economy--traditionally, local government had staffed itself in two ways.

Three officials were appointed by the center to serve at the county level, sometimes four. And then the local government would require the richest taxpayers to provide services to local government to make government work. People who would be responsible for collecting taxes, serving as clerks, manning the doors, serving as the secretaries, and so on, serving as scribes.

Now, the government decides that that is not the way to do it. They'd much rather hire people rather than demanding that a family, a rich family, send somebody to serve as a clerk, or in fact, while they probably often did hire somebody as a substitute to serve as a clerk. They would now have a cash tax not only of rich families, but of many families going down the taxpayer roles to lower levels. And those cash taxes would be collected, a small cash tax, and with that government would hire the personnel it needed. It made for a more efficient government and it provided a steady income stream for government.

Here's another policy. The militia policy or the militia law that was put into effect is also about local government and local society. This is very commonly known by its Chinese name, which is baojia. The idea is simple. You organize households in groups, groups of 10, five groups of 10, 50 groups of 100, and so on. So you have different groups. The group of 10 would be a neighborhood block group if you will.

The leading households, the richest households, would lead each group. And the original thought was that this would be a militia. The government wouldn't have to hire local police, for example, local security personnel, local soldiers in cases of banditry and rebels coming through. Rather, the farmers would be the soldiers. And these groups of 10, 50, 100 households, the males would get military training. And that way government expenses could be cut down and the farmers would be more involved.

But there was more to it than that. The government saw that they could use these groups or Wang Anshi saw they could use these groups to collect taxes. And they could use these groups for another purpose as well: mutual liability and mutual surveillance. So if you want to keep the peace and if you want to make sure that everybody pays their taxes, one way to do it is to say, if somebody in your group of 10 households is not paying taxes, the rest of you are responsible to make up for their tax loss.

Or you could say, if somebody in your group breaks the law, you have to report them. Otherwise, you share liability for the crime that's been committed. It may be a very good way of maintaining order. It's not necessarily something that's terribly popular. The final thing I want to mention is a little bit different.

One of the conclusions I hope you--well, I know some of you reached was that these policies taken all together undermined wealthy, private families, whether they are government officials or private merchants or just wealthy landlords. If the government is giving loans to the farmers, you as a rich family are not lending money at interest. If the government is moving goods to the cities, wholesale goods, you as a big merchant are not making a profit.

If the government is organizing farmers into groups then what it is saying in effect is everyone will relate directly to government. They will not be dependent on Temple associations, religious groups, rich families, landlords, and so on. Well, taken together, this is not good for the wealthiest and richest and most powerful members of society. What does Wang Anshi have to offer them?

In fact, he is very aware that they are being disadvantaged. He talks a lot when he's talking to the emperor about the danger that big families who are buying up land or when people borrow money from them and default they foreclose on their land, they expand their power, that these families are a real threat to the new policies. But does he offer them something in return? Well, he does.
His policies altogether probably expanded the number of government officials, centrally-appointed government officials, from 20,000 to 40,000, a tremendous increase. And he starts to see that he should create schools-- remember, back in 1058, he talked about schooling as being of fundamental importance--that he should create schools that would serve the boys of these families. And not only that they should have these schools, but they should also have a curriculum. A curriculum that would get students to think like Wang Anshi thought. To see the rightness of his views by studying the classics with commentaries that he and his protégés wrote.

And then he said, well, if you want to take part in the examinations-- this eventually emerged. It didn't happen right away. Remember, that Wang Anshi and his followers are in power for almost 50 years. He says, what we'll have is a graded school system and if you want to take the exams then you have to pass through the school system. In fact, at one point they thought they could get rid of the exams entirely, and people would enter government by passing through the highest level of the school system.

Now, let me sum up about Wang Anshi. It seems to me that Wang Anshi is interested in finding a universal system, an integrated social order that can include everybody. It's an activist government. He wants to do things and accomplish things. It's also a government that's concerned with what's called in Chinese, managing wealth, something that people, other people, more conservative people, think is not the role of government.

But it is not just managing the wealth of the government, it's also using government money to invest in society, to increase the income of the government to do more for society, and so on. Now, we're going to pause not only so you can reflect on this, but we have a surprise for you and, well, I'll show you in a minute.

3. Waterwheel Painting

Now, we have a painting we want to show. It's thought to be from the 11th century, and it's showing you some rather interesting stuff. And it has some bearing, I think, on what's going on in the economy and society and the new policies. But let's take a look at it and I'll point some things out for you and you can, perhaps, do some more with it on your own.

Let's begin on the right side of the painting. You see the building in the lower right, and that wooden structure, pointless wooden structure that appears right before the front door. Well, those structures were typical in cities in the 11th century. They disappear later, but in the 11th century they're still typical. They're put in front of wine houses, restaurants, and hotels.

And if you look to the right there and look around, what you're seeing, I think, is a hotel, an inn. And right out of the front door you see an innkeeper peeking. He's peeking out of the front door. Well, why is there an inn there and what are they doing?

Let's go to the center of this picture for a moment. There is-- you see a house, two floors, a fancy house open. And in the middle of it, what do you see? Down at the bottom that's a water wheel. It's a horizontal water wheel and you can see the water gushing in, and it turns that wheel and above, on the second floor, you see the stones grinding wheat-- I assume it's wheat-- into flour.

Now, if you look at the rest of the painting, you'll see that in one way or another everything revolves around that. So people are going to the inn because they're bringing grain to the mill. Perhaps, selling it, perhaps, paying the mill to work on it. You see different kinds of boats. You see people doing different parts of the job of getting grain milled.
And then over in the left, up in a pavilion in the upper left, you see a group of people sitting around a table. And as far as we know, those are officials. So this mill is not a private mill. It's a government mill. Given the looks of things, it's a mill in the city or on the edge of the city. The officials are there running it. So at the very least, this is a picture that shows the role of government in the economy.

Section 4: Sima Guang

1. Introducing Sima Guang

Let's turn now to Sima Guang. Wang Anshi, as I've mentioned, and his supporters were in power for 50 years well after Wang Anshi himself died in 1086. But there was tremendous and growing opposition within a year of the policies being announced. Various officials started to oppose them. Eventually, the leading opponent became Sima Guang. And Sima Guang would eventually then come into office and try to undo all of the policies.

Let me tell you something about his background. Sima Guang was born in the Northwest, in Xia County, in Shanxi Province in 1019. He was two years older than Wang Anshi. A wealthy family to be sure, but more importantly a family that had served the Song Dynasty almost since its founding.

Although he did earn a Jinshi degree, the highest civil service examination degree, in fact, he had been given official rank when he was only 15 years old. He had been given that rank because his family was so highly placed that it had the privilege of protecting a son or a grandson and getting official rank for them, which made them eligible for appointment. So at 15 years old, he's already a ranked person.

He didn't need, in fact, to ever take the examinations. He could have been appointed, but he was ambitious. And by taking the civil service examinations, he made himself eligible for the fast track in government and for higher office later. He spent almost all his career at court, rarely went out to the provinces to serve. When he did, it was in the North. So a northerner, the capitals in the north, and his local services in the North.

When Wang Anshi's policies are announced, he starts to oppose them. And in 1071, he's forced out of government and a few years later he decides he would retire and settles in the city of Luoyang, which had become a haven for the conservative elite, for the opponents of the new policies. He spent his time in those years in Luoyang working on a monumental history of China from 403 BC to the founding of the Song Dynasty in 960.

And after the emperor died in 1085, the Empress Dowager, who had not been sympathetic to the new policies, the new laws, called Sima Guang to government, summoned him to court and asked him to form a government. He did, and once he held power he started to abolish every single one of the new laws. He died, however, a year after, but his policies continued.

There are other stories we can tell you about this. In 1093, the Empress Dowager is no longer the regent. The new emperor decides to go back to the new policies and so on, but you can read about that. Sima Guang from the start was suspicious of literary talents, suspicious of people like Ouyang Xiu. People who idealized antiquity, who tried to force changes based on ideas about what was right rather than an understanding of what Sima Guang regarded as reality.

And what was that understanding of reality? Well, for Sima Guang it came from history not the classics. It didn't come from high antiquity. It came from the historical record, the record of dynasties, which had risen and fallen through time. And he says at one point that for the last 1,400 years we've only had 500 years of
unity. Unity is unusual. It's hard, and what I've done is I've gone to study history and to write this monumental history book to figure out what rules government must follow to maintain unity and stability.

What are the constant rules of political organization that can be inferred from the historical record? And he comes up with rules. He says, you know it's not a matter of cycles, that things rise and they fall, what is unified must split. It's not a matter of the Mandate of Heaven, that Heaven decides to give somebody the right to unify the world and one empire. That's all, he says, is nonsense. The Mandate of Heaven is nothing more than a camouflage for what really happens to the founding of dynasty, which is military conquest or usurpation.

But he says, there are rules you can follow that will ensure that your dynasty will last. And he actually argues that if you follow his model, your dynasty could last for 1,000 years. It never had happened before, but it could once you understood the rules. And the rules involved making sure that all the different components were kept in their proper place.

And he uses as a metaphor a house. A house is built on a foundation. What's the foundation? The common people. It's surrounded by a wall. What's the wall? The army. It has pillars upholding the roof. What are the pillars? They're the laws, they're the rules. The beams, the high officials, and so on. And who owns the house? The emperor.

And if we want the house to stay in good shape forever all we have to do is make sure that each component, each piece of the structure fulfills its role. That it doesn't change. That it's not allowed to go off track. That it keeps working and doing its job as it should do it.

That view is a very different view from Wang Anshi's view of the world as an organic system, a living body in which there's circulation and movement. This is a world of stability and solid structures. Well, I'm going to pause here so that you can go and read Sima Guang's objections in his own words to the new laws, and decide what you think he thinks is wrong with it.

2. Sima Guang’s Objections

Now, you've seen his objections, and you quite rightly have seen that there's a logic to them. Sima sees a new world emerging from the new laws, and a very dangerous one. The service exemption is a cash tax and that means that people have to go to market and they have to become integrated into marketing systems. The crop loans law forces people to borrow and if there's a bad year it will fall into arrears and the government will lose its money as well.

They'll lose their homes and become rootless. The militia system has been teaching people how to fight, which is in effect teaching them how to rebel. The government is using up its granary reserves, that people are rootless. They no longer are paying attention to farming. It has been a bad year. They know how to fight. They'll be rebels, and the government lacks the means to suppress rebellions because its militia system has given up on maintaining local police.

Moreover, he faults Wang personally. He says this man was so totally devoted to having it his way, thinking everyone had to be just like him and think just like him that he would expel anyone from the government for disagreeing with him as it happened to Sima Guang. There is much to be said for Sima Guang's objections.

Wang Anshi's exemption tax did free the wealthy to pursue other interests. And it did tax more people. And it's true, it did require that they market goods to get cash to pay the tax, but that was part of a changing economy. And that's a kind of change that Sima Guang did not want to see. He saw government really as having a zero sum game.
If government got more money then it followed for him that the people had less. There's a point at which he says to the emperor, you know, this makes no sense. It's obvious that Sima Guang and Wang Anshi disagreed profoundly about what the role of government should be, but in many ways they shared a belief that government determined what happened in society and government determined what happened to government and to the dynasty. Each sought to persuade others to teach them how to think, how to learn like them.

Sima Guang writes a history book to both teach the emperor, but teach the literati. Wang Anshi does commentaries on the classics, even his own dictionary to be used in schools. For Wang Anshi, the government is something that's positive. It can accomplish things. It can transform people's lives. It's not a zero sum game.

At one point, Sima Guang says, what is this notion of managing wealth and the idea that we can create more wealth? That's impossible. The amount of wealth in the world is directly proportionate to the number of people farming in the world. And that was not necessarily true. Each sought in his own way to accomplish something, but Wang Anshi has an expansive vision and Sima Guang has a very limited one.

For Sima Guang, the role of government is to maintain stability, to avoid making changes. And he sees, in fact, that the real source of instability in society comes from officials not doing what they're supposed to do, not knowing what the principles of good government are. The role of the government is not to redistribute wealth. It's rather to balance different interests in such a way that no one changes their role in society. And he goes on at considerable length to defend the role of rich families in local society.

Section 5: Su Shi

1. Introducing Su Shi

Now, those of you who know something about Chinese literature and art may find it strange that I've included Su Shi in this sequence and am treating him as a significant political figure in this debate over the proper role of government in society. In fact, though, this literatus from Western Sichuan in the west of the Sichuan Basin, was a leader-- one of the leaders of groups opposing Wang Anshi and the new policies. He was exiled and he would later be exiled again towards the end of his life for his opposition to the government.

He joined Sima Guang's government, but he led a particular faction within that government that did not entirely support all the things Sima Guang stood for. He objected to the effort to abolish every single one of the new policies. He objected also the lack of recognition on Sima Guang's part that it was a commercial world or a commercializing world that Song was part of.

But it's certainly true that he was a great poet, a great calligrapher, a wonderful essayist, a commentator on the Confucian classics, but all of that could be said for Wang Anshi too. He was an art critic as well, and I'm not sure we would say that about Wang Anshi. When he was exiled for his opposition to the new policies, he was exiled in part because he made fun of them. And people with power don't mind you disagreeing, but they don't like you to ridicule them.

Well, his criticisms are fairly clear, and I think what I'll do is just leave it up to you to read those criticisms and see what you think of them and how you understand them. My view is that they're fairly close to Sima Guang's position.

2. Su Shi’s Criticism
But did Su Shi have something to offer of his own? Sima Guang— at least we can say Sima Guang did have a positive vision of some kind, of a limited government and limited roles for government, and the importance of the wealthy in society. But what did Su Shi have to offer?

He didn't have a program to offer like the new laws. He certainly denied that he had a set of doctrines or dogmas that everybody ought to learn. You may get a hint of where Su Shi was going when I tell you that when Wang Anshi set out to set up a school system and transform the schools to fit his new curriculum and change the civil service examinations from a test of poetry and literary composition to a test of interpretations of the classics, Sima Guang preferred to have a different system, one in which the best people would get recommendations from people at court and would be allowed to take exams, as a small group, and go on to government offices. Something that would, in effect, keep people like Sima Guang in power, people from old families. Su Shi said, I want neither of those things. I think we ought to go on testing poetry.

Well, why does he say that? Remember, discussing poetry before in this course, we've talked about poetry as something where the individual is responding to the moment, taking his own reading of the moment and coming up with his response to it. And to get a sense of that, let me give you an example of what Su Shi meant by the idea of power. The Chinese word for this is "quan." I'm going to show you, just hold on for a second.

So this is a way of measuring things. You'll see along the edge here are markers for weight. Here we have a weight here. We suspend it here and on this hook we can attach a weighted object. It turns out that this tool is balance. It's actually called a steelyard in English, but the Chinese word for it is "quan." And that word is actually the word that's used for political authority and power.

I've loaded a bunch of metal. I'm going to put that there. And now I'm going to hold this here and I want to figure out how much this weighs. I'm going to move my weight along the beam, and I will find the moment, the place of equilibrium, which is right around here. And then I know how much this weighs.

Now, what does this have to do with the notion of power and authority? I think it has everything to do with it because imagine now that our weight is constantly changing. And that what it means to have power is the ability to use a little bit of force to move our weight, to stabilize the changing conditions. And that's very much the way Su Shi thinks about power. He sees it as something that people can use not to stop change, but to accommodate it and to balance it. He says at one point, people can all be alike in learning how to create things, but they will be different in what they create.

There you go, in balance. My little demonstration was meant to illustrate the notion that people in government— officials from Su Shi's perspective— had to learn how to be reactive, had to learn how to respond to change, not to block it, but to accommodate it and to balance it. He says at one point, people can all be alike in learning how to create things, but they will be different in what they create.

And you can imagine this with calligraphy. You've seen our sequence on calligraphy, and you know that a calligrapher can work in many different styles according to the occasion and yet every good calligrapher is unique. We can recognize that he's doing it in a certain style and yet the calligraphy, the product of his penmanship, will be different.

For Su Shi, this is a very important metaphor because a person who is truly cultivated, who can learn how to respond to change in the world, has to know a lot. They have to have mastered the techniques and the arts. They have to have learned history and learned the conditions. Public responsibility, he argues, is another form of artistic production. The successful politician is one who can see the world, know what policies have been used in the past, and bring them to bear on the present in a way that works for all the interests involved.
They can create things of enduring value. Just as his calligraphy, his writing, his poetry have had an enduring value and you're still reading them today. Now, I've just briefly mentioned some of the things that Su Shi is doing, and in part, because I want you to have a chance to read Su Shi in his own words.

So we've collected a series of things that are really not about politics at all, although some of them do refer to the new policies and the new laws. And it's Su Shi ruminating on literature, on art, and its role, and also criticizing the policies along the way, but why don't you take a look at that and we'll conclude afterwards.

Section 6: Final Thoughts on the New Laws Era and the Legacy of Reform

Let's think for a minute about the role of government in society. For Sima Guang, what the government takes from the people is a loss. It's a zero sum game. For Wang Anshi, the government in taxing finds money with which to invest to make lives of everybody better, and, in fact, to increase the total amount of wealth.

It comes close to being an idea of growth, but I don't think quite conceptualize and theorize in the ways that modern people have conceptualized economic growth. For Wang Anshi, there is no real place for mediating groups. By that, I mean groups that or organizations that get in between the lives of the people and government. To make it work, to make his system work, government has to be able to command the people, be able to guide them, tell them what to do, to use rewards and punishments, to move them in the right direction.

For Su Shi, it's not the policy so much because no policy in itself is right. It's how cultured and cultivated men respond to circumstances. In some sense, I guess we'd have to say that he avoids the issue of trying to create a single political program that all should follow. Well, one of the outcomes of the new policies was a fracturing of the literati, intense factionalism, people-- lots of people removed from government and punished. Their descendants told they could never serve in government, and elites turning away from the role of government and its potential.

We know from today that modernization in the sense that we understand it now both in Europe and in East Asia has involved enlarging the role of government in society, not shrinking it. But at this moment in Chinese history, a decision was made in part because the North China Plain was lost to foreign invasion in 1126 and the new policies and the emperor who supported them at the time were blamed. But a decision was made for better or for worse not to follow the path of Wang Anshi's new laws.

And in fact, to disparage them permanently until the 20th century, to limit government, to rely heavily on local elites and their role in local society. And we can talk I think or we should talk at some point about what China might have lost by doing that. We want to end this sequence with a treat.

We have a set of paintings here that we'd like you to take a look at. The paintings are sort of interesting because in some ways I think you can associate each one of these paintings with one of the three people we've been talking about. We'll tell you something about the paintings when you look at them, but we think you'll have a lot of fun doing this.