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Early Modern Classicism and Late Imperial China

Elman, B.A.

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nitional trap that we saw lies in wait. Avoiding it and its hegemony means avoiding the one model of modernity that chanced to succeed; it means re-defining modernity so that it is not about fossil fuels, parliamentary government, and secularisation, but a completely open category waiting to be filled with local content generated by empirical work.

When we compare the intellectual histories of the early modern world, what is it precisely that we want to know or do? Validate a hypothesis over N cases? Develop causal accounts of big structures and processes? Differentiate cases? The first is the goal of comparative history; the second, the goal of comparative sociology. For us the most effective comparative intellectual histories are going to be of the last type, which (as Peter Baldwin explains) ignores generalisation and seeks to capture similarities and differences across a limited number of instances in order

to understand the cases under discussion, to isolate from the incidental what is 'crucial' and possibly, though less likely, what is 'causal'.

The world that intellectuals across the globe inhabited and sought to know changed indubitably and radically in the period standardly called early modern. The master class participants want to know how those intellectuals responded, how their responses might compare with each other in different places, how similarly or dissimilarly their responses transformed the great intellectual traditions to which they were heir. The question to ask is not 'How modern is it?' – that's the hegemonic comparison we need to consciously bring to the table and examine critically. The question to ask instead is whether intellectual modernity may have had different characteristics and histories in different parts of the world, including the history of *kaozheng xue*, 'evidential scholarship', in China, of *tajdid*, 'renewal', and *tahqiq*,

'verification', in the Middle East, and of 'newness', *navyata*, in India; and more, whether in those histories possibilities for a modernity different from the capitalist variety may once have been contained. <

Suggestions for Further Reading

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- Quentin Skinner, 'On Intellectual History and the History of Books', in *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1,1 (2005): 29-36.
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A number of ideas in the foregoing essay are developed in greater detail in 'Introduction', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham: Duke U. Press, forthcoming) and in 'Comparison without Hegemony: The Logic and Politics of a Comparative Intellectual History of Early Modern India', in *History and Indian Studies*, ed. Claude Markovits et al. (forthcoming).

Early Modern Classicism and Late Imperial China

Most historians treat late imperial China, 1400-1900, as a time of fading and decay. Indeed, viewed backwards from the Opium War (1839-1842) and Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), events before 1800 appear to have left China unprepared for modernity. But the 17th and 18th centuries can be considered not only as a 'late imperial' prelude to the end of traditional China, but as an 'early modern' harbinger of things to come.

Benjamin A. Elman

By 1650 leading Chinese literati had decisively broken with the orthodoxy entrenched in official life and tipped the balance in favour of a 'search for evidence' as the key to understanding China's past. Like Renaissance Latin philologists, Chinese philologists exposed inconsistencies in contemporary beliefs. They were also prototypes of the modern philologist as moral reformer – radical conservatives who attacked the present in the name of the past. As scholarly iconoclasts they hoped to locate a timeless order in and prior to the classical antiquity of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.).

Until 1600, the ideal that motivated Chinese literati was sagehood. If every literatus was a virtuous exemplar, then society would prosper. Knowledge was equated to action, and political and cultural stability depended on each individual's moral rigour. To buttress such claims, Chinese had by 1200 developed an interactive account of the heavens, earth, and human concerns. Ideally each person was a pivotal factor in a morally just and perfectly rational universe.

By 1750, however, the heirs of this entrenched moral orthodoxy formed a relatively secular academic community, which encouraged (and rewarded with livelihoods) original and rigorous criti-

cal scholarship. In contrast to their predecessors, late imperial literati stressed exacting research, rigorous analysis, and the collection of impartial evidence drawn from ancient artefacts and historical documents. Personal achievement of sagehood was by now an unrealistic aim for the serious classicist.

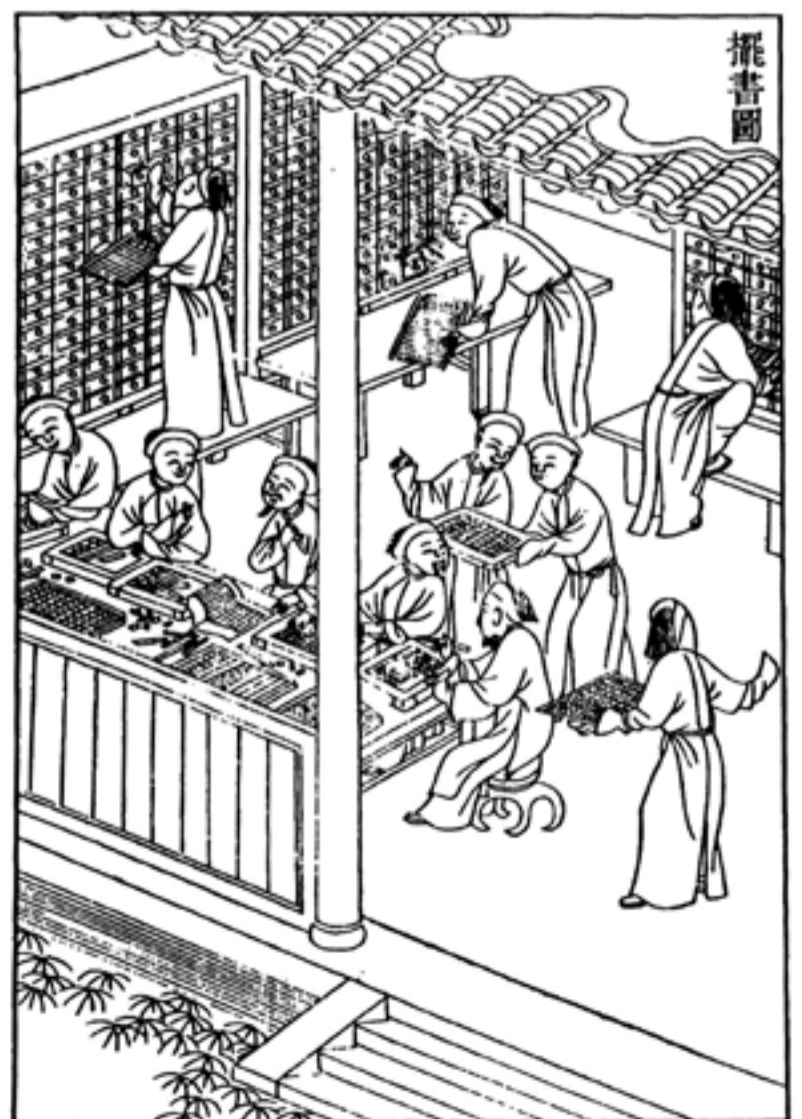
This philological turn represented a new, early modern way to verify all knowledge. The creation and evolution of this new scholarly community led to fresh intellectual impulses that recast the place of the literati scholar from sagely Mandarin to learned researcher. The major figures called what they did 'evidential research' (*kaozheng* 考證, lit., 'the search for evidence'), and for the most part they resided in the wealthy and sophisticated provinces in the Yangzi River delta. There they received, rediscovered and transformed the classical tradition.

Their precise scholarship depended on a vibrant commercial and educational environment that rewarded cutting edge classical studies with honour and prestige. Academic work as collators, editors, researchers, or compilers depended on occupationally defined skills that required thorough mastery of the classical language and a professional expertise in textual research. Practitioners were bound together by common elements in education and

shared goals, which included the training of their successors in scholarly academies.

Classicism and commercial expansion after 1550

Besides academies and patronage, evidential scholars also contributed to a growing network of bibliophiles, printers, and booksellers who served their expanding fields of research. Libraries and printing were pivotal to the emergence of evidential scholarship in the Yangzi delta. Scholars shared a common experience in acquiring philological means to achieve classical ends. This experience touched off differences of opinion and led to reassessments of inherited views. Supported by regional commerce and local trade, early modern communications grew out of the publishing industry in late imperial China. As China's population grew, the reach of the late imperial bureaucracy declined. Many literati wondered whether the classical orthodoxy still represented universal principles at a time when goods and art were financially converted into objects of wealth paid for with imported silver. Late imperial literati were living through a decisive shift away from their traditional ideals of sagehood, morality and frugality. Landed gentry and merchant elites transmuted the classical ideal of the impartial investigation of



Setting movable type in the Qianlong Imperial Printing Office. Qinding Wuying dian juzhen ban chengshi (Beijing, 1776). Elman, Benjamin A. 2005. On their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900. p. 18

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things from moral cultivation into the consumption of objects for emotional health and satisfaction.

Antiquarianism drew its strength from the economic prosperity that pervaded the Yangzi delta. On their travels, merchants and literati searched for ancient works of art, early manuscripts, rare editions and magnificent ceramics. They paid extravagant sums when they found what they wanted. The rise in value of ancient arts and crafts also stimulated imitations, fakes and forgeries of ancient bronzes, jades and ceramics.

The civil service and classical literacy

Classical learning first reached counties and villages in the 15th century, in the form of the empire-wide examination curriculum. Thereafter, the new curriculum, which required writing classical essays on the Four Books and Five Classics, attracted the interest of millions of examination hopefuls. Civil service examinations were regularly held in 140 prefectures, about 1,350 counties, the 17 provincial capitals and the imperial city. Manchu emperors promulgated civil examinations to cope with ruling an empire of extraordinary economic strength undergoing resurgent demographic change.

The civil service recruitment system thus achieved a degree of empire-wide standardisation unprecedented in the

early modern world. These precocious examinations engendered imperial schools down to the county level, several centuries before Europe. Because the classical curriculum was routinised, however, little actual teaching took place in these dynastic schools. Ironically, they became 'testing centres' to prepare for official examinations. Training in both vernacular and classical literacy was left to the private domain.

Late imperial civil service examinations provided the opportunity for elites and the court to adjust the classical curriculum used to select officials. Education was premised on social distinctions between literati, peasants, artisans and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Although a test of educational merit, peasants, petty traders and artisans, who made up 90% of the population, were not among those 100 annual or 25,000 total Qing dynasty (1644-1911) palace graduates. Nor were they a significant part of the 2.5 million who failed at lower levels every two years. Nevertheless, a social by-product was the increasing circulation of lower elites into the government from gentry, military and wealthier merchant backgrounds. After 1400, sons of such merchants were legally permitted to take the civil examinations. In addition, the examination failures created a vast pool of literary talent that flowed easily into ancillary roles as novelists, playwrights, pettifoggers, ritual specialists, lineage agents and philologists.

Occupational prohibitions, which extended from so-called 'mean peoples' in unclean occupations to all Daoist and Buddhist clergy, kept many out of the examination competition, including all women. Unlike contemporary Europe and Japan, where social barriers between nobility and commoners prevented the translation of commercial wealth into elite status, landed

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affluence and commercial wealth in China were intertwined with high educational status. The educational requirement to master non-vernacular classical texts created an educational barrier between those licensed to take examinations and those who were classically illiterate.

Well-organised lineages were able to translate their local social and economic strength into educational success. Lineages formed charitable tax shelters, which enhanced their access to family schools for a classical education. Success on civil examinations in turn led to political and economic power outside the lineage. In this manner, merchants also became known as cultured patrons of scholarship and publishing. The

result was a merging of literati and merchant social strategies and interests. Although the classically educated exhibited a characteristic set of moralistic predispositions favoured in the civil examinations, alternative and dissenting learning proliferated. Natural studies, particularly medical learning, became a legitimate field of private study when literati sought alternatives to official careers

Editions circulated from China to Japan and Korea to Vietnam. A book-oriented atmosphere conducive to the development of scholarship emerged from an environment of reference books, practical manuals and popular compendia of knowledge, which aimed at a different though overlapping audiences of scholars, students, householders, literate artisans and merchants.

For 18th century philologists, descriptive catalogues and annotated bibliographies were essential. Closely linked were the lists of bronze and stone inscriptions that enabled scholars to compare their texts with epigraphic relics. Qian Daxin (1728-1804), the leading evidential scholar of his age, acquired over 300 ancient rubbings of stone inscriptions, spending decades buying, borrowing, and making rubbings himself. His work on the variances in the Dynastic Histories, a project that he completed after 15 years of work, grew out of his epigraphical research. Qian later produced four collections of interpretive notes for his holdings, which by around 1800 totalled more than 2,000 items and also benefited his academy students.

The book trade in China attracted the interest of scholars from Choson Korea, who accompanied tribute missions to Beijing. Korean scholars had visited bookstalls in Beijing since the Kangxi era (1662-1722), looking for books to send back. A process of cultural exchange ensued that linked the 18th century Korean 'Northern School' wave of learning to the Chinese evidential research movement. Several Qing scholars developed a warm relationship with the scholars who accompanied the Korean missions to Beijing.

Korea's bibliographic riches did not match books later recovered from Japan. A Japanese commentary to the Classics was presented to China between 1731 and 1736 by the Tokugawa shogun Yoshimune (r.1716-45). It became very popular among evidential scholars because it was based on lost Chinese sources that had survived in the Ashikaga shogunate's (1392-1573) archives. After 1750, Koreans and Japanese adapted the philological techniques pioneered in China.

By 1800, publishing and book collecting, made possible by the spread of printing in China, helped produce a dramatic change in the conditions of scholarly research and teaching. Cutting edge literati scholars championed empirical criteria for ascertaining knowledge, but their cumulative intellectual rebellion was limited to the exposition via classical philology of a new, early modern theory of reliable knowledge. The unintended consequences of their rebellion added weight to the Chinese intellectual revolution after 1900, when all the Classics were decanonised. ◀

Benjamin A. Elman
Departments of East Asian Studies and History
Princeton University
elman@princeton.edu

under the Mongols, who curtailed the examinations after 1280. Critical scholarship thrived outside the examination system, most notably in private academies and lineage schools of classical learning. Classical literacy, the ability to write elegant essays and poetry, was the crowning achievement for educated men and increasingly for elite women in the 17th and 18th centuries. They became members of a 'writing elite' whose essays and poetry marked them as classically trained. Even if unable to become an official, the educated man could still publish essays, poetry, novels, medical handbooks, and other works. In addition, he could engage in classical research.

By producing too many candidates, the civil examination market also yielded a broader pool of 'failures', who as literate writers redirected their talents into other areas. Philologists emerged from this mix, but at higher levels of classical literacy. Often the classical scholar was a degree-holder waiting for an appointment in a time of excess higher degree-holders.

Print culture and the rise of philology

After 1600, scholarship, book production, and libraries were at the heart of China's cultural fabric. A wider variety of information and knowledge was available than ever before. Classical controversies emboldened revisionist literati-scholars such as Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529) to take their predecessors to task for prioritising knowledge over morality. His opponents, however, shifted to a more rigorous methodology for extending all knowledge, whether moral, textual or worldly, under the banner of precise scholarship.

Literati revived the classical tradition through exacting research, which depended on access to classical sources that were increasingly printed in urban centres for aspiring scholars, examination failures and lower-brow elites anxious to emulate their superiors. In the Yangzi delta outstanding xylographers staffed the printing shops. These elite tiers of print culture extended to the provincial hinterlands, where local families involved in paper production, wood-block carving and ink manufacture helped printers to produce more paper and books than anywhere else in the world between 1600 and 1800.

Chinese printers early on experimented with movable type, but xylography was generally more economical. Wood-blocks were easily stored and, with reasonable care, easily preserved for re-use.

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