

Turbulent Empire

The Magistrate's Tael:
Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in
Eighteenth-Century Ch'ing China
by Madeleine Zelin.
University of California Press,
385 pp., \$35.00

**The Peasant Economy
and Social Change in North China**
by Philip C. C. Huang.
Stanford University Press,
369 pp., \$38.50

From Philosophy to Philology:
Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change
in Late Imperial China
by Benjamin A. Elman.
Council on East Asian Studies,
Harvard University, distributed by
Harvard University Press,
368 pp., \$20.00

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Among the great and enduring questions in the study of Chinese history are these: In an agricultural country of such extraordinary size how was the land farmed and what were the patterns of ownership and tenancy? How was the rural revenue extracted from the farms and apportioned to the different sectors of the imperial bureaucracy? What was the ideology that served as the country's social bond, and what was the relation to the state of the scholars who created that ideology? The scale of these questions and the span of China's history make definitive answers elusive; but the recent appearance of three remarkably fine books by Madeleine Zelin, Philip Huang, and Benjamin Elman certainly takes us a major step forward in our attempts to find explanations.

The fact that all three books concentrate on eighteenth-century China—Zelin's entirely so, Huang's to a significant extent, and Elman's in great measure—testifies to an important change that has taken place in the recent historiography of China. In studies of late imperial China, at least those written in America, there have been several broad shifts in emphasis over the last forty years. The first important field of research was that of nineteenth-century Chinese reactions to the pressures of Western trade, warfare, and technology. By the later 1960s, though there were still important studies of nineteenth-century history, the attention of many scholars moved to the specifics of the 1911 revolution, which brought down the Ch'ing dynasty, and to the era of warlordism and emerging Communist organizations that followed.

By the later 1970s a significant number of able young scholars were turning backward. They were beginning to explore the history of the later Ming dynasty, the reasons for that dynasty's collapse in 1644, and the reactions of the intelligentsia to life under the successor Ch'ing dynasty in the second half of the seventeenth century. Now in the mid-Eighties we have suddenly reached a new stage, one in which we are beginning to get a sense of eighteenth-century China as a whole.

Each of the three new studies under review makes a clearly stated point which is of considerable polemical importance for understanding the shape of Chinese history and which is designed to stop us from giving undue weight to the place of Western imperialism in China's recent history. Madeleine Zelin suggests that the failure in the late eighteenth century to maintain the impetus of earlier financial reforms proves that the economic disasters of the nineteenth century—seen by other historians as crucial precursors of revolution in the twentieth century—were in fact mere sequels to a pattern fixed a century earlier.

Philip Huang, after a careful examination of northern Chinese land tenure in the eighteenth century, concludes that patterns making rural labor a semiproletariat, the development of managerial farms, and the dangerous overreliance on certain specialized cash crops such as cotton long antedated the impact of the world market on China. Hence these cannot be seen just as recent phenomena triggering revolutionary tensions.

Benjamin Elman finds that the eighteenth-century Confucian scholars conducting "evidential research" had themselves begun the systematic unraveling of classical Confucian beliefs that is often attributed to nineteenth-century Chinese scholars reeling under the impact of the military and technological superiority of the West.

One should add that all three of these studies show not only a remarkable grasp of Chinese archival materials and difficult printed sources, but are also deeply grounded in the works of contemporary Japanese scholars on late imperial China. (For those whose Japanese is less than fluent, two new publications offer a large sampling of recent Japanese scholarship in English translation, so that readers can gauge for themselves how useful, varied, meticulous, and often combative current Japanese research can be.)

The magistrate's "tael" of the title of Madeleine Zelin's study refers to the exchange unit of one ounce of silver that was used during the Ch'ing dynasty as the official currency for paying tax assessments. The "magistrate" was the official in charge of county administration, whose duty it was to supervise the collection of local taxes from the landowners in his jurisdiction. There were some fourteen hundred counties in the 1730s, and their magistrates were the crucial link in the chain that drew a percentage of the profits of China's farms to the treasuries of the court in Peking. Most magistrates had passed the highest levels of China's state examinations system, so they may be considered learned men, at least in the intricacies of Confucian textual history, even if they did not necessarily have much financial or administrative experience before taking office.

Professor Zelin concentrates on the period of the emperor Yung-cheng, who ruled China from 1723 to 1735. Like other scholars before her, she sees Yung-cheng as a talented and vigorous imperial reformer, with a passion for administrative detail and efficiency; she has little to say about the emperor himself, but she goes far beyond those scholars in her financial analysis, since she was able to make extensive use of the financial archives of the period that are stored partly in the Palace Museum collection in Taipei and partly in the Number One Historical Archives in Peking. The result is a meticulous and, to the specialist, wholly engrossing study of the interconnections between imperial decision making and the rural revenue collection system.

Far from accepting any clichés about a stagnant China, Zelin writes that we "must learn to look at China in the late-imperial period as a dynamic state, struggling to devise its own formula for rational and efficient bureaucratic rule." She finds evidence for this dynamism in the relationship between emperor Yung-cheng and financial specialists like T'ien Wen-ching, and their decision to work out a system that would impose a standard surcharge on the basic land tax.

Though this may not sound dramatic to us today, Zelin argues persuasively that it had the greatest importance in the 1720s. What was at issue was the creation of a workable tax base for China's separate provinces, so that they would have sums of money available to pay adequate salaries to the magistrates, and to undertake important local work projects for irrigation, land improvement, communications, and education. By retaining

this money in the provinces, peasant proprietors would be spared a myriad special levies and illegal exactions, while local administrators would be freed from the delays and dishonesty of the centralized bureaucracy, and be able to devise imaginative and independent programs which—cumulatively—would strengthen the country as a whole.

The changes were carried through most effectively in the northern and north-western provinces, particularly Shansi, Honan, Chihli, and Shensi; here the landholdings were on a small scale and tax collection and supervision were relatively simple. In the southwest, and on the southeast coast, things were more difficult: the provinces had low tax bases to begin with, and a number of special costs to bear, including the pacification of aboriginal populations and the maintenance of coastal defense. And especially in Kiangnan—comprising the two east Yangtze provinces of Kiangsu and Anhwei, traditionally the richest area of China and one with powerfully entrenched landlord special interests—the emperor and his staff ran into virtually insuperable problems of local resistance.

In *The Magistrate's Tael* Professor Zelin describes the types of resistance and the efforts of the imperial squad of over seventy skilled bureaucrats to push through fair reforms. Her chapter on these matters is a splendid example of sustained investigative scholarship, as she leads the reader into the realms of proxy and overlapping registrations, manipulation of famine rice and timber sales, clerical embezzlement, false flood reports, secretly coded tax record books, juggled receipt stubs, and crooked mortgage documents. (It should be assigned reading for anyone seeking to reform tax systems today.)

In her conclusion to this chapter, which sets the scene for the failure of the tax reforms later in the eighteenth century, Zelin notes that the Ch'ing reformers could never have got their way "without a vastly expanded bureaucracy capable of supplanting the informal networks of local power." This the society could neither tolerate nor afford. By the end of the eighteenth century in China "rational fiscal administration was dead, and informal networks of funding once again became the hallmark of the Chinese bureaucracy," though now the population was over 300 million, and the fragmentation of peasant holdings and the commercialization of the economy were proceeding apace.

Professor Philip Huang's analysis of the peasant economy enlarges on this story and gives it a rather different emphasis. Like Zelin, Huang, a professor at UCLA, sees major changes occurring in eighteenth-century China, most importantly in the development of a growing distance between the rich peasant managerial farms that hired labor, on the one hand, and, on the other, the poor peasants and agricultural workers who sold their labor. Huang sets his changes against the background of a growing population, inheritance that was divisible, changing crop patterns, and selective development of commercial farming, particularly of cotton. He concludes that there is "no question that the small peasant economy of North China underwent dynamic change long before China's contact with the modern world economy."

In several ways Professor Huang's analysis is richer than Professor Zelin's, since he concentrates on a far longer period and goes into immense detail about a number of rural communities in north China—specifically in Hebei province and western Shandong. (Huang prefers the new "pin-yin" romanization. These provinces were originally rendered as Hopeh and Shantung.)

He was able to extract such detailed information by an ingenious use of sources. Starting with the extremely thorough surveys made under the auspices of the Japanese South Manchurian Railway Company between 1935 and 1942 (the "Mantetsu surveys"), Professor Huang compiled data on thirty-three villages which could be classified into seven different categories according to their levels of commercialization. He then received permission to go to several of the same communities in the early 1980s, to study the land-use patterns under the People's Republic, and to interview peasants about the details of past landholding and cropping patterns. In the Ch'ing dynasty archives in Peking he examined the cases presented before the Board of Punishments involving homicides related to land use and tenancy for the region during the eighteenth century (most especially during 1736, 1737, and 1796) as well as the Baodi (Paoti) county punishment office archives as these related to problems of rural tax collection between 1800 and 1911.

Professor Huang's book is extraordinarily rich, and I believe it to be the best sustained study of rural north China yet written. He is interested in a great many theories concerning peasant production and entrepreneurship, and he leads us through the technical literature on these topics with clarity and fairness. He evokes the ecological setting of the region from dry upland to marshy lowland, noting the wells, the irrigation

works, the patterns of settlement, and the strength (or lack of it) of lineages. He analyzes the effectiveness of labor use on managerial farms in the 1930s, and then backtracks to study the development of such farms in the early Ch'ing dynasty, the relationship of "hired worker-serfs" on great estates to freeholders, and the class composition of the landholding class as a whole. He looks at the steady growth of tenancy, the parceling out of holdings, the social relations between small landlord and landowning agricultural workers, the development of sharecropping contracts, and the contrasts in efficiency between managerial farms and small family farms. Central to this analysis is his careful study of human and animal productivity, in an agricultural environment where—as Professor Huang illustrates in detail—one laborer's daily wages were precisely equal to the cost of one day's donkey fodder.

The survival of millions of uneconomic, even below-subsistence, tiny farms into the 1930s leads Professor Huang to pose some of his most searching questions on the interconnections of farming with local handicrafts and partial commercialization, the hiring out of labor in the busiest seasons, at the very time when, of course, it was needed on its own farm, and the downward spiral that resulted from such practices when the farmers also became disastrously linked to a depression-prone world economy with violent price fluctuations in certain cash crops. As Huang summarizes the process in one of his many succinct and effective formulations:

The combined workings of population pressure and social stratification on a stagnant peasant economy thus resulted in a tenacious system that was particularly vicious in human terms. Poor peasants came to be locked into a dual dependence on family farming and hiring out, unable to do one without the other, and compelled to accept below-subsistence incomes from both. Their cheap labor, in turn, propped up a nonproductive landlordism and a stagnant managerial agriculture. Poor peasants, more than anyone else in the rural society, had to labor under the mutually reinforcing pressures of overpopulation and unequal social relations.

A good part of Professor Huang's discussion also concerns the relations of the village and the state; here he sees considerably more isolation and insularity than most recent analysts of rural China have tended to do, and he also notes how the post-Ch'ing state tried to penetrate below the county level, but only succeeded on an extensive scale after the revolution

in 1949.

Did this "success" bring great change? In general welfare, yes, but, as Professor Huang points out, his central finding concerns the "formation over several centuries of a poor-peasant economy and society under the twin pressures of involution and social stratification, without the relief of dynamic economic growth." As a consequence, the shape of collectivization in the People's Republic was more predetermined than we might have realized. The Communist production brigades and teams, like the old, desperate farms, were units "of both production and consumption, which under severe subsistence pressures will tolerate agricultural involution [i.e., retrogression in productivity] to an extent unthinkable for a capitalist enterprise. Like the family farm, the collective does not fire its surplus labor."

One might add, parenthetically, that Professor Huang's work has not lost topicality with the promulgation of new reforms in the People's Republic which are abolishing much of the collective farming system. To the contrary, his work will be essential background reading to understanding what choices the Chinese now really have, and what the greatest dangers confronting them are. As he shows in chapter ten of *The Peasant Economy*, many of the achievements in the People's Republic are the result of new developments made possible by the scale of socialist investment, especially in state-financed irrigation works that allowed for more vegetable growing and intercropping, the drainage and regrading of waterlogged land previously restricted only to sorghum growing, tractors that allowed faster plowing and sowing and thus altered the small work-to-land ratios of earlier times, and state hog-raising policies that boosted fertilizer supplies. The challenge will be to see if newly entrepreneurial farmers can build on these foundations a pattern of prosperity that does not drive new generations of workers back onto the downward slope of subsistence farms and forced sale of their own labor.

In discussing the "underdevelopment" of managerial farming in Ch'ing China, Professor Huang suggests that the wealthier Chinese had generally understood that even the most successful farming could lead to only limited profits, and that the big money was to be made either in commerce and loan operations or especially by passing the state examinations and entering the imperial bureaucracy. Land-owning as a source of ultimate wealth was quite different from managerial farming for one's own sake, and "in this upper tier, a family needed to secure an

office only once in several generations to be able to own land on a scale unthinkable for the average managerial farmer."

That this gives an excessively rosy picture of Ch'ing bureaucratic life is, I think, convincingly shown by Professor Zelin's analysis of the difficulty of getting adequate salaries in the provincial bureaucracy, by the unstable conditions of rural office holding, and by the constant risks of dismissal or fines for actual or alleged incompetence. Huang's view also suggests a continuity in the intellectual world of the bureaucracy and in the Confucian components of the state examination.

In fact, as Professor Benjamin Elman expertly demonstrates in *From Philosophy to Philology*, the eighteenth-century intellectual world of Ch'ing China was a turbulent place in which major shifts were occurring. In particular, Confucian scholars were beginning to use the "exact sciences" of linguistics, philology, and mathematics to analyze their own cultural past, especially the works of their own Confucian inheritance from which they drew the premises of ethical government.

Reading Professor Elman's admirably lucid analysis of eighteenth-century intellectual trends in the light of Zelin's and Huang's studies is instructive, for the three books together give us a fine survey of the ways that land-tenure relationships and imperial attempts to modify the entrenched powers of local gentry accompanied the search for certainty in scholarship. Ch'ing scholars felt betrayed by the immediate past, when the Ming dynasty had collapsed in the face of domestic rebellions and Manchu attacks; they sought reasons for that collapse not just in the military, economic, and political spheres, but also in those of morality and philosophy. They concluded that Confucian scholarship had lapsed into empty speculation on metaphysical issues; and they sought, through the careful examination of early texts, calligraphy, and archaeological remains, to get a sharper grasp of Confucius' original intentions.

In pursuing this research they went back behind the Sung dynasty (AD 960-1279) commentaries and analyses (which had dominated early Ch'ing thought) to the later Han period (AD 25-220) and eventually to the earlier Han (202 BC-AD 9), edging ever nearer to what they thought were true Confucian origins. In doing so, they brought all their skills to bear on evaluating the Confucian canon; as early as the 1690s certain key "Confucian" texts had been proved forgeries, and by the mid-

eighteenth century the body of Confucian wisdom was being treated as history, and history itself was being tightened in definition. "The writing of history is the recording of the facts," as Wang Ming-sheng put it in 1787. "Overall, the goal is simply to ascertain the truth. Besides the facts, what more can one ask for?"

Professor Elman speculates on the effects that Chinese knowledge of Western science and mathematics (derived mainly from the writings of Jesuit missionaries) might have had on this belief that new kinds of certainty were possible in scholarship, and he quotes the Ch'ing historian Ch'ien Ta-hsin's revealing comment that "in ancient times, no one could be a Confucian who did not know mathematics," whereas later generations "usually denigrated those who were good mathematicians as petty technicians." By default this left the field to Westerners, wrote Ch'ien, for in their computations "there will not be the most minute discrepancy." Just as Professor Huang leaves us thinking about Deng Xiaoping's dismantling of China's recent collectivization, so does Professor Elman force us to reflect on the new "seeking truth through facts" that is allegedly at the center of China's new pragmatism and modified Marxism.

Mr. Elman places his eighteenth-century thinkers in a richly evoked setting. In a series of deft and original chapters we are told not only what they thought, but also how and where they thought: about their academies and schooling, their economic backgrounds (many were from merchant stock), their libraries and their diaries and their social conventions. We also learn how books were printed and by whom, and the arguments for use of movable type as opposed to xylography on wood blocks. In a useful corrective to accepted beliefs about printing, Professor Elman points out that in China movable type was the more expensive option—woodblocks could be stored easily, and small runs of a given item printed as needed, whereas with movable type one had to gauge the needed print run accurately and face the high costs of dismantling and reordering the type. But the destruction of so many sets of the woodblocks in the major foreign and civil wars of the mid-nineteenth century was one of the reasons for the decline of the research centers of the literati in Kiangnan and the shift to new centers in the south, such as Changsha and Canton.

Historians of science have long since explained to us how shifts appear in fields of knowledge and how new "paradigms" are slowly formed from a number of apparently disconnected investigations, so that eventually what seemed to be "anomalous" becomes the expected. My guess is that we are now witnessing

something similar in Western studies of eighteenth-century China,² as China's last great period of independent growth and strength is assessed afresh, free from hindsight that ties indigenous developments either to foreign imperialism or to Maoist ideas of the necessity of rural revolution. □