Philology and Its Enemies:

Changing Views of Late Imperial Chinese Classicism

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In the late twentieth century, a new generation of scholars has placed Chinese "Confucianism" (what I prefer to call "classical learning") into fresh interpretive categories called "civil society" and "hermeneutics." However useful these new conceptualizations of Confucianism in China might be, they are also historically simplistic and politically misleading, just as "Oriental despotism" was a poorly constructed category for an earlier generation of Asian scholars who once reduced all Asian politics and Confucian learning, for instance, to the whims of political autocracy.[1]

The application of civil society and hermeneutics as terms to China in the late twentieth century coincided with a great deal of cultural and historical amnesia about the early twentieth-century fall of the Chinese empire in 1911, when Confucianism (only

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[1] See Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953). For a more nuanced analysis, see Prasenjit Duara, "Transnationalism in the Era of Nation-States: China, 1900-1945," *Development and Change* 29, 4 (October 1998): 647-70.

then sometimes actually called *Kongjiao* 孔教, lit., "the teachings of Confucius," by reformers) was more dominant in political and intellectual life than it is today.[2] One must also forget that an earlier generation of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese intellectuals contended that Confucius and classical learning stood in the way of modernity and were not its facilitators.[3]

Interpretive Problems

Depending on their own unspoken scholarly predispositions, non-specialists have translated generalizations about Confucianism into positive claims about Confucianism as the moral software in China's modernization[4] or negative claims about its role in "legitimating patriarchal social relations and authoritarian political habits." "Confucianism was responsible for the subjugation of Chinese women"[5] is one common theme even while studies of elite women in late imperial China increasingly challenge this stereotype.[6] Another is: "Confucianism provided a liberal vision of human agency and miti-

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[2] See Hsiao, Kung Chuan, *A Modern China and a New World: K'ang Yu-wei, Reformer and Utopian, 1858-1927* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).

[3] See Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," *History and Theory*, Special Issue 35 (December 1996). Cf. Dirlik, ed., *What is in a Rim?: Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993). See also Alex Woodside, "Territorial Order and Collective-Identity Tensions in Confucian Asia: China Vietnam, Korea," *Daedelus* 127, 3 (Summer 1998): 191-220. Woodside notes that the old Confucian monarchies in Asia were repackaged in cultural and educational, rather than constitutional or legal, terms.

[4] See Gilbert Rozman, ed., *The Modernization of China* (N.Y.: Free Press, 1981).

[5] Ono Kazuko, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850-1950*, edited by Joshua A. Fogel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989) presents a "victim's narrative" for modern women in China.

[6] See Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). See also Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford Uni-

gated against autocratic government,"[7] even though most Confucians since the early empire willingly served autocratic rulers and most late-twentieth-century so-called Confucians favor neo-authoritarian governments. There is no Confucian-Democratic Party or Liberal-Confucian Party anywhere in East Asia.[8] Or, "Confucianism and market capitalism were compatible since Ming (1368-1644) times" (some would even argue since the Song, 960-1279), although recent economic historians of China have shown the folly of comparing pre-modern Chinese economic development to the transition from feudalism to capitalism in early-modern European history.[9] Or, again, "Confucianism was a sociopolitical ideology of gentry elites that legitimated the status quo in state and society," although it is clear from recent studies that Buddhism and Daoism in China permeated elite and popular culture and religion and that Confucianism was not the common world-view of all or even most pre-modern Chinese peasants, artisans, women, monks, or merchants.[10]

Moreover, we know that Confucianism since the Song dynasties was rife with dissension among elites in the face of state orthodoxy. The Southern Song (1127-1279) process of literati classifying themselves as orthodox should be problematized and analyzed with detachment. The latent tendency toward orthodoxy in modern Confucianism

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versity Press, 1994), and Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[7] Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[8] See my "Where is King Ch'eng? Civil Examinations and Confucian Ideology During the Early Ming, 1368-1415," *T'oung Pao* 79 (1993): 23-68.

[9] R. Bin Wong, "Great Expectations: The Search for Modern Times in Chinese History," *Chûgokushi gaku* 中國史學 (Tokyo) 3 (1993): 7-50.

[10] See David Johnson, Andrew Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

in Asia can now be seen as a continuation of the philosophical process, common to China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, of continually inventing and reinventing classical orthodoxy.[11]

Terminology Issues

It also remains unclear whether the current terms we use in English, such as Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism to describe classical learning in imperial China are entirely appropriate to generalize about scholarly and religious traditions before 1900. After a raucous period of several contending schools of learning in antiquity (circa 500-221 B.C.), orthodox classical learning, associated with Confucius and his disciples since the Qin and Han early empire (circa 200 B.C. - A.D. 200), evolved in three major stages until 1900:[12]

1) Han-Tang scholia for the Five, Nine, or Thirteen Classics,[13] *circa* 200 B.C. - A.D. 900, during the early and middle empires;
2) Song-Ming literati learning, often based on Song dynasty interpretations of the Four Books,[14] *circa* 1000-1700. The differences between the classical

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[11] The pioneering studies of William Theodore de Bary have valorized Neo-Confucianism. See, for example, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Heart-and-Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

[12] See John Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 38-61, and *passim*.

[13] The Five Classics were: 1) *Change Classic*; 2) *Documents Classic*; 3) *Poetry Classic*; 4) *Record of Rituals*; 5) *Spring and Autumn Annals*. A sixth, the *Music Classic*, was lost in antiquity. By tradition, Confucius had compiled these instructional texts based on ancient records. See Edward Shaughnessy, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). During the medieval period, however, other Classics--some of them later included among the Four Books--were also designated as Classics. For discussion, see John Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary*, pp. 38-88.

views of Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and those of Wang Yangming (1472-1528) and their followers, marks this period as one of substantial intellectual ferment; and

3) Qing revival of "Han Learning" classicism and "evidential research," *circa* 1700-1900.[15]

Lionel Jensen has recently blamed Jesuit missionaries for the modern Western focus on Confucius, the man, as the singular voice of Confucianism in China. According to Jensen, the Jesuits misrepresented the more diffuse "Learning of scholars" in seventeenth century China, thereby whitewashing the fact that the term *Ruxue* 儒學, i.e., the "learning of scholars," in ancient and imperial China (and in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam) was rarely defined there by the single neologism of "Confucianism" per se until the late nineteenth century. It is also peculiar that modern Chinese scholars have not objected to the focus on Confucius in the term "Confucianism" because the classical learning of the *Ru* 儒 tradition preceded Confucius and was transmitted by his followers. In the study of Islam, on the other hand, Muslim scholars have long objected to the Western misuse of the term "Muhammadism" to describe Islam. Although the Jesuits did not "manufacture"

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[14] The Four Books were: 1) Analects of Confucius; 2) Mencius; 3) Great Learning; 4) and Doctrine of the Mean. Traditionally, the Great Learning and Doctrine of the Mean were included in the Record of Rites Classic, although it was believed they were compiled by two of Confucius' direct disciples. See Daniel Gardner, "Principle and Pedagogy: Chu Hsi and the Four Books," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44, 1 (June 1984): 57-81.

[15] See my *From Philosophy to Philology: Social and Intellectual Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (2nd edition. Los Angeles: UCLA Asia Institute Monograph Series, 2001).

Confucianism, as Nicholas Standaert shows, they certainly did make Confucius the focus of their translations of the classical canon into Latin.[16]

One major Song dynasty tradition, which later became orthodox empire-wide only in the early fifteenth century,[17] was referred to in Chinese in at least three different ways since the Song dynasties: 1) "Learning of the Way" (*Daoxue* 道學); 2) "Studies of moral principles" (*Lixue* 理學); or 3) "Learning of the mind and heart" (*Xinxue* 心學). "Neo-Confucianism" has become the general term for this tradition in Chinese and English only in the mid-twentieth century, although the Jesuit scholar Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718-93), in his historical memoires of China, used the term *néo- confucéens* for probably the first time.[18]

In addition, the recent challenges that Evelyn Rawski and others have raised against our simplistic notions of sinicization, sinification, and Confucianization among Mongol and Manchu ruling elites in imperial China carry over to the broader domain of the impact of Chinese classical learning among Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese schol-

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[16] Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), chapters 1 and 2. For a critique, see Nicolas Standaert, "The Jesuits Did NOT Manufacture 'Confucianism'," *East Asian Science* (16): 115-32.

[17] James T. C. Liu, "How did a Neo-Confucian school become the state orthodoxy?" *Philosophy East and West* 23, 4 (1973): 483-505. See also my *A Cultural History of Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 1-65.

[18] See Tillman, "A New Direction in Confucian Scholarship: Approaches to Examining the Differences Between Neo-Confucianism and *Daoxue*," *Philosophy East and West* 42, 3 (July 1992): 455-74, and William Theodore de Bary, "The Uses of Neo-Confucianism: A Response to Professor Tillman," *Philosophy East and West* 43, 3 (July 1993): 541-55. See also Tillman, "The Uses of Neo-Confucianism Revisited: A Reply to Professor de Bary," *Philosophy East and West* 44,1 (January 1994): 135-42. Cf. D. E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accomodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), (p. 345n54.

ars outside the Chinese empire. Were they also sinified? Or Confucianized? Or civilized? Were Tokugawa Japan (1600-1857), Chôson Korea (1392-1910), or Le Vietnam (1428-1788) simply "little Chinas," microcosms of late imperial China? Or, rather, wasn't it the case that the impact on non-Han Chinese peoples inside and outside China was part of a complex civilizing process via classical texts and literati doctrines that Mongols, Manchus, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese themselves negotiated and utilized on their own terms?[19]

Moreover, the recent tendency to label Confucianism as a religion (*zongjiao* 宗教), while well-intentioned, has somewhat confused the issue of the differences between Chinese literati and their Buddhist and Taoist priestly counterparts. The previous tendency to label literati thought in imperial China purely as a system of social and ethical philosophy certainly overlooked liturgical practices, such as the public and private expressions of imperial and literati respect for Confucius by performing sacrifices in temples directly honoring the sage and his disciples.[20] Although we should not underestimate the moral faith of Chinese scholars in a sacred canon, it is still going too far to label the teachings of Confucius and his followers in purely religious terms.

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[19] See Rawski, "Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, 4 (November 1997): 829-50, and Ping-ti Ho, "In Defense of Sinification: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, 1 (February 1998): 123-55. See also Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (reprint. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[20] See Thomas Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 32-35.

Imperial sacrifices to Confucius also had religious dimensions.[21] It is thus plausible that we can use "Confucianism" as the appropriate designation for such sacrifices because the latter prioritized the sage himself, and not just the canon, as the fountain of the classical tradition. But this sort of literal "Confucianism" was only part of the literati understanding of the classical canon, which in its most spiritual forms of interpretation stressed the transmission of classical orthodoxy from mind to mind via enlightenment and not through works or faith alone. Although both Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism have been referred to by modern scholars as a civic religion, which unexpectedly reaffirms the Jesuits' position during the early eighteenth century Rites Controversy,[22] premodern literati still demarcated publicly the more secular and areligious aspects of their intellectualized commitments to the teachings of the sages from the more popular Confucian temple rituals and the heterodoxies they associated with Buddhism and Taoism.[23]

Consequently, while we can affirm a transcendental and ritualistic, religious-like concern among Chinese literati, the literati way of intellectual life was not strictly bound by monastic views nor were they members of a religious order like Roman Catholic priests or Muslim clerics, unless they were also Buddhist or Taoist priests, for instance. More recent scholarship suggests that the ever evolving Western concept of religion, which until recently was tied to membership in religious congregations, was not fully un-

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[21] Wilson, "The Ritual Formation of Confucian Orthodoxy and the Descendants of the Sage," *Journal of Asian Studies* 55 (Aug. 1996) 3: 559-584, and "Ritualizing Confucius [Kongzi]: The Family and State Cults in Imperial China," in Thomas A. Wilson, ed., *On Sacred Grounds: Culture, Society, Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius in Imperial China* (Cambridge MA: Institute for East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 2003).

[22] See Judith Berling, "Confucianism," in the Asia Society's *Focus on Asian Studies* 2, 1 (Fall 1982), *Asian Religions*, pp. 5-7. See also C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 20-21.

derstood in China until the late nineteenth century when the term for "teaching" (*jiao* 教) in China was replaced by the term for "religion" (*zongjiao*) for referring to literati learning, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Indeed, not until then did the term "Confucianism" (*Kongjiao*) per se mean for Chinese scholars a religion based on Confucius, although temple sacrifices to Confucius did presage such religious forms of ritual practice. The vague term of "Confucianism" that we use today thus obfuscates the modern distinction between "teachings of the scholars" and the "teachings of Confucius" made explicit in the 1890s.[24] One of the ironies of the anti-Confucian movement during the twentieth century was that it was led by modern Chinese intellectuals from literati backgrounds who rejected Confucianism precisely because it seemed to be a religion like Christianity. University-based scholars such as Hu Shi (1891-1962) preferred the relatively more secular, cosmopolitan, and agnostic tone of literati learning to the religicized version of Confucianism that Kang Youwei represented.[25]

From Philosophy to Philology

The orthodoxy of Song and Ming (1368-1644) times, which was called "Learning of the Way" by natives, was increasingly challenged within China beginning in the sixteenth century by classical scholars such as Wang Yangming under the banner of "Learning of the mind and heart." Scholarly criticism accelerated during the seventeenth and

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[23] See my *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, pp. 346-60.
[24] See Marianne Bastid-Bruguière, "Liang Qichao yu zongjiao wenti" 梁啟超與宗教問題 (Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the religion question), in *Tôhô gakuhô* 東方學報 (Kyoto University) 70 (March 1998): 329-373.
[25] Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism*, pp. 220-64.

eighteenth centuries in China as well as Korea and Japan. A tug of war developed among Qing dynasty (1644-1911) classical scholars over how the Five Classics and Four Books taught by Confucius and his disciples should properly be evaluated. The Classics remained sacred, but they were read and interpreted with new eyes and with new strategies. Due in part to the Jesuit impact, Chinese literati in the seventeenth century began to re-evaluate the classical canon in light of both natural philosophy and new currents in astronomy. They also initiated a return to ancient learning that carried over to Japan and Korea.[26]

In Qing times, a unified academic field of empirically-based classical knowledge emerged among literati-scholars in the lower Yangzi delta provinces, which eventually challenged the orthodox curriculum authorized in Beijing. This philological grid for classical learning, called evidential learning (*kaozheng xue* 考證學), represented a fundamental shift in the common codes of elite knowledge about the past. The textual vocabulary of classical scholars during the eighteenth century in turn reinforced a shift from Song-Ming rationalism, typified by the "Learning of the Way," to a more skeptical and secular classical empiricism. By making precise scholarship, rather than reason, the source of acceptable knowledge, Qing classicists contended that the legitimate reach of ancient ideals should be reevaluated through comparative delineation of the textual sources from which all such knowledge derived.

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[26] See my "Qing Learning and *Kōshōgaku* in Tokugawa Japan," in *Sagacious Monks and Bloodthirsty Warriors: Chinese Views of Japan in the Ming-Qing Period*, edited by JoshuFogel. Norwalk, CT: EastBridge Press, 2002, pp. 158-182.

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The turn to empirically based classical inquiry meant that abstract ideas and a priori rational argumentation gave way as the primary objects of elite discussion to concrete facts, verifiable institutions, ancient natural studies, and historical events. In general, Qing classicists took Song and Ming "Learning of the Way" to be an obstacle to verifiable truth because it seemed to discourage further inquiry along empirical lines. The empirical approach to knowledge they advocated, namely "to search truth from facts," placed proof and verification at the heart of organization and analysis of the classical tradition. Classical commentary by now had yielded to textual criticism and a "search for evidence" to refortify the ancient canon.

A scholarly position stressing that valid knowledge should be corroborated by external facts and impartial observations in turn added impetus to study of the natural world among eighteenth century literati. A full-blown scientific revolution as in Europe did not ensue, but evidential scholars made astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and geography high priorities in their research programs. Animated by a concern to restore native traditions in the precise sciences to their proper place of eminence, after less overt attention during the Ming dynasty until the coming of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century, eviden-

tial scholars successfully incorporated technical aspects of western astronomy and mathematics into the literati framework for classical learning. Qian Daxin (1728-1804), in particular, acknowledged this broadening of literati traditions, which he thought reversed centuries of focus on moral and philosophic problems: "In ancient times, no one could be a literatus (*Ru* 儒) who did not know mathematics. . . Chinese methods [now] lag behind Europe's because *Ru* do not know mathematics."[27]

Habermas Vs. Gadamer in Chinese Studies

What is surprising in the late twentieth century, however, is the startlingly degree to which the defenders of recent currents called "New Confucianism" rely on recent developments in hermeneutics in Germany, principally the work of Martin Heidegger's disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer, while others searching for a public sphere, civil society, or human rights in China rely on the work of the distinguished German sociologist Jurgen Habermas, who himself relied on Western Enlightenment discourse of the eighteenth century.[28]

The positive or negative reading of classical learning and religion in China according to the yardstick of modernization has been popular since Max Weber.[29] Post-modernist scholars have successfully exposed the ahistorical aspects inherent in this overemphasis on the modern "present" as the measure of the pre-modern "past." An ex-

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[27] Qian Daxin 錢大昕, *Qianyan tang wenji* 潛研堂文集(Collected essays of the Hall of Subtle Research) (8 vols. Taibei, Commercial Press, 1968), 3.94-95.

[28] For the case of Tokugawa Japan and a public sphere there "on its own terms," see Mary E. Berry, "Public Life in Authoritarian Japan," *Daedelus* 127, 3 (Summer 1998): 133-65, who tries to "detach the public sphere from the telos of democracy."

[29] Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, translated by Hans Gerth (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

ample of these interpretive dangers is the ongoing debate in global Chinese studies concerning the application of Habermas' notions of a public sphere and civil society by historians to imperial and modern Chinese history and the parallel use of Gadamer's views of philosophical hermeneutics by philosophers and historians in Hong Kong and Taiwan to reinvent New Confucianism in the borderlands outside of the People's Republic of China.

Public Sphere/Civil Society in Late Imperial China

Essentially the public sphere/civil society debate is over how to define the complex relations between the late imperial state, which was represented at different times by the emperor and his court, eunuchs, or officials in the bureaucracy, and gentry society (particularly in the Yangzi delta) from 1600 to 1900. Proponents of a late-Qing dynasty Chinese public sphere argue that the Confucianized gentry-managerial elites in urban centers in the late-Ming had initiated movement toward an autonomous political and economic sphere vis-à-vis the dynasty in power. Opponents contend that the claims for a public sphere in Chinese history overdetermine Habermas' notion of a bourgeois civil society in eighteenth-century Europe, itself based on Enlightenment discourse, as the measuring stick for Chinese gentry society, thereby missing the unique political and social compromises worked out between the imperial dynasty and its elites since the Song dynasty. These long-term compromises successfully reined in any localist movements toward political autonomy during the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.[30]

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[30] Cf. the "Symposium" in *Modern China* 19, 2 (April 1993). See also Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "Boundaries of the Public Sphere in Ming and Qing China," *Daedalus* 127, 3 (Summer 1998): 167-89, where the nested hierarchies of official-bureaucratic engagement, "public weal" affairs, and private-secret parts in society are usefully distinguished.

We should add here that recent research has shown that the complicated relationships among the imperial dynasty, local elites, and village peasants were transformed between 1400 and 1600. As China's population grew from approximately 65 to 150 million in that time, the reach of the imperial bureaucracy declined irrevocably. Because the monetarization of the Ming economy during the "silver age" of 1550-1650 facilitated the commutation of village and town labor tax services into cash levies, the imperial court and its bureaucracy lost control of its land and labor resources well before the 1911 Republican Revolution. Retreat of the dynasty from direct involvement in village affairs magnified the mediating role of the gentry-landlord elite in late Ming and Qing politics and society.[31]

Under the umbrella of the central government, gentry and merchant elites in the Yangzi delta and elsewhere diversified their hold on local power into expanded forms of profiteering based on land rent and commercial enterprises.[32] They also monopolized positions in the imperial bureaucracy by translating their economic and social power into cultural and educational advantages that enabled mainly the sons of gentry, military families, and merchants to pass the empire-wide civil examinations based on the teachings of Confucius and his disciples as interpreted by Song literati. Indeed, civil governance remained a tense bureaucratic arena where the imperial court gamely tried to maintain control of its elites, and elites used the government to enhance their social status and eco-

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[31] See essays in Linda Grove and Christian Daniels, eds., *State and Society in China: Japanese Perspectives on Ming-Qing Social and Economic History* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1984).

[32] For discussion, see my *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 16-19.

nomic assets. Within this arena, the "Learning of the Way" was transmitted as imperial orthodoxy and ideology in homes and dynastic schools from 1400 to 1900.[33]

Any picture of late imperial government and society that presents their interaction as an unrelenting imperial hegemony called “oriental despotism” is thus one-sided. So, too, any portrait of civil society as an autonomous "middle realm" misses the carefully worked out partnership between imperial government and gentry society in politics. Since medieval times, the imperial state and society were maintained by both the dynasty and its evolving elites. Gentry and merchants got what they wanted through the political system: confirmation of their beliefs in the "Learning of the Way"; social status; political power; landed wealth. When legitimated by satisfied elites, the imperial court ruled through an elegant and sophisticated bureaucracy, which was filled with classically literate officials recruited from those very gentry and merchants on terms that their literati scholars prescribed. This remarkable partnership between late imperial dynasties and men of high social standing, often challenged since 1400, was unceremoniously eliminated in 1905, when civil examinations based on classical learning were abrogated.

The conceptual distance between a Western notion of an autonomous "public" space versus a Chinese/classical defense of a "public" (*gong* 公) partnership between elites and the ruling dynasty, makes even more limited claims for a public sphere anachronistic. For example, sociologists and anthropologists, such as Max Weber and Maurice Friedman,[34] hitherto have viewed pre-modern Chinese lineage organizations as particularistic and divisive features of gentry society or as an impediment to an autonomous so-

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[33] See my *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations*, pp. 66-124.

ciety capable of assuming modern political form. But imperial rulers and their officials saw instead the convergence of kinship ties and public interests, which were incorporated through the legalized institutionalization of charitable estates and the legalized status of family division of property through parageniture according to the ideals of partible inheritance.[35] The egalitarian ideals of the classical moral economy were fulfilled in theory through an equitable distribution of wealth and resources via lineages and families throughout society. Where gentry political associations (*dang* 黨) based on non-kinship ties during the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties were defined by the government as a "private/selfish" (*si* 私) threat to society and therefore were banned as illegitimate, social organizations based on descent were promoted as "public," the exact opposite of modern Western nomenclature in Habermas' terms.[36]

The reason the pre-modern imperial dynasty and gentry and merchant families together supported kinship groups as "public" is not difficult to understand. The literati persuasion, conceptualized via classical learning and the "Learning of the Way" as a social, historical, and political form of daily practice organized around ancestor worship, encouraged kinship ties as the cultural basis for moral behavior, which were thought to redound to the dynasty as part of the literati partnership with their rulers. More often than not, political, economic, and cultural resources were focused on the formation and maintenance of lineages for family success in the social, academic, and political worlds. Con-

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[34] See Friedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (N.Y.: Humanities Press, Inc., 1971), pp. 29-31, 88-96, 104-117.
[35] David Wakefield, *Fenjia: Household Division and Inheritance in Qing and Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).
[36] See my "Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies," *Modern China* 15, 4 (1989): 379-418.

sequently we cannot assume, as advocates of the public sphere in Europe often do, that there was an inverse correlation between the power of the state and the development of kinship groups. Chinese lineages before 1900 did not develop in "private" antagonism to the state but rather evolved as a result of the "public" partnership between the state and its elites, who entered the bureaucracy via competitive civil examinations. A state partnership with elite society, not a separate public sphere, was involved.

This historical partnership cannot be addressed by applying the Habermas model for a civil society to China.[37] Efforts to finesse this point by arguing that in China the public sphere included family and lineage interests dilute Habermas' position on public versus family interests and the formation of new modes of public communication, based increasingly on bourgeois notions of privacy in eighteenth-century Europe. In a recent conference volume on Song statecraft, for example, the editors have argued that the "notion of a middle-level 'public space' . . . had emerged in Southern Song, as far as we know for the first time in the history of Chinese social and political discourse."[38] This is what Japanese and Chinese social historians after 1945 called "gentry society" to explain the paradox of a centralized, bureaucratic state and well-entrenched local elite power. Others have called this "literati culture."[39]

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[37] See also Mary Rankin's *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 92-135, and David Strand's *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 167-97. Both works, meticulously documented, remain important scholarly contributions.

[38] See Robert Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer, eds., "Introduction," in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 51-58.

[39] Linda Grove, and Christian Daniels, eds., *State and Society in China: Japanese Perspectives on Ming-Qing Social and Economic History*. Duara's "cultural nexus" represents the first successful effort to transcend the arbitrary division between elite and popu-

For scholars of classical learning in Asia, the public sphere debate reveals the analytic dangers if we cannot avoid simple-minded linkages between Chinese history, literati values, and the development of a civil society in late imperial China. At the very least, the controversy vis-à-vis China should set off alarms for those working on similar problems in Japan, Korea, or Vietnam. If the Song, Ming, or Qing imperial states never legally granted townsmen, merchants, artisanal guilds, Buddhist and Taoist temples, or literati academies their political autonomy, as occurred in feudal Europe through the application of Roman law and its stress on private rights,[40] then inventing a civil society for Qing China, Chôson Korea, Le Vietnam, or Tokugawa Japan tells us more about ourselves than about the East Asian legacy of Confucius and his followers. Hence, a more self-critical starting point is needed to evaluate such claims.

Philosophical Hermeneutics and New Confucianism

Similarly, the recent proclivity for Taiwanese and Hong Kong scholars of Chinese intellectual history and Cheng-Zhu philosophy to cite Habermas's arch-enemy in Germany, Hans-Georg Gadamer, as an "intellectual ally"[41] in their efforts to reaffirm Chinese tradition and philosophical hermeneutics as the key to reestablishing the "Learning of the Way" as the standard of truth is politically and intellectually curious. While some Western and Chinese socio-cultural historians trumpet Habermas to present the liberating role of the public sphere in late imperial China, "borderland" students of Chinese phi-

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lar society, which his predecessors have generally assumed as given. Hence Duara's "religious sphere" is analytically distinct from the notions of an elite civil society that has been read into Song, Ming, Qing, and Republican history.

[40] See Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1974).

[41] On the use of allies in academic discourse, see Bruno Latour, *Science in Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 30-59, 162-73.

losophy increasingly rally around Gadamer's profound cultural conservatism as the means to reinvent China's classical hermeneutics as the basis to determine the post-socialist future of New Confucianism.[42]

Followers of Habermas place China on the road to democratic emancipation from autocratic political habits, an emancipation they then read back into the Ming and Qing dynasties. Those who appeal to Gadamer preach a holistic vision of historical understanding that reasserts the cultural function of Confucianism or New Confucianism today to serve as the correct hermeneutics (lit., the "study of interpretations" as opposed to exegesis or exposition) for ontological questions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. The hermeneutic basis of all social theory, Gadamer contends, reveals the limiting and unrealized cognitive processes that precede and undermine the so-called impartial interpretive methods of the social scientist, historian, or philologist.

Once the scientific authority of modern objectivity is challenged in Heidegger's and Gadamer's terms, then the value-laden and value-generating prejudices of Habermasian modernization theory in Europe, as in China, can be challenged and reduced to simply another form of interpretation. True understanding is possible only when through enrichment and amendment new horizons of meaning are fused to transcend earlier scientistic versions of that truth. As China's "effective history," then, Confucianism or New Confucianism, usually but not always focused on either Confucius or Zhu Xi, becomes the proper and authoritative locus of cultural and historical understanding in China, which is in tension with the modernist vision of emancipation from tradition, that in Habermas's

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[42] Both Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming, and their followers, are elaborated within the Neo-Confucian framework. Often, Confucius and Mencius are referred to in light of Confucianism.

terms dissolves all authoritarian structures. Those New Confucians less impacted by Gadamer, such as Yü Ying-shih at Princeton University, see less problem in reconciling the demands of Confucian tradition and modernity.

Conservative Germans and some "borderland" New Confucians employ the ahistorical and anti-philological agenda of hermeneutics, which treats texts as holistic teleologies of meanings rather than as objects of historical research, to gainsay the corrosive effects of the modernist discourses of science and objectivity and to retreat simultaneously into a pre-modern amnesia about how "texts" and "authors" were historically constructed.[43] Zhu Xi and his followers successfully invented a Southern Song version of such a calculated hermeneutics, which they called the "study of meanings and principles."[44] Zhu's followers in turn constructed a seamless narrative for what would become a "Learning of the Way" orthodoxy. Late imperial classical scholars challenged this seamless narrative and called their efforts to unravel the past the "search for evidence."[45] Gadamer and his Chinese followers thus pose as postmodern cultural critics, but their po-

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[43] See Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 107-97. See also Heidegger's distinction between "calculating" and "meditative" thinking in *Discourse on Thinking*, translated by John Anderson and E. Hans Freund (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 46-47, which becomes his wedge to bemoan the "loss of rootedness" in human life and the threat modern communications poses to the "autochthony" of man.

[44] See the discussion in Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 107-38. Cf. also Heidegger's "Conversation on a Country Path About Thinking," in his *Discourse on Thinking*, pp. 58-90, that invents a dialogue between a scientist, teacher, and scholar on the "noble-mindedness" of waiting for the mystery of existence to be revealed through thinking as commemoration and releasement.

[45] Thomas A. Wilson. *Genealogy of the Way: The Construction and Uses of the Confucian Tradition in late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). For a recent study, see Chin-hsing Huang, *Philosophy, Philology, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

sitions, I suggest, could be more properly called "canonical relativism" because long-standing traditions--German or Confucian--take precedence for them.

For early modern European intellectual history, the studies of earlier discontinuities in discourse, such as that between rationalism and empiricism, reveal how the formation of concepts and their modes of connection and coexistence can change dramatically from one epoch to another.[46] The epistemological vocabulary of educated Europeans during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in turn reinforced this shift among some elites from Christian rationalism to skeptical and secular empiricism. An epistemological position that stressed that valid knowledge must be corroborated by external facts and impartial observations in turn gained further impetus from the study of the natural world and the concomitant emergence of the scientific revolution.[47] In the late-twentieth century we witnessed a decisive, postmodern assault on that confidence in epistemology and knowledge, an assault that builds on German romanticists and their existentialist successors.[48]

An empirical epistemological turn also occurred among elites in seventeenth-century China, which represented the third stage of the scholarly developments in classical learning from antiquity to the late empire. For reasons quite different from the European case, a remarkable turn in Chinese classical discourse occurred from the hermeneutics typified by the philosophy of Zhu Xi to a commitment to empirically based philological inquiry. Abstract ideas and a priori rational argumentation gave way as the primary

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[46] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York, Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 50.
[47] Cf. Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), pp. 11-30.

objects of discussion among classicists to concrete facts, verifiable institutions, and historical events.[49]

Unfortunately, the role of Qing philology, when repackaged as the hermeneutics of New Confucianism, is conveniently elided, leaving "borderland" New Confucians in Taiwan and Hong Kong free from textual controversy,[50] and able to pose as latter-day Zhu Xi's trumpeting a Confucian or Neo-Confucian version of classical philosophy that is both heir to the economic triumphs of market-driven trade and remedy for the political failures of the Chinese revolution. Classical hermeneutics as a tactic of interpretation presupposes a non-philological reading of literati cultural criticism that reduces intellectual debate centering on phonological, etymological, and paleographical studies of the official Canon to a behaviorist-like black-box called ritualism, or metaphysical ontology.[51] Gadamer's stress on the ontological conditions for the possibility of human understanding, which undergirds German and New Confucian hermeneutics, rewrites the history of canonical texts by restoring to them their religious and philosophical conceits and belit-

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[48] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[49] See my "The Unravelling of Neo-Confucianism," *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, New Series 15 (1983): 67-89.

[50] On this, see Mark Elvin, "The Collapse of Scriptural Confucianism," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 41 (1990): 45-76.

[51] See the articles in Richard J. Smith and D. W. Y. Kwok, eds., *Cosmology, Ontology, and Human Efficacy: Essays in Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), pp. 35-58 (On-cho Ng: "Toward an Interpretation of Qing Ontology") and pp. 179-204 (Kai-wing Chow: "Purist Hermeneutics and Ritual Ethics in Mid-Qing Thought"), a volume commemorating the scholarship of Kwang-Ching Liu to which I also contributed (see pp. 59-80: "The Revaluation of Benevolence [*Jen*] in Qing Dynasty Evidential Research").

tling scholars who impeach the philosophical holism in such pretensions to academic and political power.[52]

Is Gadamer's twentieth-century reading of the history of European philosophy and philology appropriate to Chinese texts from the imperial era? Is Gadamer's Heideggarian approach appropriate to the study of the Bible? Greek and Latin literature? Is the hermeneutic way of reading texts and authors really the way European intellectual history developed,[53] i.e., that philology was always a subset of hermeneutics and never broke free to become a critique of hermeneutics? Where does Friedrich Nietzsche fit in, then? Or are our "borderland" New Confucians here captive of Gadamer's rhetorical flourishes about hermeneutics in German thought, which are poorly grounded in the historical evolution of linguistics, philology, and cultural criticism since the middle ages.[54] If Gadamer's, like Heidegger's, is a twentieth-century reading of truth in an age of relativism, then it is unclear how this sort of perspective, a sort of "canonical relativism," helps us understand better what truth in the present there is in the Confucian Classics and Four Books (other than suggesting that the Classics give us "classical" truths). How indeed does one rein-

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[52] Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, pp. 69-104, and 151-66, on Husserl. On the rise of humanistic scholarship in Europe, see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[53] See Anthony Grafton's *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), for an historical account of the vicissitudes in western scholarship that both Heidegger and Gadamer conveniently elide (and not simply give a different interpretation for) in their self-serving accounts of western philosophical hermeneutics. Applying a Nietzschean perspective (Nietzsche after all was a philologist), one could describe the work of Gadamer as post-modern historical amnesia. See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1974), and "Nietzsche: Notes for 'We Philologists' [*Wir Philologen*], translated by William Arrowsmith, *Arion* 1, 2 (1974): 279-380.

[54] Cf. Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, pp. 5-41.

vent New Confucianism in Hong Kong and Taiwan without any sacred classical texts? By whose authority are the Classics and their commentaries revived as cultural icons?

Hans-Georg Gadamer's conservative views and his use of his mentor, Martin Heidegger, to articulate the authentic, existential encounter between personal prejudice and wider societal horizons of meaning has been formulated in the context of public debates with Jurgen Habermas in which he stands opposed to what he considers the anarchistic utopian vision of those who would undo the necessary authority of the past needed to maintain public order in the present. It is revealing, therefore, that when scholars of Chinese history and thought appropriate Habermas or Gadamer into their positions on late imperial civil society or New Confucian philosophical hermeneutics, they seem oblivious to the Habermas-Gadamer debate and simply coopt that part of the debate that allies with and fits in with their predetermined scholarly agenda. Indeed, those who cite Gadamer usually make no mention of Habermas, and certainly no one involved in the brouhaha surrounding the public sphere in China has even mentioned Gadamer.

Such elective affinities in contemporary sinology reveal instead the overdetermined process of adapting Western ideas to do battle in the arena of classical thought and Chinese history. We would do well to be wary of both sides in this dilemma until each can articulate the Habermas versus Gadamer debate in its full twentieth-century context and demonstrate why the choice in China's modern historiography should be between imagining a liberal Chinese public sphere or inventing conservative New Confucian philosophical hermeneutics. Without that clarification, the proponents of Habermas versus those who champion Gadamer unwittingly present their own autobiographies in Chinese/classical dress, namely that they are either in favor of a sinified version of Western

liberal democracy, or steeped in profound cultural and political conservatism drawn in part from German romanticism. Such personal views are perhaps admirable in Hong Kong and Taiwan where New Confucians are free to protect and preserve their revered traditions of learning. But their academic tactics are also useful to tell us about late-twentieth century Confucian currents. When we want to understand the classical/Chinese past and its uses in Asia in general, however, we should be able to see through and beyond such ideological distortions, whether modernist or postmodernist in disguise.

In his account of the historical significance of the 1793 Macartney mission, James Hevia, for example, contends that Lord Macartney's discourse of "sovereign equality" in the late eighteenth century was derived from an emerging European view of equal nations and the concomitant natural interchange of commodities between those states that would enhance the well-being of all their subjects. Hevia calls this mode of cultural production "speaking public sphere ideas and values" to the Qing empire. A member of the English intellectual aristocracy, Macartney represents for Hevia "public sphere culture" in England that stressed the British empire's exceptional values of tolerance and liberty, as well as the enlightened use of reason in separating empty diplomatic ceremony from the realpolitic of the business of diplomacy. The Embassy's sense of its own superiority over the Manchu imperium, complete with Macartney's "naturalist gaze" on all things Chinese, contributed to its inability to understand the diplomatic terms of the Qing court. Britain was ranked below Burma (soon to become a British colony) in the 1793 diplomatic

ceremonies for the Qianlong emperor's eightieth birthday at the imperial summer retreat.[55]

Hevia notes the controversies surrounding the application of Jurgen Habermas' public sphere to European history. Moreover, he does not follow others in misapplying the concept to Qing China. If Macartney indeed represented a European public sphere, we should also note that he directly served the British ruler as its plenipotentiary envoy to China and was a member of the English aristocracy. Indeed, Macartney falsely presented himself to the Qing court as a cousin of King George III. Macartney's location in the social space of eighteenth-century English political culture, between a royal family and a still aristocratic elite, suggests that Habermas' notion of an autonomous European-style public sphere in England capable of criticizing the British state specifically via a newly emergent modern English public opinion is not an altogether satisfactory way of dealing with Macartney and the British embassy vis-à-vis Qing China.[56]

Indeed, it may be more likely that our views of civil society and philosophical hermeneutics are themselves recent genealogical derivatives of an enterprise in modern cultural production peculiar specifically to the post-WWII intellectual culture of "West" Germany (that drew on eighteenth century Enlightenment discourse), which was then applied teleologically to both pre-modern European and Chinese history. The Habermas-Gadamer debate over the progressive public sphere versus conservative cultural hermeneutics represents one of the centerpieces of contemporary Germany's own historical raison d' être, that is, the traumatic transition in post-war West and East Germany from

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[55] James L. Hevia, *Cherishing Men From Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).
[56] *Ibid*., p. 63.

Prussian, Nazi, and Stalinist despotism to liberal democracy. Similarly, when translated into Chinese history, the debate is emblematic of the traumas of Confucianism in its retreat from China proper to its non-socialist borderlands after 1949.

Things do not get much better in other recent studies. The formerly "left-wing" Taizhou literatus Li Zhi (1527-1602) from the late Ming now appears as a Bourdieu-like anti-academic academic in Pierre Bourdieu's own *Homo Academicus*.[57] Indeed, to turn Orientalist discourse inside out a bit, Bourdieu's influential efforts to transvaluate Emile Durkheim's sociological vision of healthy social, political, and cultural reproduction via state-sponsored public education into a dark, hegemonic vision of symbolic violence may require a 1960s Maoist prism to unravel French refractions of the Chinese Revolution within the European revolutionary tradition.[58]

Mao's violent role in the mid-twentieth century demise of classical learning in China, which influenced Korean and Vietnamese revolutionaries, also reads as a cautionary tale about the uses of Confucianism in modern Asian history. Early twentieth-century efforts to negate Confucianism in the name of national progress and modern science followed the same simplistic intellectual logic that late twentieth-century appeals to Neo-Confucianism as the voice of that progress through civil society have resorted to.[59] Neither is an accurate assessment of the Chinese classical legacy.

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[57] See Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, translated by Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

[58] See, for instance, Roland Depierre, "Maoism in Recent French Educational Thought and Practice," in Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid, eds., *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1987), pp. 199-224.

[59] See Wang Hui, "The Fate of 'Mr. Science' in China: The Concept of Science and Its Application in Modern Chinese Thought," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 3, 1 (spring 1995): 14-29.