

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War.* By Betty Peh-T'i Wei. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006. Pp. xvii + 392. \$59.50.

Betty Peh-T'i Wei's new book explores the life, times, and works of Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), a distinguished scholar-official known in the mid-Qing era prior to the Opium War for his classical learning 經學 and scholarly patronage. His support of Han Learning 漢學 and evidential research 考證學, for example, helped promote the last great classical turn in Confucian scholarship 儒學 before Western incursions challenged traditional institutions and values after the Opium War. Betty Wei currently holds honorary appointments at the Institute of Qing History 清史研究所 at Renmin University of China 中國人民大學, Beijing, and the Centre of Asian Studies and the Department of History at The University of Hong Kong. She has carried out research at many libraries, archives, and on many continents.

In this new study, Wei contextualizes Ruan Yuan's contributions to the intellectual history 學術思想史 of the "Qian-Jia era" 乾嘉學派 (1780–1820) in light of the many public offices he held for over fifty years before retiring in 1838: from provincial education official and governor in Zhejiang and governor-general in Guangzhou and Kunming to imperial court official in Beijing. Wei's vigilant chronological delineation of Ruan's five decades in the Qing bureaucracy thus presents us with a timely account of a high Qing official that nicely balances and puts into proper perspective the earlier portrait of Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771) as a Neo-Confucian 新儒學 traditionalist in provincial office, particularly while in Yunnan in the mid-eighteenth century, which William T. Rowe prepared in his very valuable book entitled *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

We see in Ruan Yuan a very different sort of "élite consciousness" from Chen Hongmou, however, and thus Wei's book allows us to understand that there was no one character model for the Qing official, however much Chen represented the voice of the conventional Neo-Confucian 道學程朱 public advocate while in office. More scholarly and better trained classically than Chen Hongmou, Ruan spoke for a new, cutting edge generation of officials who came to maturity in the late Qianlong era and who were less convinced that the state orthodoxy 宋學正統 needed to be draconian or exclusive. Both Ruan and Chen became officials under the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor, but at decisively different times in that long reign (1736–1795), Chen toward the beginning and middle, and Ruan toward the end of the reign.

Ruan's contemporaries and recent modern scholars have long recognized his importance as a classical scholar 經學家 and as patron of learning through his official staffs 幕友 of secretaries and advisors. While serving as director of education 學政 from 1793 to

1795 in Shandong (Bi Yuan 畢沅 was then governor), for instance, Ruan Yuan began a pattern of aiding, recommending, and promoting men of learning, which was to continue throughout his official career. Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), a Yangzhou relative and distinguished scholar in his own right, went to Shandong to serve on Ruan's staff and later accompanied Ruan to Zhejiang. Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753–1818) was appointed circuit intendant in Shandong when Ruan was serving there and had, as a result, frequent contact with Ruan's secretarial staff. These included Wu Yi 武億 (1745–1799) and Gui Fu 桂馥 (1736–1805), the latter having served earlier as copyist for the Shandong bibliophile Zhou Yongnian 周永年 (1730–1791) before coming to Ruan's staff.

But to date we have not had a careful study that takes a close look at Ruan's long and distinguished career as a Qing dynasty imperial official who served in provincial and capital posts of major importance. Wei's is the first full-length account of Ruan Yuan in English, and the only one in any language that successfully brings together all aspects of his life in the political, social, and intellectual context of his time.

Wei's detailed account follows Ruan Yuan from his childhood in Yangzhou 揚州, the major entrepot for salt merchants in late imperial China. In her succeeding chapters, Wei describes the expansion of Ruan's intellectual horizons and his political network in Beijing working directly under several emperors beginning with Qianlong. He was quite precocious from the beginning. In 1788, for example, Ruan Yuan published his first work entitled *Kaogong ji chezhi tujie* 考工記車制圖解 (Explications using diagrams of the design of wheeled carriages in the "Record of Technology"), in which he reconstructed the ancient dimensions of vehicles. Ruan improved on Dai Zhen's 戴震 (1724–1777) earlier research on this problem and boasted that now anyone could build a replica of an ancient carriage if they followed his guidelines. Archaeological research during Ruan's time, known then as "the study of antiquities" 古學, was taking on a momentum of its own as an exact field of classical scholarship.

It is thus timely to have such a careful, chronological and biographical 年譜 account of a major Qing scholar statesman whose name is inscribed in all the important archives of Qing history and on the major collections and collations 校勘記 of the Thirteen Chinese Classics 十三經注疏 in the early nineteenth century. Ruan Yuan's extensive collation of the Classics relied in large part on remnants of the Classics engraved on stone during the Han 漢, Tang 唐, and Song 宋 dynasties. In two pioneering essays on the history of calligraphy in China written in 1823, Ruan Yuan maintained that the inscriptions on stone stelae and bricks, not the styles employed by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 and his son, typified the styles of the post-Han era. Ruan dismissed the two Wangs' *tie* 帖 calligraphy because he believed their calligraphy styles had been falsified in the process of constant copying and forging. Ruan Yuan in effect was making use of archaeological pieces as evidence for the historical development of calligraphy in China and as proof that the classical tradition transmitted since the Tang dynasty had been misguided.

The wide range of his service, his broad sponsorship of classical scholarship, and his own considerable research publications, which culminated with the publication of the *Qing Exegesis of the Classics* (*Huang-Qing jingjie* 皇清經解) in Guangzhou in 1827 make Ruan a particularly representative figure during the "High Qing" age of evidential research, when the early stages of the opium trade were beginning to subvert the imperial political system.

Zhou Yongnian, the famous Shandong bibliophile, had contended that scholars should contribute to a single comprehensive collection of classical works in order to preserve Confucius' tradition intact. Such a collection would serve as source materials for students and would be the most effective way to counter the large Daoist 道藏 and Buddhist 佛藏 temple collections. Ruan Yuan's *Huang-Qing jingjie* project was inspired in part by Zhou's proposal.

The book also details Ruan's long service in the provinces, particularly when he was based in Hangzhou 杭州 and Guangzhou 廣州. While there, he handled some of the thorniest issues of the day in security and control, such as piracy in Zhejiang province and the opium trade in Guangdong. Wei's account reproduces—but not totally uncritically—the high praise that Ruan received during his last years as a senior statesman in the capital 經師, before living out his last days in retirement in his native Yangzhou. Wei notes how Ruan was praised in a gilded and corrupt “High Qing” age as an honest official and exemplary man whose depth of classical learning informed his political actions.

For this biography, Wei has utilized numerous new materials after visiting a dozen cities and as many libraries and archives on three continents. During the time she worked on this volume, she tracked down hundreds of sources and also personally talked with Ruan Yuan's descendants in Yangzhou. Such intimacy with Yangzhou history, and Wei's familiarity with the written sources has allowed her to balance her account by relying on both written accounts of Ruan Yuan and oral lore about his family. Thus Wei's book builds on and goes beyond earlier published works and archival sources. Her account adds many new details to our understanding of the full dimensions Ruan's political and intellectual career. As one of the most important figures during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we see through Ruan's “life and times” a dynastic era in transition from a late empire 晚期帝國 to the early modern world 近世時代.

Specialists in late imperial Chinese history in particular will find the many sources and rich information in this volume of great value. Wei presents such a solidly nuanced biography of Ruan Yuan that her account is a must read for specialists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But the book's comprehensiveness on Ruan Yuan's political career also makes it an important addition to modern Chinese history. Wei's meticulous use of numerous archives enables her to present the broader history of the period and define the multiple intellectual agendas of the early nineteenth century. Moreover, Hong Kong University Press has produced this book with numerous maps, tables, appendices, bibliographies, and illustrations, thus making this important research accessible to the non-specialist and members of the public who want a taste of what the life of a late imperial Chinese official was like in the Celestial Bureaucracy 天朝 before the Opium War.

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