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

Antiquarians drew its strength from the state-sponsored cultural rituals embedded in 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 standardization 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 dynamic schools. Ironically, they became “teaching 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, artisans and merchants in descending order of rank and prestige. Although a test of educational merit, peasants, petty traders and artisans, who made up 60% 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 2.3 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 back- grounds. After 1400, sons of such mer- chants 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 people’ in unclean occupations to all Buddhist and Buddhist clergy, kept many out of the examination competition, includ- ing all women. Unlike contemporary Europe and Japan, where social barriers between nobility and commoners prevented the translation of commer- cial wealth into elite status, landed 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 clas- sically illiterate.

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

Under the Mongols, who curtailed the examinations after 1280. Critical scholar- ship thrived outside the examination system, most notably in private academies and lineage schools of classical learning. Classical literary, the ability to write ele- gant essays and poetry, was the crowning achievement for educated men increasingly for elite women in the 17th and 18th centuries. They became mem- bers 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, although he could engage in classical research.

By producing too many candidates, the civil examination market also yielded a broader pool of ‘failures’, who as litera- te 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 appoint- ment in a time of excess higher degree- holders.

Print culture and the rise of philology

After 1600, scholarship, book produc- tion, and libraries were at the heart of China’s cultural fabric. A wider vari- ety of information and knowledge was available than ever before. Classical con- troversies engendered revisionist liter- ature-scholars such as Wang Yangming. Wang and future publishers and scribes 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 ban- ner of precise scholarship.

Literati revised the classical tradi- tion through exacting research, which depended on access to classical sources that were increasingly printed in urban centres, now available in wooden type and new techniques for printing. The 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 rea- sonable care, easily preserved for re-use. Editions circulated from China to Japan and Korea to Vietnam. A book-oriented society, the development of scholarship emerged from an environment of reference books, practi- cal manuals and popular compendia of knowledge, which aimed at a different though overlapping audiences of schol- ars, students, householder, 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 200 ancient rubbings of stone inscriptions, spending decades buying, borrowing, and making rubbings himself. His work on the variations in the Dianish Hist- ories, a project that he completed after 15 years of work, grew out of his epigraphi- cal research. Qian later produced four criminal cases, which enhanced his holdings, which by around 1800 totalled more than 2,000 items and also benefi- ced his academy students.

The book trade in China attracted the interest of scholars from Choson Korea, who accompanied tribute mis- sions to Beijing. Korean scholars had visited bookstalls in Beijing since the Kangxi era (1662-1722), looking for books to send back. A process of cul- tural exchange ensued that linked the 18th century Korean ‘Northern School’ wave of learning to the Chinese eviden- tial 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 Class- ics was presented to China between 1711 and 1736 by the Tokugawa sho- gun Yoshihime (1717-45). It became very popular among evidential scholars because it was based on lost Chinese sources that had survived in the Ashik- aga shogunate’s (1392-1573) archives. After 1750, Koreans and Japanese adapted the philological techniques pioneered in China.

By 1800, publishing and book collect- ing, made possible by the spread of printing in China, helped produce a dra- matic change in the conditions of schol- arly research and teaching. Cutting edge literati scholars championed empirical criteria for ascertaining knowledge, but their cumulative intellectual rebellion was limited to the exposition via clas- sical philology used by all the Clas- sics were decanonized.

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