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Early Modern or Late Imperial Philology? The Crisis of Classical Learning in Eighteenth Century China

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Abstract The discourses of classical scholars during the eighteenth century reinforced a shift from Song-Ming rationalism to a more skeptical and secular classical empiricism. By making precise scholarship 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. This turn to empirically based classical inquiry meant that abstract ideas and 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 regarded Song and Ming “Learning of the Way” as an obstacle to verifiable truth because it discouraged further inquiry along empirical lines. The empirical approach to knowledge they advocated placed proof and verification at the heart of analysis of the classical tradition. During this time, scholars and critics also applied historical analysis to the official Classics. Classical commentary yielded to textual criticism and a “search for evidence” to refortify the ancient canon. Representing a late imperial movement in Confucian letters, Qing classicists still sought to restore the classical vision. The early modern power of their philology, however, yielded the forces of decanonization and delegitimation as modernist trends, which went beyond the intellectual limits they had imposed on their own writings.

Keywords Chinese classical learning, crisis, modern, late imperial, philology, the Ming dynasty, the Qing dynasty

Received September 30, 2010

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Classical Studies in Imperial China

After the formation of imperially sanctioned *Jinwen jingxue* 今文经学 (New Text classicism) during the Former Han dynasty (202BCE–8CE), and admixtures of *Guwen xue* 古文学 (Old Text philology) during the Later Han (25–220), political, social, and cultural discourses in succeeding dynasties usually were expressed by elites through the archaic language of the Classics or Dynastic Histories. Idealistic scholar-statesmen, cynical political opportunists, and even autocratic rulers were forced to articulate their political views through the controlled medium of dynastic ritual, classical sanctions, and historical precedents such as the *Rituals of Zhou*.

The millennial connection between the Five Classics (*Change, History, Poetry, Rituals, Annals*) of antiquity and pre-modern Chinese political discourse, whether reactionary, moderate, or radical, suggests the power these texts had in channeling political behavior and expression in imperial China. Because the cultural legitimacy of the imperium in China was articulated through classical political discourse, political reformism and classical iconoclasm often went hand in hand. The “New Text” versus “Old Text” forms of writing the Classics in ancient times, for example, became embroiled in classical cum political debates in which philology, especially *wenzixue* 文字学 (paleography), was necessary both to legitimate imperial policy classically or to gainsay it by charging certain classical texts were forgeries.

A set of abstruse texts written in ancient forms of classical Chinese, the Five Classics preserved the orthodox teachings, natural philosophy, and political institutions of the sage-kings. Generation after generation, century after century, the Classics and Histories were the core curriculum for all those who would participate actively in the political arena. Replaced in relative importance by the more readable Four Books after the Song dynasties (960–1279), the Classics nonetheless remained keys to advancement, fame, and power in the political arena of late imperial China. The past had to be studied and cherished if the ideals of the sage-kings were to be realized. Students gained a rich fund of human experience from the Classics. There they found descriptions of mistakes that should be avoided and successes that should be emulated. The Classics contained paradigms for social order and had an absolute claim to transhistorical truth.

Manipulation of the machinery established for political control was justified through the classical ideals upon which the imperial dynasty was based. Classical erudition provided officials, scholars, and students in imperial China with a set of general assumptions about good and evil in government and society. If the ideals of the sage-kings were to be realized, the past had to be studied and cherished.

The *raison d'être* of public institutions and explanations of natural phenomena were enshrined in the Classics. The civil examinations instituted in medieval times tested them for millions of people. Accordingly, the centrality of classical studies for political discourse in imperial China was a prerequisite for the important role of philological studies in literati learning.

Because of the diversity of Chinese ancient scripts, paleography in imperial China was a key philological tool to unravel the Classics, which predated by centuries anything comparable in medieval or Renaissance Europe. For example, the paleographical dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (Analysis of characters as an explanation of writing), compiled by Xu Shen 许慎 (58–147) during the Later Han dynasty (25–220), contained 9,373 different characters arranged according to 530 *bushou* 部首 (radicals), a framework that despite modification remained the basic organization in most premodern classical dictionaries.¹ Dom Bernard de Montfaucon's (1655–1741) pioneering *Paleographica graeca*, published in 1708, which looked closely at the writing in Greek manuscripts and invented the word “paleography,” was the first work in Europe to understand that the history of writing was an important key to classifying manuscripts systematically. Later Scipione Maffei (1675–1755) realized that the diversity of Latin scripts in the early Middle Ages was due to the existence in antiquity of certain basic written types, variations of which were continued independently in Europe after the breakup of the Roman Empire. Classical scholars in imperial China had been debating such textual issues since the first century BCE.²

To control the interpretation of the Classics in imperial China was to control the articulation and justification of dynastic power. Literati scholars and officials were indispensable partners of the imperial court. Setting a precedent that lasted from 1313 until 1905, Mongol rulers during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) were prevailed upon by their literati advisors to install the interpretations of the great Song philosophers Cheng Yi 程颐 (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) as the orthodox “Cheng-Zhu” 程朱 guidelines for the civil examination system. Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) emperors followed suit, similarly persuaded by their advisors that the Cheng-Zhu school of *Daoxue* 道学 (Learning of the Way, i.e., “Neo-Confucianism”) provided the most acceptable justification for their rule. In effect, the Cheng-Zhu persuasion had captured the

¹ Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, Second edition (Los Angeles: UCLA Asia Institute Monograph Series, 2001), Chapter 6.

² Reynolds, L. D. and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 167–73.

“voice of imperial politics” since the early Ming state.³

Song Confucians had been concerned with building symbolic structures of meaning in which all human experience would be related. This approach was perfectly respectable and gave relatively little importance to philology. *Daoxue* symbols of correspondence and political allegories, like their Han dynasty predecessors, did not require, and thus did not encourage, the development of critical thought. The *tu* 图 (charts) of such symbolic correspondences, called *Hetu Luoshu* 河图洛书 (cosmograms), had to be questioned before the historical foundations of the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy could be reevaluated.

The Cheng-Zhu philosophical persuasion was increasingly challenged, however, beginning in the sixteenth century. Criticism accelerated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A tug of war developed among scholars and officials over how the Classics and Four Books should properly be evaluated. The locus for the legitimation of political power remained the Classics, but the textual provenance of parts of the Canon was called into question. The Classics were still inviolate, but they were read and interpreted with new eyes and with new strategies. In part due to the Jesuit impact, literati in the seventeenth century began to reevaluate the classical canon in light of both natural philosophy and astronomy.

The Intellectual and Social Context in Eighteenth Century China

During the seventeenth century a unified academic field of empirically-based classical knowledge emerged among Qing literati-scholars in the Yangtze delta provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui and eventually informed the orthodox curriculum authorized in Beijing. This philological grid for classical learning 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 moral philosophy of Zhu Xi, 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.

This turn to empirically based classical inquiry meant that abstract ideas and a

³ For discussion, see James T. C. Liu, “How did a Neo-Confucian School Become the State Orthodoxy?” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1973), 483–505; Conrad Schirokauer, “Neo-Confucians under Attack: The Condemnation of *Wei-hsueh*,” in *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China*. ed. John Haeger (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), 163–198.

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 *shishi qiushi* 实事求是 (to search truth from facts), placed proof and verification at the heart of organization and analysis of the classical tradition. During this time, scholars and critics also began to apply historical analysis to the official Classics. Classical commentary by now had yielded to textual criticism and a *kaozheng* 考证 (search for evidence) to refortify the ancient canon.⁴

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,⁵ but *kaozheng* 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,⁶ evidential scholars such as Dai Zhen 戴震 (1723–77), Qian Daxin 钱大昕 (1728–1804), and Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), successfully incorporated technical aspects of Western astronomy and mathematics into the literati framework for classical learning. Qian, 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 *ru* 儒 (literatus) who did not know mathematics. Chinese methods [now] lag behind Europe’s because *ru* do not know mathematics.”⁷

Qing scholars were also determined to pierce the thick veil of Song and Ming metaphysical and cosmological systems of thought known popularly as “Studies of the Way.” During the early Qing, when Cheng-Zhu learning revived, scholars such as Yan Ruoju 阎若璩 (1636–1704) dramatically demonstrated that the Old Text chapters of *Documents Classic* were a later forgery. Although Yan’s

⁴ See John Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), *passim*.

⁵ See Nathan Sivin, “Why the Scientific Revolution did not take place in China—or did not it?” reprinted in *Science in Ancient China: Researches and Reflections*, ed. Nathan Sivin (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), VII, 45–66.

⁶ Willard Peterson, “Calendar Reform Prior to the Arrival of Missionaries at the Ming Court,” *Ming Studies*, no. 21 (1986): 45–61.

⁷ 自古未有不知数而为儒者。中法之绌于欧罗巴也，由于儒者之不知数也。Qian Daxin, *Qianyan tang wenji* [Collected essays of the Hall of Subtle Research], 8 vols (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), vol. 3, 94–5.

discovery was passed around only in manuscript form until 1745, it helped to gainsay certain *Daoxue* doctrines concerning the “human mind and the mind of the Way” that had been based on one of the Old Text chapters.⁸ Without great fanfare, Hu Wei 胡渭 (1633–1714), Yan’s colleague, exposed the heterodox origins of Song cosmograms known as the *Luoshu* 洛书 (Luo writing) and *Hetu* 河图 (He map). Their findings later were corroborated in the mid-eighteenth century by the Suzhou scholar Hui Dong 惠栋 (1697–1758), whose followers revived ancient *Hanxue* 汉学 (Han Learning) and criticized Cheng-Zhu Song Learning more forcefully than Yan Ruoju or Hu Wei.

Language became an object of investigation in the Qianlong (1736–95) and Jiaqing (1796–1820) reigns. Dai Zhen, from Anhui, described such investigation as follows: “The Classics provide the route to the Way. What illuminate the Way are the words [of the Classics]. How words are formed can be grasped only through [a knowledge of] philology and paleography. From [the study of] primary and derived characters we can master the language. Through language, we can penetrate the mind and will of the ancient sages and worthies.”⁹ The distinguished classicist and historian Wang Mingsheng 王鸣盛 (1722–98), from Jiading, echoed Dai’s words: “The Classics are used to understand the Way. But those who seek the Way should not cling vacuously to meanings and principles in order to find it. If only they correct primary and derived characters, discern their pronunciation, read the explanations and glosses, and master the commentaries and notes, the meanings and principles will appear on their own, and the Way within them.”¹⁰

Their research program was taken literally by thousands of literati trained in *kaozheng* methods during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this way, students of evidential research were determined to pierce what they considered the thick veil of Song and Ming metaphysical and cosmological systems of thought, known generally as *Daoxue*. They hoped to recapture the pristine meaning formulated by the sage-kings of antiquity in the ancient Classics. By revisiting antiquity Qing classicists in effect called into question the dominant classical tradition, which Manchu rulers had enshrined as the norm in imperial examinations and official ideology.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the prestige of the Classics, though

⁸ See Benjamin Elman, “Philosophy (*I-li*) versus Philology (*K’ao-cheng*): The *Jen-hsin Tao-hsin* Debate,” *T’oung Pao*, vol. 59, no. 4–5 (1983), 175–222.

⁹ 经之至者道也，所以明道者其词也，所以成词者未有能外小学文字者也。由文字以通乎语言，由语言以通乎古圣贤之心志。Dai Zhen, *Dai Zhen wenji* [Dai Zhen’s essays] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 146.

¹⁰ 经以明道，而求道者，不必空执义理以求之也。但当正文字，辨音读，释训诂，通转注，则义理自见，而道在中矣。Wang Mingsheng, “Xu” [Preface], in *Shiqishi shangque* [Critical study of the Seventeen Dynastic Histories] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, reprint), 2a.

politically unchanged, had diminished vis-à-vis historical studies.¹¹ Using the phrase “the Six Classics are all Histories,” Zhang Xuecheng 章学诚 (1738–1801) placed the timeless Classics within the framework of the endless flux of history, but even in the eighteenth century Zhang’s appraisal was not unique. Nor were philosophic concepts immune to empirical analysis. Though most *kaozheng* scholars preferred an empirical program for research, a few led by Dai Zhen saw in linguistic analysis, historical phonology, and glossing of terms a new and more precise textual approach to traditional philosophic questions. Important classical concepts and ideals, as a result of Dai’s influence, were subjected to philological study. A methodology that had proven fruitful in textual criticism it was hoped would prove equally productive in moral philosophy.¹²

Changes in Qing classical traditions followed closely changes in the political, social, and economic circumstances to which they referred. The classical ordering of reality, like all traditions, was subject to the inherent tensions between reality and literati’s conceptions of that reality. Those tensions included perennial moral and political issues, which called for a variety of responses. These responses, while governed by the politics of the imperial dynasty, were not static. Classical concepts, interpretations, verbalizations, and the actions based on them changed over time. The same terms drawn from the Classics could mean different things to literati faced with different problems. For the followers of “Learning of the Way,” the orthodox repossession of the *daotong* 道统 (Way) represented the transmission of the mind of the sages. Increasingly for Qing scholars, however, it represented a Song literati version of the transmission of Buddhism by Chan 禅 monks “from mind to mind.”¹³

Philological studies evolved during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because technical works were published and became part of a dynamic classical research enterprise. Scholarly goals were not “scientific” or “objective” per se, but instead classicists now advocated a *pingxinde* 平心的 (impartial) program that would resume the interrupted conversation with antiquity. Moving back in time, Qing literati first sought out the Tang and then Later Han dynasty sources to overcome limitations they found in the Song and Ming dynasty commentaries. Because Later Han dynasty classical sources and commentaries were relatively unaffected by Daoist and Buddhist notions that had influenced Tang, Song, and Ming literati, Han dynasty literati increasingly received respect and attention

¹¹ See Benjamin Elman, “The Changing Role of Historical Knowledge in Southern Provincial Civil Examinations during the Ming & Qing,” *Journal of Social Sciences and Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1992), 265–319.

¹² Benjamin Elman, “Criticism as Philosophy: Conceptual Change in Qing Dynasty Evidential Research,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 17 (1985), 165–98.

¹³ See Benjamin Elman, “Philosophy (*I-li*) versus Philology (*K’ao-cheng*),” 211–2.

from purists during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The debate between those who favored Later Han dynasty classical scholarship, that is, “Han Learning,” and those who favored the Cheng-Zhu school, that is, the *Songxue* 宋学 (Song Learning) of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, represented more than an antiquarian quest. Its advocates cast doubt on the imperial orthodoxy that Manchu rulers had enshrined in their official legitimation of imperial power. Reconstruction of “Han Learning” during the eighteenth century brought with it the discovery that Later Han dynasty classicism, when the Old Text school (see below) became the most influential intellectual force, was very different from that of the Former Han, when the New Text school had been in vogue.

Strictly speaking “Han Learning,” denoted a school of scholarship that came into fashion in Suzhou with Hui Dong in the mid-eighteenth century. Because Hui and his sizable Yangtze delta following actively opposed Song Learning, they turned instead to reconstruction and study of Later Han classical commentaries, especially those of Zheng Xuan 郑玄 (127–200), who had successfully synthesized earlier New and Old Text doctrines. Because such interpretations were closer to the time the Classics were compiled, they were thought more likely to reveal their authentic meanings.

The Poetry Revival and Classicism in the Eighteenth Century

Along with the rise of Han Learning, the late Qianlong era also witnessed in the revival of the Five Classics and Tang poetry among literati one of the great reversals of the *Daoxue* classical regime stressing the Four Books and the *baguwen* 八股文 (eight-legged essay). Revival of ancient learning, particularly pre-Song forms of literati writing and *zhushu* 注疏 (scholia), brought in its wake an increased awareness by Qing literati of the role of poetry and *shifu* 诗赋 (*belles lettres*) in Tang and Song civil examinations and intellectual life. The epochal shift toward the examination essay, which began in the Song, had continued in the Yuan, and climaxed in the early Ming, when poetry was finally eliminated from civil examinations, had run its course in the mid-eighteenth century. Despite some misgivings, the Qianlong emperor called in the 1750s for the increased use of poetry in the examinations, and in 1760, he commanded that rhymed poetry should become part of the dynastic school curriculum and tested monthly.¹⁴

¹⁴ *Qinding Da-Qing huidian shili* [Collected statutes and precedents in the great Qing] (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1968), 382. 6b.

Slowly but surely, the Qing court rolled back key elements in the Yuan-Ming examination curriculum.¹⁵ First the *lun* 论 (discourse), *zhaogaobiao* 诏告表 (documentary), and *panyu* 判语 (legal judgments) questions were challenged by reform-minded officials. Then poetry was reconsidered as a proper measure of literati talent for officialdom. Many Qing traditionalists who favored Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy over Han Learning, such as Zhang Xuecheng, looked back to the 1756–57 reforms favoring poetry as the beginning of a forty-years process that turned the civil examinations into a trendy contest of literary taste where the most recent fads in classical prose and poetry held sway. The earlier stress on *shixue* 实学 (solid learning) in the civil examinations, according to Zhang, had been displaced.¹⁶

Poetry had been the key to the Tang selection process for *jinshi*, which privileged it as a genre among literati. After the Tang, both *gushi* 古诗 (ancient-style poetry) and *lüshi* 律诗 (regulated verse) lost their privileged positions in civil examinations and literati life. For Qing literati, however, it was precisely its loss of privilege in the Yuan-Ming age of Cheng-Zhu “Learning of the Way” that, in Pauline Yu’s words, guaranteed its “aesthetic incorruptibility” from an era that was closer to antiquity and unaffected by the Buddhist infiltration of literati thought in Song times.¹⁷

In 1756, regulated verse in five words (syllables, i.e., “pentasyllabic”) and eight rhymes was formally reintroduced as a required literary form, which took effect in the 1757 *huishi* 会试 (metropolitan examination) and was then extended to the 1759 *xiangshi* 乡试 (provincial examinations).¹⁸ Initially the poetry question was added to the second session of examinations, fittingly replacing the documentary and legal judgments questions that had four centuries earlier replaced poetry during the high tide of “Learning of the Way.” In 1758, the requirement that literati be examined in regulated verse was extended to local qualifying examinations, and then to the renewal and licensing examinations in 1760 (See Table 1).

¹⁵ See Benjamin Elman, “The Transformation of the Civil Service Curriculum between 1250 and 1400 and the Role of the Yuan Dynasty in Classical Studies,” in the *Conference Volume on Yuan Dynasty Classical Studies*, eds. Lin Qingzhang et al. (Taipei: Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, 2000), 23–69.

¹⁶ See Zhang Xuecheng, *Zhangshi yishu* [Bequeathed works of Mr. Zhang Xuecheng] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 29, 54a.

¹⁷ Mitsuo Kondo, *Shin shisen* [Selections of Qing poetry] (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1967), 9–35; Wang Zhenyuan, *Qingshi xuan* [Selections of Qing poetry] (Taipei: Luojun wenhua gongsi, 1991); Cf. Pauline Yu, “Canon Formation in Late Imperial China,” in *Culture & State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques*, eds. Theodore Hutters et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 83–104.

¹⁸ Li Tiaoyuan, *Danmo lu* [Record of skilled civil examination papers], in *Hanhai* [Seas of writings] (Qing edition, 1881), 14.11b–12b. See also James J. Y. Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 26–9.

Table 1 Reformed Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Mid-Qing, 1757–87

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Four Books 四书	3 quotations
2. Discourse 论	1 quotation
Two	
1. <i>Change</i> 易	4 quotations
2. <i>Documents</i> 书	4 quotations
3. <i>Poetry</i> 诗	4 quotations
4. <i>Annals</i> 春秋	4 quotations
5. <i>Rites</i> 礼记	4 quotations
6. Poetry question 诗题	1 poetic model
Three	
1. Policy questions 经史时务策	5 essays

To facilitate the transition to the new emphasis on form and the rules of prosody, books of rhymes were increasingly printed and distributed. Young boys (and girls) learned how to balance five- or seven-word lines in regulated verse by referring to several *mengxue* 蒙学 (poetry primers), which consisted of lessons for *zidui* 字对 (matching characters) and *ci* 辞 (phrases) of varying lengths. Such developments were a clear marker of revival of interest in Tang-Song poetry as a testable measure of cultural attainment. Within ten years, publication and republication of Tang and Song poetry anthologies increased. Other anthologies of *shihua* 诗话 (poetry discussions) from the Ming were reprinted, and Qing scholars compiled several new ones.¹⁹ The early anthology *Qianjia shi* 千家诗 (Poems by a thousand authors) became one of the key collections students and candidates used to learn regulated verse.²⁰

Subsequently, examination reformers began to square off between those who favored upgrading the new poetry question, which had vanquished the documentary and legal judgments questions on session two, and those who favored continuing the emphasis on the discourse question, which had been moved to session one after 1756. In this struggle, the discourse question became a Song Learning cause. Han Learning scholars favored highlighting Tang regulated prose because of its pre-Song ties to ancient learning, and they sought

¹⁹ Guo Shaoyu, *Qing shihua* [Qing works on poetry discussions] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1963). See also Guo Shaoyu, *Qing shihua xubian* [Qing works on poetry discussions, continuation] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983), Preface, 1.

²⁰ The authorship of the *Qianjia shi* itself is disputed.

first to diminish and ultimately to eliminate the discourse question entirely.

What was fueling the popularity of the revival of poetry was the close tie between the rules for rhyming in regulated verse and the field of *yinxue* 音学 (phonology), which became the queen of *xiaoxue* 小学 (philology) in evidential research during the eighteenth century. Qing dynasty evidential scholars framed a systematic research agenda that built on paleography and phonology to reconstruct the meaning of Chinese words. One byproduct of these philological trends was the full realization of how important poetry, particularly regulated verse, was for the reconstruction of antiquity via phonology, paleography, and *xunguxue* 训诂学 (etymology).²¹

Abrogating Classical Specializations on Examinations

Despite the addition of a poetry question after 1756, Qing classical scholars remained unhappy that examination candidates still mastered mainly the *Poetry* and *Change* classics, leaving the others, particularly the *Annals* and *Rituals*, unstudied. In 1765, for example, the Manchu governor-general in Sichuan described in a memorial the distribution of *zhuanjing* 专经 (specialization) for the sixty candidates on the Classics in the Sichuan provincial examination: 14 (23%) on the *Change*; 13 (22%) on the *Documents*; 21 (35%) on the *Poetry*; 9 (15%) on the *Rites* and *Annals*; 3 (5%) on the Five Classics as a whole. The memorial and attached materials indicated that the problem of encouraging students to specialize on the less popular classics remained, despite the 1756 reforms, which had moved the Five Classics to session two.²²

The final step in changing the specialization requirement began in 1792, after the last of the Five Classics, the *Annals*, had been tested on a revolving basis between 1787 and 1792. This dramatic increase in classical requirements paralleled the increase in competition on Qing examinations. China's demographic realities, to which the reform of examination requirements was in part addressed, meant that as the civil examinations became more difficult, the odds against passing them because of the increasing number of competing candidates became prohibitive. Not until after the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement did the court consider increasing civil quotas. The late Qing

²¹ For example, Liang Zhangju, *Shilü conghua* [Discussions about verse] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1976), in which he outlined the study of poetry and the rules of regulated verse.

²² See *Libu tiben* [Memoranda including memorials from the Ministry of Rites], in *Ming-Qing Archives*, ed. Academia Sinica. 1765, 9th month, 5th day for the memorial in this Sichuan case. The 1765 Sichuan figures were roughly the same as those for the distribution of the classical specialization before 1750. See Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press), Chapter 5.

curriculum is outlined below (Table 2).²³

Table 2 Reformed Format of Provincial and Metropolitan Civil Service Examinations during the Qing, 1793–1898

Session No.	No. of Questions
One	
1. Four Books 四书	3 quotations
2. Poetry question 诗题	1 poetic model
Two	
1. <i>Change</i> 易	1 quotation
2. <i>Documents</i> 书	1 quotation
3. <i>Poetry</i> 诗	1 quotation
4. <i>Annals</i> 春秋	1 quotation
5. <i>Rites</i> 礼记	1 quotation
Three	
1. Policy questions 经史时务策	5 essays

Beginning in 1793, for both the provincial and metropolitan examinations, examiners chose a single quotation from each of the Five Classics, which all candidates had to answer on the second session. They accepted the Han Learning slant of the new stress on the Five Classics and documented how Later Han scholars had mastered all the Classics and not simply specialized on one of them. By 1787, sentiments favoring Song Learning in civil examinations were often controverted.²⁴

Han Learning advocates were still not completely satisfied. Qian Daxin recommended in his private writings that the Four Books—not the Five Classics—should be moved back to Session two, giving the Five Classics priority on Session one. After four centuries of use, Qian contended, there were essays on every possible quotation in the Four Books an examiner might choose.²⁵ Consequently, candidates could read such essays, which were widely circulated by printers, and avoid reading the Four Books themselves. The Five Classics were too extensive and difficult for the same thing to happen to them, Qian maintained. Similarly, in a memorial to the emperor, Sun Xingyan 孙星衍 (1753–1818) called for a revival of Han classical commentaries and Tang

²³ See Li Tiaoyuan, *Danmo lu*, 16.10a–12a.
²⁴ *Guangdong xiangshi lu* [Record of the Guangdong provincial civil examinations] (Provincial report, 1794), 9a–10b, 36a–39b.
²⁵ Qian Daxin, *Shijia zhai yangxin lu* [Record of self-renewal from the Ten Yokes Study] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, reprint, 1804), 18.15b–16a.

subcommentaries to the Qing examination curriculum to supplement the Song commentaries included in the early Ming trilogy of orthodox scholia. Neither request was acted upon.²⁶

In one area, the Han Learning group in Beijing was able to change the examination curriculum with surprising ease. In 1792, Ji Yun 纪昀 (1724–1805), then a minister of *Libu* 礼部 (rites department), requested abandoning Hu Anguo's 胡安国 (1074–1138) Song Learning commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in the examination curriculum. This Song commentary had enunciated *Daoxue* themes that Han Learning scholars such as Ji Yun thought were anachronistic. Ji contended that Hu Anguo had used the *Annals* as a foil to express his own opinions about the fall of the Northern Song and the move of the dynastic court to the south. Hu also attacked the barbarians in his commentary, which focused on the Jin Jurchen precursors of the current Manchus. Hu Anguo's commentary thus was very much out of touch with contemporary concerns of the Qing dynasty. The Qianlong emperor rejected all such interpretations of the *Annals* because of their possibly deleterious effects on Manchu-Chinese relations. For his part, Ji preferred the three Han commentaries to the *Annals* which had duly informed the Kangxi era *Qinding Chunqiu zhuan* 钦定春秋传说汇纂 (Imperially prescribed commentaries and explications of the *Annals*), and had on many points refuted the Hu version. The Qianlong emperor responded by immediately ordering that beginning in 1793 the *Hu zhuan* 胡传 (Hu commentary) would no longer be used in the civil examinations.²⁷

Ji Yun's victory was incomplete, however. The Han Learning challenge to the Four Books had been successful in authorizing the Five Classics for all candidates, but the Four Books monopoly on the highest ranks in the local, provincial, and metropolitan civil examinations was maintained. Indeed, the examiners' tendency to grade each of the candidate's five essays on the Classics uniformly undermined their significance individually in the rankings. Such essays, as in the case of Qing examination essays on the Four Books were evaluated as a group. Nevertheless, the court's penchant for compromise had

²⁶ See Sun Xingyan, "Ni kechang shishi qing jian yong zhushu zhe" [Memorial recommending the use of scholia in examination compounds testing literati], in *Qingdai qianqi jiaoyu lunzhu xuan* [Selections of writings on education from the early Qing period] ed. Li Guojun et al. 3 vols (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), 3/278–9.

²⁷ See *Qingchao xu wenxian tongkao* [Comprehensive analysis of civil institutions of the Qing dynasty, continuation], in *Shitong* [Ten Comprehensive Encyclopedias] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 84.8429–30. See also Xu Liwang, "Bo Qingdai jinwen jingxue fuxing yuanyu Shangshufang 'jiangyi'—jianlun jinwen jingxue zai Kang-Yong-Qian sanchao de diwei" [Critique of the view that Qing dynasty New Text classical studies revived due to the lectures in the Upper Study of the emperor—Comprehensively evaluating the status of New Text classical studies during the three reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong], *Fudan xuebao* [Fudan Journal], no. 5 (2010), 132–40.

enabled the Qianlong reforms to take hold successfully within the bureaucracy and mollify its Song versus Han Learning advocates.

New Text Versus Old Text Classical Scholarship

The *xiaoxue* 小学 (philological) and *yili* 义理 (philosophic) rebellions spawned by *kaozheng* studies as an impartial “search for evidence” also set the stage for the social and political conclusions that New Text scholars drew from their research and scholarship. Because most New Text sources were from the Former Han dynasty, and therefore were unaffected by Daoist and Buddhist accretions in Later Han and post-Han writings, the New Text version of Confucius’ role vis-à-vis the Classics slowly received new respect and attention. Initially, New Text Confucianism did not arise in the Qing period as a rationalization for Westernization. Rather, New Text studies arose as respectable *Hanxue jingxue* 汉学经学 (Han-Learning scholarship) in mainstream centers of learning before being linked to problems of reform in the nineteenth century. Moreover, New Text scholars promoted traditional forms of Confucian reform before they initiated a radical call for Westernization.

By 1800, more radical philologists hoped to establish as normative their new and iconoclastic views of the classics. The stakes were high, and in the course of these intellectual changes, the content and form of political discourse legitimating state power in late imperial China also evolved in new directions. Rediscovery of the Old Text versus New Text debate in the late eighteenth century led some Qing scholars to a new perspective on the classical tradition. Scholars from the Zhuang 庄 and Liu 刘 lineages in Changzhou prefecture were the first Qing literati to stress the New Text school of the Former Han Dynasty. Deep and irreconcilable differences among competing orthodoxies had emerged in the Han Learning agenda for classical studies. By returning to what they considered a purer form of Han Learning, New Text scholars in Changzhou touched off, from within its ranks, the breakup of Han Learning itself. New Text scholars began to argue that much of what had once been considered orthodox by Song and Ming Cheng-Zhu followers and even early Qing *kaozheng* scholars was in fact based on Old Text sources allegedly fabricated by imperially sponsored scholars during the reign of the so-called “Han usurper” Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–23).

The Zhuang and Liu lineages’ association with new trends in Han Learning also documents how the scholarly groups, family, and lineage outlined at the outset of this chapter played important roles in the evolution of evidential research in the eighteenth century. The complex machinery of lineages was

clearly at work among the Zhuang and Liu families in the construction of a literati “school of learning” such as the New Text movement. New Text advocates turned to the *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊传 (Gongyang Commentary) for Confucius’ *Spring and Autumn Annals*, one of the Five Classics, because the latter was the only New Text commentary to the Classics that had survived intact from the Former Han dynasty. Recorded in “contemporary-style script,” hence called “New Text,” i.e., the forms of *xiaozhuan* 小篆 (small seal) calligraphy that evolved into *lishu* 隶书 (clerical script), the *Gongyang zhuan* provided textual support for the Former Han New Text school’s portrayal of Confucius as a visionary of institutional change, an “uncrowned king.”²⁸

Among the texts in the Former Han dynasty archives, however, there was another commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which later became known as the *Zuozhuan* 左传 (Zuo Commentary). It provided textual support for the Later Han *guwen* 古文 (Old Text; lit., “ancient-style script,” i.e., *dazhuan* 大篆 (large seal) forms of calligraphy) school’s portrayal of Confucius as a respected teacher and transmitter of classical learning, rather than the charismatic visionary New Text scholars had earlier painted. After the demise of the Later Han dynasty in A.D. 220, however, the classical canon was not reconstituted officially until the seventh century under the Tang. Thereafter, the *Zuo Commentary* remained the orthodox commentary to the *Annals* until the middle of the eighteenth century when Changzhou Han Learning scholars called it into question.

Classical texts and their interpretation had been the basis for political loyalties in a “schools system” for Han classical studies. When they reopened the New Text versus Old Text controversy, eighteenth century Changzhou scholars reconstructed the fortunes of an academic and, by implication, a political movement that had been replaced. Han Learning and New Text studies played an important role in the steady drift of gentry-officials toward new forms of political discourse to replace what they considered outmoded Song political values, which since the Yuan-Ming transition had legitimated authoritarian government.

Standing for new forms of belief in a time of political, social, and economic turmoil, New Text studies and Han Learning championed pragmatism and the imperative of change. Recasting of the literati tradition by New Text scholars in Changzhou also marked an initial step in emancipation from the encumbrance of accumulated imperial norms and ideals handed down since the Later Han dynasty. Like their late Ming predecessors, evidential research scholars opposed the

²⁸ See Benjamin Elman, “Ch’ing Schools of Scholarship,” *Ch’ing-shih wen-t’i* vol. 4, no. 6 (1979), 1–44.

Cheng-Zhu “voice” of the state. Like their Song and Ming predecessors, evidential scholars drew on ancient sources to express their political aspirations, a longstanding classical tendency, that would climax in the 1898 reform movement.²⁹

In the late nineteenth century, first Liao Ping 廖平 (1852–1932) and then Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) drew on the New Text scholarship of the Changzhou school and its various followers. A Cantonese scholar, Kang developed his ingenious and politically perilous interpretation of Confucius as a social reformer in his influential *Kongzi gaizhi kao* 孔子改制考 (Study of Confucius as institutional reformer), which was published in 1897 but banned for political reasons in 1898 and again in 1900. Confucius, according to Kang, was a visionary of institutional change and had enunciated a concept of progress that Old Text scholars had covered up. This provocative reinterpretation invested Kang’s ideal of “institutional reform” with all the modern trappings of institutional reform. Kang’s alternative expressions of legitimate classical learning challenged the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy.

Qing Philology and Natural Studies

The impact of evidential research was also felt in the increased attention *kaozheng* scholars gave to mathematics and *lisuan* 历算 (astronomy) as introduced by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century. In addition, for Ming-Qing *shiyi* 士医/*ruyi* 儒医 (literati-physicians) textual mastery of the medical classics was more than an auxiliary tool. Classical learning was required to recover medical principles and practice from ancient writings and their commentaries. The formation of evidential scholarship and the return to antiquity in medicine reinforced each other. Reemphasis on ancient texts such as the *Shanghan lun* 伤寒论 (Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stimulated the reexamination of pre-Song therapies for cold and heat factor illnesses. Instead of using warming medicines, physicians increasingly prescribed cooling drugs and methods for infectious illnesses. The diseases of the south, with their richer variety of climates, infection, and infestation, led to new medical frameworks in Jin, Yuan, and Ming China, which challenged confidence in standard approaches to acute fevers derived from the canonical cold damage therapies based on the *Shanghan lun*.

Qing debates between antiquarians and modernists concerning early medicine

²⁹ See Tang Chih-chün and Benjamin A. Elman, “The 1898 Reforms Revisited,” *Late Imperial China*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1987), 205–13.

paralleled those between Han Learning and Song Learning classical scholars. Evidential scholars of the Five Classics, for example, focused on the distant past to overcome the failures of the recent Cheng-Zhu tradition. The rhetoric entered the discussion of medical texts. Like Han Learning scholars, for example, Qing scholar-physicians began their studies with Han dynasty medical texts such as the *Shanghan lun* and the earliest classical interpretations, because the latter were closer in time to the composition of the classics and thereby more likely to reveal their authentic meaning. They rejected Song dynasty sources, which Song Learning scholar-physicians had relied on, because of their questionable authority and great separation from antiquity.

On the other hand, Qing mathematical and astronomical interest grew directly out of the Jesuit studies and the mid-Qing findings of Mei Wending 梅文鼎 (1633–1721) and others. Mei had contended that the study of physical nature gave scholars access to the *li* 理 (principles) undergirding nature. In essence, Mei saw *xixue* 西学 (Jesuit learning) as a way to enhance the mathematizing of the *Daoxue* notion of moral and metaphysical principle.³⁰ At the same time, however, Mei Wending continued to believe in the native Chinese origins of Western natural studies. Such origins made it imperative, Mei and his highly placed patrons in the early Qing court thought, to rehabilitate native traditions in the mathematical sciences to their former glory. Under imperial patronage during the Kangxi reign, mathematical studies, including *lülü zhixue* 吕律之学 (mathematical harmonics), were upgraded from an insignificant skill to an important domain of knowledge for literati that complemented classical studies.³¹

During the Kangxi revival of interest in mathematics, Mei Wending's grandson, Mei Juecheng 梅穀成 (d. 1763), and others could not find many of the works originally included in the medieval *Shibu suanjing* 十部算经 (Ten Computational Classics). Moreover, in addition to Li Ye's (1192–1279) *Ceyuan haijing* 测圆海镜 (Sea Mirror of Circular Measurement, 1248), the seminal works of Qin Jiushao 秦九韶 (1202–61), and Zhu Shijie 朱世杰 (fl. end of thirteenth century, ca. 1270–1330) on polynomial algebra and other important topics were not

³⁰ John Henderson, "Qing Scholars Views of Western Astronomy," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1986), 121–48.

³¹ On medicine, see *Siku quanshu zongmu* [Catalog of the complete collection of the four treasures], comp. Ji Yun 纪昀 et al. (Taipei: Yiwen chubanshe, reprint, 1974), 103.1a, 104.51a–55b. See also Chao Yuan-ling, "Medicine and Society in Late Imperial China: A Study of Physicians in Suzhou" (Los Angeles: UCLA Ph.D. dissertation in History, 1995), 72–80, 113–23, and Marta Hanson, "The *Golden Mirror* in the Imperial Court of the Qianlong Emperor, 1739–1743," *Early Science and Medicine*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2003), 112–47. On mathematics, see Catherine Jami, "Learning Mathematical Sciences during the Early and Mid-Qing," in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900*, eds. Benjamin Elman and Alexander Woodside (Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 1994), 223–56.

widely available and perhaps lost during the Manchu conquest of the Ming.

After 1750, a large-scale effort to recover and collate the treasures of ancient Chinese mathematics became an important part of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century upsurge in evidential studies. Many of the mathematical texts were collated under imperial auspices during the last years of the Kangxi reign, when the *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今图书集成 (Synthesis of Books and Illustrations Past and Present) encyclopedia was also completed. When published in 1726, it included some European texts from the late Ming and early Qing *Chongzhen lishu* 崇祯历书 (Mathematical Astronomy of the Chongzhen Reign). Five works on Chinese mathematics were also included in the astronomy section of the encyclopedia:

Zhoubi suanjing 周髀算经 (The Gnomon of the Zhou Dynasty and Classic of Computations)

Shushu jiyi 数术记遗 (Notes on the Mathematical Heritage)

Xie Chawei suanjing 谢察微算经 (Mathematical Manual of Xie Chawei)

Mengxi bitan 梦溪笔谈 (Brush Talks from the Dream Brook), Mathematics part

Suanfa tongzong 算法统宗 (Systematic Treatise on Computational Methods)

When the first set of the Qianlong Imperial Library collection (i.e., *Siku quanshu*) was completed between 1773 and 1781, its compilers included several collators well-versed in classical mathematics such as Dai Zhen, Kong Jihan 孔继涵 (1739–1784), and others. The *Tianwen suanfa* 天文算法 (Astronomy and Mathematics) category incorporated 58 works into the collection (see below). Several older, lost mathematical texts were recopied from the early Ming *Yongle dadian* 永乐大典 (Great Compendium of the Yongle reign), which had survived in the imperial court relatively intact. The general catalog of the Qianlong Imperial Library, for example, included twenty-five notices on mathematics. Of these, nine were on Tang classics, three were for Song-Yuan works, four on works from the Ming period, including the Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) and Xu Guangqi 徐光启 (1562–1633) translation of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, and nine on works from the Qing, most importantly the *Shuli jingyun* 数理精蕴 (Collected Basic Principles of Mathematics) and several works by Mei Wending.

The recovery of ancient mathematical works extended beyond the borders of the Qing dynasty. The role of Korea and Japan in preserving lost Chinese works is generally well-known. Worthy of special mention, however, was Ruan Yuan's recovery of the lost *Suanxue qimeng* 算学启蒙 (Primer of Mathematics) by Zhu Shijie from a 1660 Korean edition that had been reprinted as a textbook in 1433.

When transmitted to Japan, the *Primer* and its single unknown (*tianyuan shu* 天元术; *tengenjutsu* in Japanese) algebraic notations also played a significant role in Japan in the seventeenth century.³²

Overall, Ruan Yuan's compilation of the *Chouren zhuan* 畴人传 (Biographies of Astronomers and Mathematicians) while serving as governor of Zhejiang province in Hangzhou, reprinted in 1849 and later enlarged, marked the crucial period in the celebration of natural studies by Yangtze delta literati in the eighteenth century. Containing biographies and summaries of the works of 280 *chouren*, including thirty-seven Europeans, this work was followed by four supplements in the nineteenth century. The mathematical sciences had begun to grow in importance among literati beyond the reach of the imperial court in the late eighteenth century. They were now linked to classical studies via evidential research. Because Ruan Yuan was a well-placed literati patron of natural studies in the provincial and court bureaucracy, his influential *Chouren zhuan* represented the integration of the mathematical sciences with evidential studies. Mathematical study was no longer independent of classical studies.³³ Literati scholars had incorporated mathematical study into evidential research and made natural studies a part of classical studies, thus explaining the fate of natural studies and technology in late imperial China since the Jesuits first made their presence felt in the seventeenth century.

Philology and natural studies were wedded together when Mei Wending and Mei Juecheng evaluated early modern European findings in astronomy and searched through the classical canon for evidence that this new knowledge was likely based on ancient Chinese knowledge, which had been transmitted to the Western regions in antiquity. Mei Juecheng contended, for instance, that the Song-Yuan *Tianyuan* 天元 (heavenly origins) method for representing algebraic equations was the equivalent of the algebraic formulas later introduced by the Jesuits. This "Chinese origins" argument legitimated renewed Qing literati interest in the sciences, and philology became one of the key tools later evidential research scholars employed.³⁴

The mathematics associated with evidential research in the eighteenth century had been algorithmic, i.e., focusing on getting the right results, and thus was less

³² See *Siku quanshu zongmu*, vols. 106–7. See also Jean-Claude Martzloff, *A History of Chinese Mathematics* (New York: Springer, 1996), 20, 32–3, and Du Shiran and Li Yan, *Chinese Mathematics: A Concise History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1987), 223–4. Compare Hu Mingjie, "Merging Chinese and Western Mathematics: The Introduction of Algebra and the Calculus in China, 1859–1903" (Princeton Ph.D. dissertation in the History of Science, 1998), 288.

³³ Arthur Hummel et al., *Eminent Chinese of the Qing Period* (Washington, D.C.: Government Publishing House, 1942), 402.

³⁴ Henderson, "Qing Scholars Views of Western Astronomy," 121–48.

concerned to justify methods and formulas. Wang Lai 汪莱 (1768–1813) and Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), for example, each tried to build on traditional Chinese algebraic equations, known as *Tianyuan*, rather than just automatically accept the Indic-Arabic forms of algebra that the Jesuits and later the Protestants taught when they came to China. Wang in particular derived more than one positive root for a *Tianyuan* equation, which contributed something new to the traditional focus on a single, positive solution for any algebraic equation by following Western views of positive and negative roots.³⁵

Wang Lai, who was appointed to the dynastic observatory in Beijing, employed Western methods long accepted in the *Qintianjian* 钦天监 (calendrical office) since the Kangxi reign, in his calculations of *Tianyuan*. As a result of his professional ties to the Jesuit “new studies” harbored in the observatory, Wang was criticized by more conservative *kaozheng* scholars interested in traditional mathematics for going too far in his emulation of Western methods. Because he was a literatus outside the court and thus tied to the Yangtze delta academic community, Li Rui 李锐 (1765–1814), who devised a theory of *Tianyuan* equations strictly in terms of Song mathematics, received more support from literati, many of whom still revered Yang Guangxian 杨光先 (1597–1669) for his prosecutions of the Jesuits in the Kangxi court in the 1660s. Before 1850, then, classical learning still took precedence over Western learning, and the antiquarian interests of evidential scholars stimulated them to study the textual history of native mathematics rather than build on the findings of Western mathematics, as Wang Lai had.³⁶

This “Chinese origins” argument legitimated renewed Qing literati interest in the sciences, and philology became one of the key tools later evidential research scholars such as Xu Shou 徐寿 (1818–82) and Li Shanlan 李善兰 (1810–82) employed in the nineteenth century to build conceptual bridges between Western learning and the traditional Chinese sciences. In the process, modern Western science was initially introduced in the nineteenth century as compatible with native classical learning.

Conclusion

The legacy of Qing evidential research in the nineteenth century was important but not unique. Certainly Han Learning and New Text studies played an

³⁵ Horng Wann-sheng, “Chinese Mathematics at the Turn of the 19th Century,” in *Philosophy & Conceptual History of Science in Taiwan*, eds. Lin Cheng-hung and Fu Daiwie (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 167–208.

³⁶ Huang Yinong, “Qingchu tianzhujiao yu huijiao tianwenjia de zhengdou,” *Jiuzhou xuekan*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1993), 47–69.

important role in the steady drift of literati-officials toward new forms of political discourse to replace outmoded imperial political values, which since the Ming dynasty had legitimated authoritarian government. Social and economic pressures, coupled with population growth placed demands on Qing China that rulers and officials had never before faced. By 1800, over three hundred million people lived in China. Ancient ideals drawn from feudal times were already deemed unsatisfactory. Alternative solutions were required. Many literati realized that the institutions enshrined in the imperial system were not inviolate. Unprecedented conditions required unprecedented solutions. To “accord with the times” became the slogan of a generation of statecraft (*Jinshi zhixue* 经世之学) scholars who during the early nineteenth century sought pragmatic solutions to the myriad organizational and logistical breakdowns which seemed to come all at once.

Literati faith in the past as a guideline for the present remained intact. Increasingly, however, the past represented conflicting ideals of moral and political commitment. Institutions of the past, whether defended in Song or Han Learning terms, were undergoing a crisis of confidence from which the imperial system would never recover. The turn to evidential research revealed that the crisis of confidence had extended from the institutions of the imperial system to the very nature of intellectual values literati had served since the Ming. Neither marginal literati nor disgruntled petty officials, Han Learning scholars disclosed in their search for new truths in ancient and unorthodox classical texts that they no longer had confidence in answers provided in the *Daoxue* lexicon, which they had mastered as youths and defended as scholars.³⁷

With hindsight, we know that Qing China was on the eve of a confrontation with Western imperialism and a rising Japan, which would unleash revolutionary forces at all levels of Chinese society. Literati by 1800 already comprehended that if the Chinese empire hoped to cope successfully with its problems, fundamental changes were required. Tragically, appeals to alternative forms of classical learning to revamp the imperial system never succeeded. Reemergence of New Text classicism coincided with the end of imperial China. Reformism, however, survived the failure of the 1898 Reform Movement.

Han Learning was never revolutionary. Although evidential scholars proposed changes in the classical agenda, they reaffirmed the role of classical ideals in the present. For them, classical learning was the starting point and unquestioned

³⁷ See Yu Ying-shih, “Some Preliminary Observations on the Rise of Ch’ing Confucian Intellectualism,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 11 (1975), 125. On late Ming debates concerning the authenticity of new versions of the *Great Learning*, see Lin Qingzhang, *Qingchu de qunjing bianweixue* [Study of forged classics in the early Qing] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1990), 369–86.

constituent for new beliefs and patterns of political behavior. New Text classicists appealed to a radical reconstruction of the past to authorize the present and prepare for the future. They had not yet reached a concept of political revolution or demonstrated a full understanding of social progress, but evidential styles of empirical research and New Text notions of historical change and advocacy for practical adjustment of institutions to changing times were important stepping stones to a vision of political and cultural transformation. It is impossible to think of Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚 (1893–1980) and China's *xinshixue* 新史学 (New History) in a “modernist” vacuum. Many of his building blocks came from Qing evidential research, and with them he and others in the May 4th era unraveled the lies posing as truths in imperial history.

The historical and philological consequences of evidential research, thus, contributed to the emergence in the decades of the late-Qing and early Republic, 1890–1930, of a virulent form of cultural iconoclasm and revolution that saw its roots, and hence its legitimation, in such studies. But such perspectives misrepresent the actual motives that Qing scholars clearly laid out in their own writings. In the end, the scholarly intentions and cultural consequences of Qing dynasty evidential research are analytically distinct. Too often, we have read the twentieth-century consequences of evidential research anachronistically into the intentions of classical scholars writing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Such a procedure has incorrectly turned classical scholars such as Dai Zhen and Qian Daxin into a sort of “modern” intellectual that they never were. As literati they remained committed to *ru* ideals. As late imperial classicists, the last great native movement in Confucian letters, they sought to restore the classical visions of state and society. The early modern consequences of their cutting edge philology, however, yielded the corrosive consequences of modern decanonization and delegitimation, which went beyond the intellectual limits they had imposed on their own writings.

Acknowledgments This article was presented at the “Forum on Asia in the Early Modern World” (November 1–6, 2010, Shanghai and Hangzhou, China). Writing for this article was supported by two summer grants from the Chiang Ching Kuo Foundation, Taipei, 2008 and 2009.

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