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Introduction: Empire and Information in Late Imperial Chinese History

In the last few decades, empire and information have come into focus in Chinese history as concepts demanding analysis and debate in their own right.¹ Neither, to be sure, were neglected in earlier studies. As the realm of the *Huangdi*, China between 221 BCE and 1912 is normally termed an empire in European languages. Information in its various facets—including education and examination content, fiscal statistics, intelligence, literacy, publishing, rumors, scientific knowledge, and commercial data—has been recognized as a crucial dimension of many fields of history. Now, however, the diffuse strands of both topics, previously taken up selectively depending on the subject in question, are being drawn together for systematic analysis. It is appropriate that they have come to prominence together, for any discussion of how we characterize an empire, whether bound by purely

¹ Although there is a growing body of scholarship on empire in each period of Chinese history, the nature of the Qing political order has attracted particularly intense debate from the late 1990s onward. For one review of this trend see Joanna Waley-Cohen, “The New Qing History,” *Radical History Review* 88 (2004): 193–206. The literature on information in Chinese history is smaller but growing. Following Christopher A. Bayly’s pioneering application of information as a concept in Asian history, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Hilde De Weerdts was perhaps the first to apply the concept of an “information order” to Chinese history: “Byways in the Imperial Chinese Information Order: The Dissemination and Commercial Publication of State Documents,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 66, no. 1 (2006): 145–88; more recently, information has been the focus of reinterpretations of nineteenth-century Chinese history, for example Tobie Meyer-Fong, “To Know the Enemy: The *Zei qing huizuan*, Military Intelligence, and the Taiping Civil War,” *T’oung Pao* 104 (2018): 384–423, and Jenny Huangfu Day, *Qing Travelers to the Far West: Diplomacy and the Information Order in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

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political and military forces, or also by economic, social, and cultural ties, will benefit from close attention to connections and disjunctures in the movement of information. An indication of the rising profile of these two subjects is that William T. Rowe's students have chosen them as the theme of this special issue in honor of his 70th birthday. So expansive a theme does justice to the scope of their teacher's extraordinary contribution to the history of late imperial China. This brief introduction, needless to say, can touch only superficially on this theme and the career it celebrates; it discusses only a few dimensions of empire and information in the late imperial context, their place in Rowe's work, and their continuation in the work of his students.

Information flows trace the contours of political life. China developed perhaps the most centralized and disciplined bureaucracy of any pre-modern state, one designed to place the emperor and his closest councilors at the center of power and information networks. Historians of the Qing state, the most sophisticated iteration of this system, have long taken pains to reconstruct its modes of information management.² More direct and personal channels of correspondence, notably the innovative secret memorial, coupled with new agencies in which efficient clerks and omniscient ministers sifted and digested incoming information, gave the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors great control over their realm.³ Yet if control of information meant security, it is notable that Qing rulers often showed unease, if not paranoia, regarding the limits of their knowledge. Could distant officials be trusted to report the truth when their personal interests might better be served by falsification, misrepresentation, and omission? Might not officials collude instead of monitoring each other? If rulers sought to thwart deception by seeking broader input, could they contain the fallout, keeping policy discussions confidential and dissent silent?

We know much about the streamlined and strictly policed channels of bureaucratic communication under the rule of the High Qing triumvirate of emperors, but less about informal channels of political communication. How far did this attempt to maintain a state monopoly over policy discussion succeed? If literati did shy away from political discussions, did they do so out of fear, or from

² For one early example, see Silas H. L. Wu, *Communication and Imperial Control in China: Evolution of the Palace Memorial System, 1693–1735* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

³ Jonathan D. Spence, *Ts'ao Yin and the K'ang-hsi Emperor: Bondservant and Master* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers: The Grand Council in Mid-Ch'ing China, 1723–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Mark C. Elliott, "The Manchu-Language Archives of the Qing Dynasty and the Origins of the Palace Memorial System," *Late Imperial China* 22, no. 1 (2001): 1–70.

satisfaction with the empire's management? The field of political discussion greatly expanded after the death of Qianlong in 1799.⁴ As the Jiaqing Emperor tried to come to grips with the vulnerabilities and failings of his ancestors' systems of control, officials, their private advisors, and even men far from the halls of power hastened to counsel and criticize. Now, however, the target of persuasion was no longer simply the highest echelons of the state. Persuading officials serving locally, or even fellow reformists without any official position, could have a significant impact on governance even without the emperor's assent.

Much remains to be understood about this shift in Qing political communication. As the Korean visitor Pak Chi-wŏn noted in 1780: "The Chinese take great pains to be circumspect. When they talk to others . . . they burn the records of their conversations without leaving a scrap of paper . . . the Manchus are even worse."⁵ In his view, only discrete conversations allowed one to probe their "inner thoughts, which they do not entrust to pen and paper."⁶ This reminds us that unofficial political discussions continued during the period of greatest state power, but it remains challenging to piece together their scope, tenor, and influence. Conversely, compared to the meticulous care given to parsing the personalities and governing styles of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong, we still know astonishingly little about the "inner thoughts" of the Jiaqing and Daoguang emperors. Factors beyond the systemic crisis he faced gave Jiaqing a different conception of emperorship than his father, but what these were remain somewhat opaque. How much did Han literati intuit about their new ruler in 1799? Did Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 (1746–1809) have an inkling that he would survive criticizing the emperor? His was not an isolated case: Jiaqing was less inclined than his father to sentence protesting literati to death.⁷ Imperial attitudes behind

⁴ Pioneering work on this topic was undertaken by Susan Mann and Philip A. Kuhn, "Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion," in *The Cambridge History of China: Late Ch'ing, 1800–1911*, vol. 10, part 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 107–62; recent monographs on the political, social, and cultural impact of the Qianlong-Jiaqing transition include: Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Seunghyun Han, *After the Prosperous Age: State and Elites in Early Nineteenth-Century Suzhou* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); William T. Rowe, *Speaking of Profit: Bao Shichen and Reform in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

⁵ Min Tu-ki, *National Polity and Local Power: The Transformation of Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5.

⁶ Min, *National Polity and Local Power*, 10.

⁷ Han, *After the Prosperous Age*, 1–2.

restrictions on political discourse before 1799 present little mystery, but those behind the new tolerance in the nineteenth century remain to be fully delineated.

What relationship existed between empire-wide political crises and seismic shifts in the imperial information order? In *Origins of the Modern Chinese State*, Philip Kuhn captured a crucial tension within High Qing politics: Elite education, centered on the civil service examination, inculcated a political vocation. Yet from the ruler's perspective, only that tiny fraction of students actually selected for official duty could legitimately fulfill this vocation. Emperors enjoined the remainder to avoid political discussion, a policy inherited from the Ming and sharpened by an acute awareness of their own vulnerability, as Manchus, to potent forms of ethnicity-based opposition. When the realm was well-ordered and the power of the state feared, this inner tension could be contained. When order began to fail, however, a far wider spectrum of educated men felt the need to embody their vocation and shore up a weakened state. Only the boldest of those out of office targeted their message at the emperor; the rest hoped for a more oblique political influence by expressing their views in poetry, letters, and treatises, often printed to reach a wider audience. For Kuhn, then, political crisis raised submerged "constitutional questions," notably "defining that part of the community that properly participates in national politics."⁸ Such a definition, of course, raises issues of literacy and education, networks and their local or national scale, and strategies of influence.⁹

In a pattern familiar to Qing historians, Hilde De Weerdts has found that the early Song state constructed an unprecedentedly centralized system of communications, based on "the absolute primacy of the imperial person in all decision making," before a political crisis—the loss of territory north of the Huai River—triggered a "restructuring of the information order."¹⁰ Literati gained far greater scope for voicing their opinions and setting the political agenda. What had been an emperor-centered system designed for one-way transmission was "gradually refitted to allow for two-way traffic between the court and local elites."¹¹ Like their Qing successors, Song literati sought to reinvigorate the state, keeping the Song imperial government at the center of their political discourse and committing themselves to the "imperial mission" of reconquering and ruling an idealized conception of the Chinese realm.¹²

⁸ Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 27.

⁹ For an early study of the origins and strategies of elite political influence in this period see James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Hilde De Weerdts, *Information, Territory, and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 430, 436.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14–18.

Together with considerable resonance between the Song and Qing cases, there exists a fundamental difference. After 1644, Chinese literati were only one among several elite groups in the empire, and only one, albeit by far the largest, of several linguistic and cultural spheres of communication. Despite recent advances, we still know very little about the multilingual complexity of political communication within the Qing realm. Did the crisis around 1800 stimulate expanded political discussion in Inner Asia parallel to that in China? What were the pressing concerns of Inner Asian elites—Mongol aristocrats, Tibetan Buddhist clergy, and others—in a time of manifest state breakdown? Were their information orders largely sealed off from those based in China Proper, or was there significant influence across linguistic boundaries? Answering these questions is essential to charting the dynamics of the nineteenth-century Qing order.¹³

Within China, there exists a second enduring puzzle specific to the Qing case. Historians have long recognized parallels between the late Ming and the first half of the nineteenth century, both ages of internal crisis and foreign threat, in which political discussion slipped beyond state control. A thread connecting them is the fact that late Ming political commentators, and their Ming loyalist successors, gradually returned to prominence after 1800.¹⁴ The three most prominent of these, Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82), Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–92), and Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–95), were resolute opponents of Manchu rule; one reason their prominence dimmed in the High Qing was the general suppression of late Ming political commentary, which was regarded as harboring dangerous anti-Manchu currents. Qing emperors throughout the eighteenth-century feared that unsupervised literati political discussion would generate sedition, and adopted a range of policies to police and restrict the range of works permitted to circulate.¹⁵ The loosening of state censorship and the surging reputations of late Ming authors, perhaps surprisingly, led to an outcome that resembled the late Song dynamic: Literati overwhelmingly identified themselves with what they took to be the Qing

¹³ Surprisingly few studies examine how non-Han peoples responded to changes in Qing state policy and ambition. For recent examples see Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ For the rising reputation of Gu Yanwu see Polachek, *Inner Opium War*; for Wang Fuzhi see Stephen R. Platt, *Provincial Patriots: The Hunanese and Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8–33.

¹⁵ L. Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien-lung* (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1935); R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

imperial mission, and worked to maintain it.¹⁶ Had the paranoia of High Qing rulers been misplaced all along? Was the imperial dragnet so effective that anti-Manchu arguments had fallen into oblivion? Or did the Qing state decisively win the loyalty of Han literati at some point in the eighteenth century—a shift that could not be publicly acknowledged? Did the obvious weakening of the central state make anti-Manchu agitation less urgent? Or was there already a premonition of the choice faced acutely during the Taiping Rebellion: That a Qing state collapse would endanger the entire Confucian social and political order? Determining the relationship between Manchu rule and literati political communication after 1800 remains an important element for understanding the Qing information order.

A richer appreciation of the complexity of the Qing imperial information order influences how we understand changes after 1840. It was once an axiom that the Qing state faltered in the face of Western imperialism because its rigidly China-centered worldview made it ignorant of developments beyond East Asia.¹⁷ Given our far fuller knowledge of how the Qing Empire bested the formidable Junghars by mastering complex geographic and military intelligence, gathered across multiple languages and vast distances, and digesting this knowledge into effective policy, this conclusion raises as many questions as it answers.¹⁸ Did the capacities and focus of the Qing state radically wither in the span of half a century? If so, why? Did the novel maritime strength of European empires confuse Qing policymakers, who were more accustomed to overland threats? Did the imperial heritage matter for the period after 1840? Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794–1857), a leading Qing scholar and statecraft thinker, could serve as a witness for the prosecution, for he tied the humiliating Qing defeat in the first Opium War to its neglect of contemporary world affairs. Yet, set in context, Wei's case offers the basis for a qualified defense of the sophistication of Qing worldviews. Already in the 1820s, he considered knowledge of the empire's far-flung frontiers essential for those who wished to guide policy. Although he studied world geography due to Opium War-Era stimuli, he based his interpretation of the threat posed by European

¹⁶ Rebellions, of course, became more frequent after 1795, but strikingly few can be linked to the influence of late Ming and early Qing anti-Manchu literati authors, such as Wang Fuzhi or Lü Liuliang 呂留良 (1629–83). Only after 1895 do such authors seem to have become influential among those seeking to overthrow the dynasty.

¹⁷ A classic formulation of this view can be found in John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953 [1964]), 3–22.

¹⁸ Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

empires on his expert knowledge of Qing military history. His pivot to global geopolitics was eased by earlier reading about the terrain and politics of the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, and the steppe. Empire building before 1800 shaped Qing thinking about empire maintenance in the nineteenth century.¹⁹

Approaching Chinese history from the vantage point of empire and information offers at least two advantages. One is to encourage research spanning divisions between political, social, cultural, and intellectual history, for the flow of information cannot be understood without a consideration of all of these spheres. The other is to encourage placing individuals within the context of their networks and connections, without which the movement of information cannot be understood. Spanning sub-disciplinary boundaries and placing things in context are distinguishing characteristics of William Rowe's scholarship. Each of his five substantial monographs traces how a single location or person was enmeshed in, and illuminates, the trends of an age.²⁰ The questions tackled by Rowe's approach come close to being coterminous with the boundaries of late imperial Chinese history as a whole, and here I will only highlight one: The role of the decades around 1800 as a turning point in Chinese history, and the relationship of this shift to the ways political life was organized and information was transmitted.

Already in his two monumental studies of Hankou, we see the particular importance Rowe attributes to the period around 1800. Each commences in 1796, the first year of the reign of the Jiaqing Emperor. This is part of a deliberate effort to counteract the gravitational pull of industrial modernity and consider developments in the nineteenth century less as the product of external stimuli from the West than as a working out of "the internal logic of China's own socioeconomic development."²¹ The Jiaqing period, rather than the Opium War, or even the Taiping Rebellion, marks a useful turning point because it is here that

¹⁹ Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ William T. Rowe's five monographs are: *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796–1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796–1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); *Crimson Rain: Seven Centuries of Violence in a Chinese County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); and *Speaking of Profit: Bao Shichen and Reform in Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). He has also published a survey of Qing history, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

²¹ Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society*, 341.

the manifest decline in central state power, an important theme in nineteenth century history, first becomes apparent. In his early studies, Rowe is interested in how this circumstance, simultaneously a challenge and an opportunity, was met by merchants interested in maintaining the welfare of an urban society: “In retrospect, we can identify in this period of simultaneous merchant prosperity and administrative fiscal distress the beginnings of a new pattern of private (i.e., nonbureaucratic) initiative in the management of urban public affairs.”²² His twin volumes meticulously delineate the range of sophisticated networks and organizational forms these men required as merchants, philanthropists, and partners in governance.

Rowe’s next major study turned from nineteenth-century Hankou to the eighteenth-century official Chen Hongmou 陳宏謀 (1696–1771), a legendarily effective administrative agent of the central state. Chen rose to renown under the Yongzheng Emperor, known for the boldness of his plans to augment government power. If studying Hankou revealed the ebbing of state power, Chen’s early years saw its capacities reach their zenith. Still, Chen’s career reveals some of the ambiguities of High Qing state power. To a considerable extent, our view of Qianlong as an effective autocrat comes from his unparalleled impact on China’s cultural and intellectual life. Under his rule, the scope of imperially-produced scholarship and the network of state censorship far outstripped that of his father and grandfather. In the words of Lynn Struve, “The word confidence surely is inadequate to characterize the grandiose and imperious way in which the Qianlong emperor went about things.”²³ To what extent do Qianlong’s totalitarian ambitions in the realm of discourse blind us to the fact, made clear in Rowe’s study, that he was far more relaxed in the nuts-and-bolts fields of taxation and fiscal administration?²⁴ By shrewdly looking to the provinces in the age of a ruler who wished to draw all attention to himself, Rowe raises crucial questions about the trajectory of Qing history: When, during his six-decade-long reign, did the powers of the Qing central state fatally weaken? Different historians have advanced a range of viewpoints, typically stressing the period after the rise of Hešen in

²² Ibid., 119.

²³ Lynn A. Struve, *The Ming-Qing Conflict, 1619-1683* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1998), 60. R. Kent Guy also remarks on Qianlong’s relative emphasis on literary projects compared to his father’s focus on territorial administration: “Zhang Tingyu and Reconciliation: The Scholar and the State in the Early Qianlong Reign,” *Late Imperial China* 7, no. 1 (1986): 50–62.

²⁴ Rowe, *Saving the World*, 65.

1776.²⁵ Rowe shows that Qianlong's lack of attention to the "sinews of power" goes back much earlier: "The relatively weak state that the Qing found itself with when it came to face an expansive and predatory West in the mid-nineteenth century was a deliberate product of the early Qianlong reign"²⁶ Careful attention to the practicalities of statecraft allow Rowe, in his masterful 2009 introduction to Qing history, to convincingly make the size of the Qing state—its impressive achievement relative to past dynasties but its conspicuous lack of growth relative to that of smaller polities in Europe—a core theme in explaining the course of its history.²⁷

Having composed studies that begin and end in the late eighteenth century, it is perhaps not surprising that William Rowe's latest project returns to this period of transition, tracing the intellectual agenda of the seminal reformer Bao Shichen 包世臣 (1775–1855). Through a careful study of his highly technical statecraft writings, Rowe illuminates "the early nineteenth century as a milestone era in late imperial history, and . . . the collective project to rescue the empire from its manifest decline."²⁸ Bao's utilitarian concern for pressing aspects of China's economic welfare and social stability—studied by Rowe under the headings farming, grain, salt, and money—complement the similar concerns, but very different career, of Chen Hongmou. Like Kuhn, Rowe recognizes that beneath Bao's technocratic agenda lies a deeper, constitutional concern: How to strengthen the central state by harnessing the energies of the literati.²⁹ Rowe shows that Bao spent most of his life without a formal state appointment, yet consistently favored expanding official institutions, including a proposal to bring private experts like himself into the bureaucratic structure.³⁰ Although Bao, like his peers, linked the crisis facing his dynasty more to internal weaknesses than to external dangers, he was ahead of his time in appreciating the threat posed by growing British power. Yet in his relationship to the empire as a whole, Bao stands apart from fellow statecraft scholars like Wei Yuan and Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792–1841). The

²⁵ David S. Nivison, "Ho-shen and His Accusers: Ideology and Political Behavior in the Eighteenth Century," in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. David S. Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 209–43; for an important recent revisionist study on Hešen see Wook Yoon, "Prosperity with the Help of 'Villains,' 1776–1799: A Review of the Heshen Clique and Its Era," *T'oung Pao* 98 (2012): 479–527; for another interpretation of the origins of declining efficiency in the Qing state see Perdue, *China Marches West*, 549.

²⁶ Rowe, *Saving the World*, 46.

²⁷ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 286–87.

²⁸ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

latter used the space opened by the Qianlong–Jiaqing transition to bring the entire Qing realm—Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Manchuria—into the sphere of policy debate. Rowe finds, by contrast, that “it is specifically the *Zhongguo/neidi*—not the empire as a whole—which is the object of Bao’s own identification and sympathies.”³¹ As De Weerdts suggests, crises trigger a reconsideration of the object of political commitment. Divergent views on this question even among close associates suggest that much further study is needed concerning how Han literati after 1800 understood and defined “China.”

As Rowe shows, attention to information circulation and publication holds one key to appraising the importance of men like Chen and Bao. Near the start of both studies he carefully delineates how their image emerged and changed over time, and what this tells us about their relationship to the political climate of different ages. Chen was a valued servant of two emperors, but while his memorials carried enormous influence, his unofficial writings were neglected in his own prosperous age. In an ironic twist, it was the decline of the government he labored to support that restored his fame, from the 1820s onward, as an archetypal model official and guide to later literati seeking to “order the world.”³² By contrast, Bao published relatively little until late in life. He sought influence, successfully, through personal contact with officials and fellow statecraft thinkers, and through the strategic use of political letter writing. He acted “so discretely behind the scenes” that the range of his influence is only now coming to be appreciated.³³

The five articles of this special issue illustrate the insights offered by an information-centered approach to Chinese history. Emily Mokros traces how the protean “communications liaisons,” serving at the margins of the Qing bureaucracy, reinvented their position as the state reengineered the forms of official communication. Nominally associated with the military bureaucracy, early Qing communications liaisons were appointed by provincial governors to serve as their agents in the capital. Part official and part private servant, these liaisons facilitated the dispatch of seals and gifts, collated regular reports of official acts and unofficial news, and acted as spies and public relations representatives for their employers. In 1728, the Yongzheng Emperor characteristically imposed stricter regulations on this post, stipulating the qualifications required, the term of office, and the future

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185. In this Bao seems to be much closer to the concerns of Yan Ruyi 嚴如煜 (1759–1826), whose wide-ranging statecraft interests centered on China Proper. See, for example, Daniel McMahon, “Identity and Conflict on a Chinese Borderland: Yan Ruyi and the Recruitment of the Gelao during the 1795–97 Miao Revolt,” *Late Imperial China* 23, no. 2 (2002): 53–86.

³² Rowe, *Saving the World*, 4–8.

³³ Rowe, *Speaking of Profit*, 14–16.

career trajectory of successful incumbents. Despite these reforms, the expenses of the job, coupled with opportunities for profit, gradually commercialized the position. Communications liaisons partnered with professional managers, who paid them a fee for permission to publish and sell official gazettes. Enterprising liaisons offered private services to provincial sojourners in Beijing, arranging for personal correspondence to be sent home, and for necessary identity certifications to be made. Although communications liaisons joined *yamen* clerks and runners as marginal functionaries denounced for their venality, the office itself survived until the collapse of the dynasty. As Mokros shows, the position of communications liaison, as formally defined, held little appeal. Information was kept in circulation by the pragmatic willingness of incumbents to provide the services demanded by the market. As she concludes, “innumerable such employees in Beijing and across the empire helped facilitate the daily work of the state.”

John R. Bandy’s contribution studies the interwoven careers of the friends Xie Jinluan 謝金鑾 and Zheng Jiancai 鄭兼才, both Fujian natives, students at Fuzhou’s prestigious Aofeng Academy 鰲峰書院, *juren* 舉人 degree-holders, and county instructors in Taiwan. In 1806, as piracy menaced the coast, they joined forces in a concerted media campaign to extend official Qing control over the Gemalan 噶瑪蘭 region of northeastern Taiwan. Xie penned a treatise emphasizing that moral duty and self-interest compelled the Qing to incorporate Gemalan, and Zheng, in Beijing for the *jinshi* 進士 examination, spread this message among influential supporters, ultimately leading the Jiaqing emperor to ratify the project. Their careers reveal much about literati activism in these troubled times. County instructor-ships were not subject to the rule of avoidance, and this was now seen as an advantage. Zheng went so far as to reject a promotion to serve in this post in his home province. In his view, this modest rung on the bureaucratic ladder allowed him to function as an effective intermediary between magistrates and ordinary people. Paradoxically, however, insights gained locally were of value only if they could influence policy at higher levels of government. Both Xie and Zheng won such influence, in Fuzhou and Beijing, by burnishing their reputations as local experts in print and via personal networks.

It is illuminating to contrast Zheng and Xie’s plan for Gemalan with Gong Zizhen’s slightly later proposal to turn Xinjiang into a province.³⁴ From one standpoint similarities stand out: All three were Jiaqing-era *juren* venturing to discuss the best way of managing the empire’s frontiers. From another, however, they differed: Zheng and Xie were self-consciously promoting a local project on

³⁴ James A. Millward, “‘Coming onto the Map’: ‘Western Regions’ Geography and Cartographic Nomenclature in the Making of Chinese Empire in Xinjiang,” *Late Imperial China* 20, no. 2 (1999): 61–98.

the basis of local expertise, whereas Gong was attempting to influence how Manchu officials managed a distant region he could hope to visit only in exile. This resonates with the distinction drawn above between Bao Shichen, who concentrated on regions where he had personal experience, and Wei Yuan's interest in policymaking at the most distant parts of the empire. We do know that between 1800 and 1840, some Han literati became deeply interested in the governance of Qing Inner Asia, while others limited their concern to the provinces of China.³⁵ Rowe's work on Bao Shichen, and Bandy's study of Zheng and Xie, remind us that any study of nineteenth century statecraft thinkers must begin by pondering the spatial boundaries of their political commitment.

Ke Ren brings a cultural lens to the study of interactions between returned Qing diplomats and foreign entrepreneurs during the "scramble for concessions." Like Mokros and Bandy, he is interested in "ad hoc bureaucrats" with marginal official status, in this case "lower-level 'foreign affairs experts.'" Ren's protagonists, Chen Mingyuan 陳明遠 (?–1920) and Chen Jitong 陳季同 (1852–1907), agreed to help a Shanghai-based director of French syndicates in his hunt for mining concessions, a project doomed by shortcomings in the projected mine site and opposition from powerful officials. This new career, as guide and fixer for Western investors, required a new, self-justifying persona. Both Chens sought to represent themselves as cosmopolitan experts who knew how to benefit all parties. Chen Jitong poetically described himself as a man among "demons" (*gui* 鬼)—Westerners and Guizhou aborigines—but worldly enough to question the human—"demon" dichotomy itself. He depicted himself as uniquely able to navigate the shoals of self-strengthening in the turbulent 1890s, steering between Westerners seeking to profit at China's expense and ignorant local officials. His colleague, Chen Mingyuan, also sought the middle ground in his self-exculpatory retrospective account of this mining venture, painting himself as an economic nationalist alert to the pitfalls of foreign-capitalized mines, but also geopolitically savvy enough to see how such projects might benefit China. Ultimately, Ren is concerned with the anxieties of those serving as nodes in emerging transnational networks, and how they publicly fashioned a self-image to ward off political odium.

Considering these three papers together stimulates further consideration of some questions touched on above. One is the astonishing scope and variety of political communication in the Qing context. Although the communications liaison was crucial for the transmission of essential information, official and private, Bandy and Ren show that those trying to promote specific projects or justify their activities could privately print and circulate treatises, write letters, or even compose poetry

³⁵ Matthew W. Mosca, "The Literati Rewriting of China in the Qianlong-Jiaqing Transition," *Late Imperial China* 32, no. 2 (2011): 89–132.

— the last a genre of political expression unduly neglected in Western scholarship.³⁶ All three articles show that within the dynamic world of nineteenth-century China, enterprising individuals could exert greater influence than their modest official ranks would suggest. Finally, of course, there is the question of how this influence could shape individual careers. If Zheng and Xie were men of intense moral seriousness, striving to improve their home province, they were not indifferent to their image, which shaped the reception of their individual judgments. For the communications liaisons and the two Chens, concrete pecuniary benefits flowed from serving as conduits of information, or even claiming rare expertise. All three authors follow the model of their teacher in showing how the study of individuals navigating the challenges of their time can offer unexpected insight into broad historical trends.

Information, of course, is important far beyond the boundaries of public life, and its value for the study of culture and society is demonstrated in the contributions of Ying Zhang and Xiaoqian Ji. Zhang investigates the role of vernacular literature as a medium for circulating medical advice. As she observes, tracking individual recipes as a unit of data transmission shows the porousness of textual and social boundaries. Recipes moved between popular encyclopedias, manuscript commonplace books, and even vernacular novels. Aiding their circulation was content that appealed to practically-minded users, notably testimonials or stories proving that the author or a trusted informant had found the recipes effective. Compared to the relatively narrow influence of elite medical writings, these “practice-oriented recipes” were designed to influence the domestic healing of ordinary people. Still, even here, the line between medicine, culture, and politics remains blurred. As Zhang observes, collecting, testing, and sharing recipes offered local literati a way to advertise their moral mission and assert “their shared expertise and identity as local leaders and reformers.”

Xiaoqian Ji’s study of the late Ming emergence of published *yangsheng* 養生 (nourishing life) techniques for women highlights a fascinating permutation of the circulation of recipes. Like those studied by Zhang, these were ostensibly practical, designed to be prepared and applied in the domestic sphere without the aid of medical experts. From one perspective, they expanded the benefits of the *yangsheng* genre, hitherto preoccupied with male health and longevity, to include women. Yet, as Ji shows, the gender relations underpinning the emergence of this genre were complex. The text at the center of her study, *Xianglian runse* 香奩潤色 (Embellishing the appearance with fragrant cosmetic cases), was printed by Hu Wenhuan 胡文煥, a wealthy and successful publisher attuned to the tastes and expectations of his male audience. Incorporating the *Xianglian runse* into his

³⁶ The value of poetry for political history is demonstrated in Polachek, *Inner Opium War*.

repertoire marked women's health and beauty as objects of knowledge that male literati were expected to master. The purpose of such mastery, however, was less to aid women than to satisfy male curiosity about female bodies and practices. It was their expertise, as much as the benefits of *yangsheng* practices, that now extended into the most intimate spheres of the inner chambers. Ji makes clear that her study captures a moment of transition, in this case the unrestrained but fleeting world of the late Ming. The more straight-laced Qing reverted to the view that information concerning the lives and practices of women should be confined to drier formal medical texts or encyclopedic *leishu* 類書. Although not concerned with state policy, Zhang and Ji trace the circulation of information to uncover shifts in the politics and power relations of everyday life. For local elites and male literati, as much as for Fujianese county instructors and late Qing transnational intermediaries, possessing expertise formed a basis of one's self-image, and advertising that knowledge was an important way to justify one's opinions and influence those of others.

William Rowe's sensitivity to periods of transition is evident in the work of his students. Transitions present historians with notorious difficulties. In China, as elsewhere, ages tend to be bookended by specific political events: Imperial China starts with the Qin unification and ends with the Republican revolution. Marking shorter spans in late imperial history are Dorgon's crossing of the Great Wall in 1644, the start of the High Qing after Kangxi's defeat of the Three Feudatories and the Zheng family regime, the death of Qianlong and Hešen in 1799, and the outbreak of the First Opium War. Historians know that for all their significance, these events are the counters of the wise and the money of fools. The Qing conquest of China neither began nor ended in 1644; a glorious High Qing did not bloom suddenly in 1683 or end promptly in 1799; and an older order on the coast did not suddenly metamorphose into a new one in 1840 or 1842.³⁷ Near the beginning of his outstanding survey of Qing history, Rowe quotes with approval the words of Frederic Wakeman, Jr.:

Gradually, social historians began to realize that the entire period from the 1550s to the 1930s constituted a coherent whole. Instead of seeing the [Qing] as a replication of the past, or 1644 or 1911 as critical terminals, scholars detected processes which stretched across the last four centuries of Chinese history into the Republican period.³⁸

³⁷ Pär Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 5.

Few historians have had the boldness and energy to embrace this approach, and Rowe is one of this distinguished cohort. In his scholarship, transitions are used not to constrain topics into conveniently slender bounds, but as reminders of the imperative to explore both sides of any watershed. It was once not uncommon to believe that 1911, or 1919, or 1949 marked the start of a New China that could be understood largely without reference to earlier developments. Such claims were implicitly predicated on the belief that some overwhelming external factor—an ideology, technology, model of governance, or nebulous “modernity”—had decisively turned China away from an internally-generated course of development (or stagnation). Today, perhaps more than at any point in the past two centuries, it is clear that contemplating China’s present and future requires a *longue durée* perspective that considers multiple layers of history simultaneously. As William Rowe has demonstrated, a longer and wider perspective illuminates internal logics of development obscured by a shorter span. By showing that there need be no trade-off between painstaking research and broad vistas, between the mastery of a specialist and the fearless transcendence of historiographical boundaries, he serves as an inspiration to all who follow in his path.

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