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REVIEW ESSAY

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The Nature and Impact of Late Imperial Chinese Academies: A Review of Some Recent Publications in China

Abstract This review essay analyzes the historiography of Confucian academies (*shuyuan*) in imperial China, focusing on five representative books published in China between 2008 and 2014, including two new editions of books originally published in 1995 and 2004. The five authors share a deep concern about the nature of academies, particularly their relationship with the state. A secondary theme that these books address is the impact that academies had on late imperial Chinese culture and society. Read together, these five works show how research on academies in imperial China has evolved over the past two decades.

Keywords academies, *shuyuan*, historiography, imperial China

The Power and Problem of a Name

By the early nineteenth century, the title "academy" (*shuyuan*, 书院) had gained widespread appeal in southern China. In 1819, Cantonese merchants trading in the central Guangxi market town of Qintang established a native-place association to facilitate their commercial and social activities there. Rather than calling it a "native-place association" (*huiguan*, 会馆), however, they chose the more refined name *Yuedong shuyuan*, 粤东书院, or Guangdong Academy.[1] Some six years later, in the thriving market town of Jiujiang, in Guangdong's

[1] When this "native-place association" was renovated in 1842, the merchants renamed it *Yuedong huiguan*, 粤东会馆. *Chongjian Yuedong huiguan beiji*, 重建粤东会馆碑记, stone inscription, 1842, *Qintang laoren yule huodong zhongxin*, 覃塘老人娱乐活动中心 (Yuedong huiguan, Qintang, Guangxi).

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Nanhai county, leading gentry there established an institution that they called the *Rulin shuyuan*, 儒林书院, or the Forest of Scholars Academy. The main function of this "academy" was to coordinate gentry-led taxation of the town's extensive commercial operations while keeping the hands of the Nanhai county government at bay. The fact that the *Rulin shuyuan* was a gentry-led institution may help to explain why editors of the 1835 Nanhai county gazetteer list this institution as a *shuyuan* along with other unambiguous academies in the county, such as the provincial-level *Yuexiu shuyuan*, 粤秀书院, and even an institution not called a *shuyuan*, the famous *Xuehaitang*, 学海堂. Yet a close study of *Rulin shuyuan* reveals that it was more a tax-farming organization than an educational institution.[2]

The fact that, in early nineteenth-century southern China, both a "native-place association" serving merchants and a tax-collecting unit run by commercially savvy local elites used or "misused" the title "academy" draws attention to two of the main themes of this essay. In the first place, the strategic adoption of this title suggests that however much various organizations called "academies" might have diverged from the intent of the people who established "real" academies, these institutions grew to have a deep social impact. People from different segments of society, many far removed from seats of government power, were aware of the institution of *shuyuan* and found the title "academy" appealing precisely because it conveyed a high degree of legitimacy upon their institution and implied recognition by the imperial state.

In China, the past decade has seen the publication of a number of important books on academies, approaching this broad subject from a number of different angles. Although none of these studies deigns to include something as far removed from Confucian scholarship as Qintang's *Yuedong shuyuan*, they nevertheless share with one another a deep concern about questions that my two examples raise: A question about the nature of academies, particularly their relationship with the state, and a question of the impact that academies had on late imperial Chinese culture and society. For this essay, I have chosen a selection of five representative books by Chinese authors on academies that have been published within the last decade. Two of these five books are new editions of works published in 1995 and 2004; I include them to illustrate how the field has

[2] *Nanhai xianzhi*, 南海县志, 1835/1869, *11*, pp. 49b–52a. For a description of this "academy's" operations see S. B. Miles (2006). *The sea of learning: Mobility and identity in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, pp. 252–254.

since developed, over the somewhat longer period of two decades.[3]

The two new editions of previously published books are institutional histories, providing useful chronological narratives of the origins, rise, flourishing, and decline of academies. The historian Bai Xinliang, born in 1944 and currently based at Nankai University, represents a senior generation of current scholars who work on academies. His *Research on Ming and Qing Academies*[4] is a retitled edition of his influential book *History of the Development of Academies in Ancient China*[5]. This name change makes a certain amount of sense, as the book devotes one chapter to pre-Ming history, one chapter to the Ming, and four separate chapters to the Qing. Having come of age under Mao, Professor Bai firmly situates his narrative within the context of a Marxist economic base and social superstructure. Ironically, this established approach provides a refreshing dash of sober social reality in a field that tends to present the scholars (*shi*, 士, or *shiren*, 士人) who sponsored and attended academies as detached from any class backgrounds or interests. Bai's book is based almost exclusively on gazetteers, but he uses a lot of them.

If Bai Xinliang helped to set the current field of the institutional history of academies, the historian Deng Hongbo offers a detailed reexamination of this topic in his *History of Academies in China*.[6] Though still quite young, Professor Deng has been influential in the study of academies for three decades, and may accordingly be considered a transitional figure between Bai's generation and the three other authors discussed below. This book is a revised edition of a 2004

[3] This is clearly not an exhaustive list; my aim is to be representative. Some other important studies are J. L. Wang (2009). 清代书院与汉学的互动研究 [*Qing dynasty academies and Han learning*]. 武汉, 中国: 武汉出版社 [Wuhan, China: Wuhan Publishing House]; Q. Y. Song (2012). 诂经精舍与学海堂两书院的文学教育研究 [*Research on the study of literature at Gujingjingshe and Xuehaitang Academies*]. 济南, 中国: 齐鲁书社 [Jinan, China: Qilu Press]; and B. Li (2005). 书院与科举关系研究 [*Academies and the imperial examinations*]. 武汉, 中国: 华中师范大学出版社 [Wuhan, China: Huazhong Normal University Press]. Another important work, produced by a scholar based in Chinese Taiwan, is W. Y. Chen (2004). 由官学到书院: 从制度与理念的互动看宋代教育的演变 [*From official schools to academies: The interaction of institutions and ideals in the evolution of Song dynasty education*]. 台北, 中国: 联经出版公司 [Taipei, China: Linking Publishing].

[4] X. L. Bai (2012). 明清书院研究 [*Research on Ming and Qing academies*]. 北京, 中国: 故宫出版社 [Beijing, China: Forbidden City Press].

[5] X. L. Bai (1995). 中国古代书院发展史 [*History of the development of academies in ancient China*]. 天津, 中国: 天津大学出版社 [Tianjin, China: Tianjin University Press].

[6] H. B. Deng (2013). 中国书院史 [*History of academies in China*]. 武汉, 中国: 武汉大学出版社 [Wuhan, China: Wuhan University Press].

book with the same title. The most significant new element in the 2013 edition is the revised estimates of the total number of academies for each dynasty; this is particularly the case for the Qing, as Deng has taken up the task of providing a complete list of academies for the tables of academies and schools used in the massive new *Qing History* project. Like Bai's work, Deng's lengthy study uses a large number of gazetteers, but Deng has expanded his source base to include other material.

The remaining three authors considered here belong to a generation of scholars born between 1964 and 1974 whose recent publications are pushing the field in new directions by opening up new source bases and by exploring particular topics in more detail. Another factor is the entry into the field of scholars trained in literary history. One such scholar is Liu Yucai. In *Research on Qing Dynasty Academies and Changes in Scholarship*,[7] Liu situates the intellectual history of the Qing within the institution of academies, seeking to convince intellectual historians of the importance of academies and to shift the focus of studies of academies from institutional history to intellectual history. Liu makes use of a wide range of sources; particularly noteworthy is his use of letters. He organizes his book with chapters focusing on the role of academies in particular intellectual or literary trends; the result is a flexibly chronological overview, to the extent that a chapter on *lixue*, 理学, is primarily set in the Kangxi reign while the following chapter on evidential research is set in the Qianlong and Jiaqing eras, for example.

Another literary scholar who tackles the topic of academies is Cheng Nensheng. *Research on Literature Education in China's Academies*[8] is an ambitious attempt to address a disparate range of issues related to literature education in academies throughout their history. One recurrent theme in this book is the importance of moral education in tandem with literature education and, often, in tension with education focusing on civil service examinations. Like Liu, Cheng goes far beyond gazetteers in his search for sources, making particularly good use of published editions of marked academy examination papers.

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[7] Y. C. Liu (2008). 清代书院与学术变迁研究 [*Research on Qing dynasty academies and changes in scholarship*]. 北京, 中国: 北京大学出版社 [Beijing, China: Peking University Press].

[8] N. S. Cheng (2014). 中国书院文学教育研究 [*Research on literature education in China's academies*]. 北京, 中国: 中国社会科学出版社 [Beijing, China: China Social Sciences Press].

The final author to be considered, Xiao Yongming, is a historian, but one who takes a very different approach from the grand narratives presented by Bai Xinliang and Deng Hongbo. At least, this is the impression one gets upon first encountering Xiao's book *Confucianism, Academies, and Society: A Sociocultural Historical Perspective on Academies*.[9] The book is organized thematically, seeking to place the history of academies within a solid historical context. Rather than focus on one academy or a set of academies in a specific region, however, Xiao ambitiously seeks to address the nature and impact of academies across the entire history of academies throughout China. Accordingly, as we shall see, an overarching narrative gradually emerges from the pages of this book.

In this review essay, I will not attempt to address every issue that these five rich studies cover; rather, I will focus on some of the ways in which the five authors are in conversation with each other. In different ways, all five books address issues of the nature and impact of academies in late imperial China. Specifically, a primary concern that they all share is identifying the relationship between academies and the state. Were academies popular organizations independent of the state, were they state creations, or did the state coopt academies by transforming them into institutions resembling official schools (*guanxue hua*, 官学化)? A related question is that of the relationship between the civil service examinations and education at academies. A second concern is the impact of academies, both on scholarly and literary trends and, in more recent studies, on the society beyond academies. Finally, approaching this field as a scholar of history, not a scholar of education, I will suggest some questions that these five works do not ask, and thus are open to future studies.

The Nature of Academies and Their Relation to the State

For all of their innovative features, the five studies under review here share with earlier studies an abiding concern about the relationship between academies and the state.[10] This question emerges as soon as the authors address the origins of

[9] Y. M. Xiao (2012). 儒学, 书院, 社会: 社会文化史视野中的书院 [*Confucianism, academies, and society: A sociocultural historical perspective on academies*]. 北京, 中国: 商务印书馆 [Beijing, China: Commercial Press].

[10] An early but still widely cited study that distinguishes between popular and official academies is S. Y. Cao (1929/1930). 宋元明清书院概况 [Overview of academies from the Song to the Qing]. 国立中山大学语言历史学研究所周刊 [*National Sun Yat-sen University Institute of Philology and History Weekly Journal*], *10*, 111–114.

academies. Bai Xinliang points out that the name "*shuyuan*" was first used by two institutions carrying out imperial scholastic projects—*Lizheng shuyuan*, 丽正书院 and *Xiuxian shuyuan*, 修贤书院—at the Tang court in the 710s. While Bai acknowledges that most *shuyuan* in the Tang were privately established studios of individual scholars, he notes that they rarely outlived their owners. Thus, Bai ultimately sees northern China's Central Plains as the place of origin for academies (p. 50). In contrast to the northerner Bai Xinliang, the southerner Deng Hongbo asserts that the first institutions to use the name "*shuyuan*" were in fact private studios in the area of modern-day Jiangxi established before the 710s. Soon after they were created, their activities expanded beyond the functions of private scholars' studios. This is not to say that the state was not important; rather, the court's establishment of *Lizheng shuyuan* and *Xiuxian shuyuan* legitimized the label "academy" and led to its widespread acceptance by scholarly elites (*shiren*, 士人). For Deng, then, *shuyuan* had dual origins in Tang China, both official (state) and popular (society), and accordingly there emerged two traditions of official (*guanban*, 官办) academies and popular (*minban*, 民办) academies. To drive home his point, Deng argues that of 72 academies in the Tang and Five Dynasties eras, 12 are known to have been founded by the central government or by local officials, as opposed to 53 established by non-state agents (pp. 54–55).

Liu Yucai follows Bai Xinliang in asserting that the Tang court first used the name "*shuyuan*," in the 710s. For Liu, however, much more important than the origin of the name is the origin of the spirit of academies, and this he boldly traces back to Confucius and his disciples, and somewhat more cautiously to private schools of classical exegesis in the Han dynasty. But academies really only came into being in the Northern Song, with the influence of organizational practices from Buddhist monasteries (pp. 2, 4, 7). The social historian Xiao Yongming is less concerned with the remote origin of academies, seeing their birth as a process culminating in their institutionalization during the Song. Nevertheless, Xiao probably goes further than any other scholar reviewed here in stressing the non-state origins of academies. He asserts that academies were spawned by private schools and grew outside the official educational system (p. 52). Xiao accepts Deng Hongbo's assertion that academies originated as popular organizations in the Tang, but Xiao emphasizes that, as early as the Five Dynasties, academies came to the attention of dynastic rulers, who sought to

coopt academies through sponsorship (p. 301).

When addressing academies and the state in late imperial China, a consistent theme is that academies tended to thrive when official schools were defunct; academies by default served as stand-in institutions for the cultivation of bureaucratic talent. This theme begins with the early decades of the Northern Song. Bai Xinliang argues that the educational function of academies became more important at this time as the dynasty's founders were preoccupied with stabilizing the new regime. Deng echoes this argument, adding that academies in the south far outnumbered those in the north, even though the political center was in the north; in Deng's view, this demonstrates that politics and cultural education can develop separately (p. 72).

All five authors identify the Southern Song as a golden age of academies, in large part because academies grew outside of, and even in opposition to, the official school and civil examination systems. The driving force behind the exponential growth of academies in the Southern Song was the *lixue* (*daoxue*, 道学, or Neo-Confucian) movement.

Among other factors, Bai Xinliang (pp. 23–25) attributes the growth of academies, of which he counts 442 in the Southern Song, to the deterioration of the official school system and the civil examination system (though the latter was arguably expanding rather than deteriorating). Another factor was the propagation of *lixue*, as Zhu Xi and other Neo-Confucian activists saw academies as the only viable forum for propagating their ideas. For Deng Hongbo (pp. 129–130), the Song dynasty was the age of popular academies (*minjian*, 民间), due in large part to the *lixue* movement (one wonders why Deng nevertheless chooses to use imperial reigns to construct charts showing rising and declining rates of academy construction). Liu Yucai, despite his focus on the Qing, views the Song, and from his description he clearly means Southern Song, as the most glorious period in the history of academies. In Liu's view, what distinguished academies from other schools, including the official schools, was the practice that developed in the Song and was known as lecturing on learning (*jiangxue*, 讲学; pp. 10–11).

A central argument in Cheng Nensheng's book is that academies generally performed the function of making up for the inadequacies of official schools, especially in emphasizing the moral cultivation of students (p. 17). In order to show the prevailing emphasis on moral education at academies throughout their

history, Cheng points to moral content in academy regulations (*xuegui*, 学规), rituals, library holdings, and even naming practices. While Cheng attempts to select an even number of examples from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing, the moral agenda that he has in mind is clearly that of the Southern Song *lixue* masters. Thus his discussion of academy regulations obligingly begins with those that Zhu Xi wrote for the famous *Bailudong shuyuan*, 白鹿洞书院. As one illustration of the moral content in naming practices, Cheng (p. 31) lists six academies in each of the four dynasties that were named after Zhu Xi (*Ziyang*, 紫阳), assuming that if the academy founders chose such a name then the academy must have emphasized moral education (of course, we saw at the outset of this essay that names can be deceptive; "Forest of Tax Farmers" would not have been an appealing name for Jiujiang's new institution in 1825). Ultimately, although Cheng recognizes that morals change over time and even have a class nature (p. 56), he identifies the special characteristics of academy education with the academies of the Southern Song and their combination of moral education and civil examination-oriented training (p. 67).

If, for Bai Xinliang, *lixue* advocates had no alternative but to base their movement in academies, for Xiao Yongming the turn to academies was not simply an expedient strategy in an unfavorable political climate but rather a conscious choice to develop *lixue* outside the official system (pp. 196–197). For Zhu Xi and others in the movement, academies not only offered an alternative space to official schools and the narrow pursuit of fame and fortune in the civil examinations, but, having originated as personal studios in the Tang, the legacy of self-determination (*zizhu xing*, 自主性) in academy education made a good fit for *lixue* and its emphasis on self-awareness (*zhuti zijue xing*, 主体自觉性; pp. 212–213). The new generation of scholars—Liu, Cheng, and Xiao—less concerned with institutional history, hold up the Southern Song academy associated with the *lixue* movement as an ideal type: a non-state space where morally engaged scholarship is freely undertaken.

For some of these scholars, another Neo-Confucian movement, that of Wang Yangming in the mid-Ming, represents a second(ary) glorious age of academies when free thinking and lecturing on learning again flourished. Both Deng Hongbo (p. 303) and Xiao Yongming portray Wang Yangming's movement as a reaction against the state-sanctioned version of Zhu Xi's *lixue* philosophy, which had become state ideology. Ironically, then, Zhu Xi's Southern Song *lixue*

movement and Wang Yangming's mid-Ming *xinxue*, 心学, movement were based in academies as alternative spaces to the state system, and were propagated through lectures on learning. Xiao goes even further to suggest that *jiangxue*, as the essence of academy education, really only became institutionalized during the Ming (p. 261).

If for these authors the flourishing of academies in tandem with the rise of *lixue* in the Southern Song is the most celebrated moment in the history of academies, much of the remaining history is presented in the overarching narrative as a kind of falling away from this ideal. The proliferation of academies during the conquest dynasties, the Yuan and Qing, presents something of a conundrum. The root of the problem is that if academies flourished in the Southern Song and mid-Ming as alternatives to the official school system, academies flourished in the Yuan and Qing because these two states eventually settled on policies of actively promoting academies by coopting them into the official system, making them more like official schools, a process that these authors refer to as *guanxue hua*.

The authors highlight this process of *guanxue hua* in all dynasties, beginning with the Song. Even for the Northern Song, both Bai Xinliang and Deng Hongbo point to state sponsorship of academies, in the form of imperially granted tablets and books, for instance; however, for Xiao Yongming this patronage represents an early state effort to intervene in the academies. When the Northern Song began to establish an official school system, this sponsorship declined (pp. 304–305). For the Southern Song, Bai notes that the state eventually became a strong supporter of academies, granting tablets, financial support, and even responding to requests to establish academies (pp. 26–27). Xiao Yongming argues that, in doing so, Southern Song emperors began the process of extending state authority over academies. Moreover, Xiao argues, state patronage was something that Zhu Xi and other *lixue* advocates actively sought (p. 308).

What began as a ripple in the Song became a tidal wave of *guanxue hua* in the Yuan. Bai, Deng, and Xiao all emphasize this, pointing out that the Yuan state controlled the appointment of academy directors (*shanzhang*, 山长), thereby incorporating them into the state apparatus as bureaucrats, and set up procedures for requesting state approval for the establishment of new academies. For Bai, in particular, Yuan patronage of academies was the conquest dynasty's only means of roping in Han Chinese intellectuals and preventing their opposition (p. 59).

Drastic fluctuations in Ming state policy towards academies makes it difficult to generalize about the fate of academies during this dynasty; nonetheless, both Bai and Xiao fit the Ming into a larger narrative of a continuing *guanxue hua* of academies. Bai emphasizes the power of the Ming state to affect the fate of academies, with strict limitations on private academies in the early decades of the dynasty (those academies that did flourish tended to be located in the far south, Bai emphasizes), state support and even state leadership in the construction of new academies in the second half of the fifteenth century, and, despite the influence of Wang Yangming's *xinxue* movement, a growing incorporation of academies into the state system from the mid-Ming. By the late Ming, Bai asserts, most academies were subordinated to the civil service examination system, in the sense that their curricula consisted entirely of preparation for the examinations. Xiao Yongming pushes this type of argument farther, by arguing that the series of purges against academies in the Jiajing reign, under Zhang Juzheng in 1570s, and under Wei Zhongxian during the 1620s, all shared the fundamental aim of bolstering authoritarian imperial rule. In Xiao's reading, the vicious rivalry between Wei Zhongxian and the Donglin Academy activists boils down to a contest between authoritarian rule and the spirit of free lecturing on learning at the academies (p. 323). But where Xiao finds a Manichean struggle, Deng Hongbo hesitates to view the state as monolithic, pointing out for example that the support of local officials was one factor that prevented many academies from being eliminated in Jiajing purges (p. 421).

Both Bai Xinliang and Deng Hongbo portray the Qing as a high point in the development of academies, at least in terms of numbers, Bai providing a figure of 4,365 academies founded or renovated in the Qing and Deng revising the number upwards to 5,836. Yet for some of these authors, far more important than the demonstrable growth in numbers was the culmination in the Qing of the process of *guanxue hua*, of coopting academies into the official system. Bai finds that, already in the early decades of the dynasty, the influence of "feudal rulers" fundamentally changed the nature of academies as they had developed in the mid-Ming (p. 144). The Kangxi court both promoted Cheng-Zhu *lixue* as state ideology and discouraged the Ming practice, still popular in the early Qing, of lecturing on learning. A once vibrant and diverse academic culture was replaced by an emphasis on training for the civil examinations. State control of academies increased in the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns, with the Yongzheng emperor's

1733 creation of flagship provincial academies and the Qianlong emperor ordering that academy directors henceforth be called *yuanzhang*, 院长, rather than the traditional *shanzhang*, the latter term suggesting remoteness from centers of state power. The result of an unbroken increase in thought control changed the original nature of academies, as organizations where lecturing on learning was freely undertaken, into state-sponsored institutions serving state needs (p. 158).

In contrast to the other authors, Deng Hongbo again offers a somewhat more nuanced perspective, particularly on the Yongzheng initiative. While admitting that the famous 1733 edict establishing 23 provincial academies was a culminating act in the establishment of official academies, Deng at the same time hails this "creative contribution to the development of academies" (p. 482). It created a system whereby the level of education at academies corresponded to where the city in which an academy was located ranked in the administrative hierarchy, some serving a county, some a prefecture, and others a province. In this system, popular academies still had a place, at the village or lineage level. Deng thus takes an institutional historian's perspective in marveling at the structural sophistication of this system.

For the intellectual historian Liu Yucai and the social historian Xiao Yongming, there is no reason to celebrate Qing developments. Liu argues that the level of *guanxue hua* achieved in the Qing far surpassed that achieved in the Yuan and Ming, with a corresponding loss of freedom for academies. The Yongzheng's 1733 edict was an attempt to control thought and ensnare scholars by transforming academies into something like official schools. Moreover, this entailed a loss of original nature: As academies' curricula increasingly focused on civil examination preparation, academies were no longer places where both knowledge and moral praxis were cultivated. Of course, in a book that situates Qing-era intellectual trends in academies, Liu is forced to admit that despite this appearance of ossification in academies' curricula, at least a few, prominent academies were able to adapt to new scholarly orientations.

Xiao Yongming implies that state incorporation of academies in the Qing was more nefarious than state suppression of academies in the Ming. He tackles the issue of the relationship between academies and the Qing state in two separate chapters. One chapter examines the influence and motivations of different social groups that sponsored academies, beginning with imperial rulers. Xiao finds a

gradual cooptation of academies, which originally grew outside the official educational system, by imperial sponsorship beginning in the Song. But the Qing was unsurpassed in its sponsorship, culminating in the Yongzheng emperor's 23 provincial academies. Like Deng, Xiao sees this sponsorship as providing a social environment in which academies could thrive, but like Liu he views this sponsorship increasingly as a tool for autocratic authority to control academies, with the result that academies lost their independence and autonomy (p. 75). In another chapter, specifically on the relationship between academies and the political system, Xiao paints a bleak picture of the Qing. For Xiao, early fluctuations in Qing policy—from suppression in the Shunzhi reign, to cautious sponsorship in the Kangxi reign, to eager support from the late Yongzheng reign into the Qianlong reign—were all measures to strengthen authoritarian imperial rule (p. 323). By incorporating academies into the official system, Yongzheng changed the nature of academies, "castrating" them. Academies were no longer places for *shi* (scholars) to gather and freely lecture on learning, but rather official organizations for producing bureaucratic talent to serve the dynasty (pp. 327, 330–331). For this argument to stick, Xiao is forced to end his discussion with the Yongzheng provincial academies and the Qianlong emperor's interventionist edicts on academies, before the innovative academies of the nineteenth century were established.

Although Cheng Nensheng shares the criticisms that the other authors level against Qing academies for focusing on civil examinations in academies, he actually bothers to read civil examination-style essays written for academy examinations and marked by academy directors. Comparing eight-legged essays in two collections of academy examination papers, published in 1895 and 1901, Cheng finds that comments on one academy's papers tend to praise the students' moral and scholarly insights while comments on the other academy's papers tend to focus on stylistic points (p. 234). Without fully reassessing the civil examinations and their place in academy curricula, Cheng thus suggests that training in eight-legged essays was not necessarily void of moral content. Instead, he emphasizes that Qing academy education had become standardized (p. 244).

The nineteenth century presents problems for the argument that academies were completely incorporated into the official system (*guanxue hua*) and subservient to the civil examinations. If academies and the Qing state were so closely intertwined, how could academies have flourished in a period when the

dynasty, at least according to standard narratives, was in rapid decline? Bai Xinliang describes a revival of scholarly creativity at academies as authoritarian rule began to falter; the early and mid-nineteenth century saw the emergence of academies devoted to evidential research and "*Han* learning," a revitalized Cheng-Zhu *lixue*, and New Text Confucianism. Cheng Nensheng draws attention to the fact that some nineteenth-century academies, such as the *Xuehaitang* and *Guangya shuyuan*, 广雅书院, in Guangzhou, became important players in the publishing industry.

Despite these signs of life in the nineteenth century, Bai Xinliang ultimately fits the history of academies within a larger narrative of decline. He quotes contemporaries' complaints to suggest that there was a serious decline in the quality of academy directors by mid-century. The efforts of local elites to gain control over the hiring of directors were, in Bai's view, an attempt to address the problem of quality (p. 214). For Cheng Nensheng, the assertion of gentry control was one strategy to address the growing problem of academies exclusively focusing on training for the civil examinations (pp. 98, 101), though it is difficult to imagine local elites protesting too loudly against academies that were helping their sons to pass the examinations. In contrast, Deng reads this elite activism in academies not as a sign of decline, but rather as a kind of democratization, a shift from official control to gentry control in revising academy regulations, hiring directors, and managing finances (pp. 492, 617).

In addressing the final decades of the nineteenth century, before an imperial edict in 1901 ordered the conversion of academies into modern schools (*xuetang*, 学堂), Bai Xinliang does not ignore the fact that the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns witnessed impressively high rates of establishment and reconstruction of academies. Arguably, the most interesting aspect of the numbers that Bai provides is the way in which academy sponsors used post-Taiping reconstruction as an opportunity to realize new goals: In fact, very few academies were renovated, only 14 in the Tongzhi reign and 11 in the Guangxu reign; compare this to the 366 and 671 new academies founded in these two reigns (p. 235). But for Bai, this was only a revival, and a temporary one at that. This wave of construction was a top-down recovery led by the highest echelons of officialdom, and as feudal rule declined, academies entered the last stage of their existence. This revival was a desperate effort to resist the tide of educational reform (p. 248). Bai thus takes an unflinching look at the demise of academies, which he

presents as inevitable for a feudal institution incapable of adapting to the needs of modern society (p. 254). There is no place for historical contingency in Bai's telling.

Whereas Bai fits academies into a master narrative of decline, Deng Hongbo, if only implicitly, forces us to question this master narrative. Deng begins by pointing out the high rates of academy construction in the Tongzhi and Guangxu reigns, the highest rates in the 1,300-year history of academies, and then raises the interesting question of why academies suddenly vanished when at the height of their development (p. 459). Moreover, rather than representing a vain attempt to stave off educational reform, Deng argues that many late-Qing academies embraced curricular reform, even incorporating Western learning. Deng asserts that the 1901 edict converting academies into schools was thus an arbitrary, even artificial, action, leading academies to die an unnatural death (p. 655); others might describe Deng's position as allowing a place for historical contingency. In an afterward to the 2013 edition of his book, Deng offers hope to true believers: Academies survived the conversion, and they have lived on into the twenty-first century. Deng points not only to waves of scholarly interest in academies, of which his own scholarship forms a large part, but also to the founding and revival of academies, such as Qian Mu's *Xinya shuyuan*, 新亚书院, or New Asia College founded in Hong Kong in 1949, and the revival of the famous *Yuelu shuyuan*, 岳麓书院, as a unit within Hunan University. For Deng, like Xiao Yongming based at *Yuelu shuyuan*, the establishment of academies and the study of academies are linked projects.

Liu Yucai has a somewhat different take on the fate of academies, which he presents both as ushering in modern-style education and as inadaptable to the modern age. Liu sees what he calls "scholarly academies" (*xueshu xing shuyuan*, 学术型书院) of the Qianlong-Jiaqing era as forerunners of the conversion of academies into schools in the sense that these "scholarly academies" abandoned the dual emphasis, found at "traditional academies," on scholarly learning and moral cultivation (p. 190). Of course, the omission of moral cultivation was also, for Liu, a fault with the overwhelming majority of Qing-era academies, which focused on preparation for civil examinations. This de-linking of scholarly training and moral cultivation, or character education in modern parlance, is for Liu a real loss worth contemplating today. While in this respect early nineteenth-century "scholarly academies" were (problematically) modern,

similar academies in the late-nineteenth century were for Liu hopelessly backward. He uses examination papers from *Zhongshan shuyuan*, 钟山书院, in 1895 to show that students were still looking to the classical tradition to find answers to new, unprecedented problems. In a tone reminiscent of Joseph Levenson, Liu asserts that the more loudly they proclaimed the importance of history and tradition, the further away from their reality these things of the past moved. This lack of truly creative theoretical innovation indicates to Liu that traditional academies in 1895 were already near end of their tether (pp. 199–200).

With the possible exception of Deng Hongbo, who sees the basic activities of academies as having been established in the Tang-Five Dynasties era, the authors of the five books under review here identify the fundamental nature of academies with those established by *lixue* advocates in the Southern Song, or with academies established by followers of Wang Yangming in the mid-Ming. To the extent that academies became linked to the imperial state, they lost some of their original nature. Where these authors disagree is the precise extent to which academies and the state became linked by the high Qing. Bai Xinliang portrays academies and the state as completely interlinked by the end, and hence they necessarily had to die together. Deng Hongbo views academies as retaining some of their nature throughout their history: Academies had dual state-popular origins in the Tang, and, despite the process of *guanxue hua*, even the proliferation of academies in the Qing was due to state and society working together; consequently, the 1901 conversion of academies was not at all necessary.

The Impact of Academies: Scholarship, Literature, and Society

Aside from addressing the nature of academies and their relationship with the state, another major concern shared by the five books under review is the impact of academies, primarily upon scholarly and literary trends, but also, in Xiao Yongming's innovative study, upon the larger society of late imperial China.

All five authors at least gesture toward the close link between academies and Zhu Xi's *lixue* movement of the Southern Song and to Wang Yangming's *xinxue* movement of the mid-Ming. Addressing the former, Deng Hongbo finds a thorough integration of the *lixue* movement and academies, particularly as the movement began in southern China. Likewise, Wang Yangming's *xinxue* movement only gained momentum when it was integrated with academies. Xiao

Yongming explicitly seeks to go beyond simply asserting a link between *lixue* and the academies to demonstrate concrete ties between the two, for example, showing how regional variations of the Southern Song *lixue* movement were linked to specific individuals active in particular academies, or listing the important *lixue* writings that Zhu Xi produced while based at particular academies.

Bai, Deng, and Liu devote a great deal of attention to the origins of *kaozheng*, 考证, or evidential learning during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns. In Bai's work, academies themselves seem to have had little impact on the rise of evidential research; rather, the impetus came entirely from imperial initiative. Increasingly disenchanted with Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, the Qianlong emperor promoted evidential research through the civil service examinations, beginning with the palace examination in 1745. Because the emperor restricted *lixue* advocates from ascending the bureaucratic ladder, academies throughout the empire followed his lead in pushing a change of scholarly direction (p. 195). Deng Hongbo largely concurs with this assessment of imperial origins of *kaozheng*, but he instead places emphasis upon the extent to which the promotion of evidential research in academies represents a third instance after the Southern Song and the mid-Ming of the integration of academies and an emerging scholarly trend. Using Jiang Fan's genealogy of "Han Learning" scholars, *Hanxue shicheng ji*, 汉学师承记, Deng shows that innovators in evidential research were based in academies, beginning with Hui Dong at *Ziyang shuyuan*, 紫阳书院, in Suzhou.

Liu Yucai argues that every major scholarly trend in the Qing was closely connected to academies, and evidential research was certainly no exception. Like Bai, he emphasizes imperial initiative in steering scholarship away from *lixue* and towards *kaozheng*. Yet Liu takes seriously the role of academies in producing and popularizing evidential research, providing more details than Deng. Liu also offers his academy-based approach as an alternative to regional categories, popular in studies of Qing intellectual history beginning with the work of Liang Qichao. Rather than an "unscientific" typology of schools of evidential research such as the Suzhou school (*wupai*, 吴派) or Anhui school (*wanpai*, 皖派), then, Liu proposes to look at circles of evidential scholars based at particular academies, such as *Ziyang shuyuan* in Suzhou or the academy of the same name in Anhui. Accordingly, Liu traces interactions among *kaozheng* luminaries in and

around these academies, in the process also highlighting the importance of scholarly staffs (*mufu*, 幕府) of such officials and evidential scholars as Ruan Yuan.[11] For example, Liu points out that practically all of the many "Han Learning" scholars that emerged from Zhejiang around the turn of the nineteenth century were either members of Ruan Yuan's staff or students at the academy that Ruan founded in Hangzhou, *Gujing jingshe*, 诂经精舍 (p. 129). Evidential research and "Han Learning" were so closely linked to academies that Liu writes of an "academization" (*shuyuan hua*, 书院化) of evidential research.

In some places Liu could push his argument further. He makes a strong case for situating Qing intellectual history in the academies. He points out that, at least before the crisis of 1895, scholarship in the tradition of Qianlong- and Jiaqing-era evidential research continued to have an important place in academies, even though it is commonly assumed that New Text Confucianism came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century (p. 182). One might go further to say that centering nineteenth-century intellectual history in academies forces us to revise common narratives about that history. It might be worthwhile to discard assumptions before approaching this history, asking what was taught in academies first, and then seeing what kind of narrative emerges.

Both Cheng Nensheng and Xiao Yongming address the impact of academies on local cultures. While in some instances the evidence they point to might be considered localist literature, or literature celebrating local culture, their focus is mostly on the role that academies played in promoting the dominant culture in a particular locale. Cheng offers two examples of academies that were important in the development of local literature (*difang wenxue*, 地方文学 or *dangdi wenxue*, 当地文学; p. 347), *Yushan shuyuan*, 虞山书院, in Changshu, Jiangsu, and the *Xuehaitang* in Guangzhou. Yet only in the latter case, exemplified by poems on the litchi, does Cheng show us any literature that might be considered localist, characteristic of or celebrating the local. After a discussion of the role of academies in raising standards of scholarship in local cultures, with evidential research at the *Xuehaitang* as a prime example, Xiao Yongming does mention the role of academies in printing localist literature. Tellingly, all but one of his examples are dated, and all of those dated were produced in the early nineteenth

[11] On the link between official staff and intellectual trends, see X. M. Shang (1999). 学人游幕与清代学术 [*Academic staffs and scholarship in the Qing dynasty*]. 北京, 中国: 社会科学文献出版社 [Beijing, China: Social Sciences Academic Press], a book that Liu also cites.

century. It thus becomes crucial to address change over time. When do we find localist literature flourishing and when not?

Among the five authors reviewed here, only Xiao Yongming takes a close look at the larger social impact of academies. Xiao's social historical approach provides a more complete picture of the teachers and students who filled the halls of academies, the *shi*. As latter-day *shi* themselves, a few of the authors occasionally slip into presenting idealized images of these people who were after all elite males. Deng Hongbo portrays the *shiren* of China from ancient times as largely consisting of poor scholars lacking regular employment (p. 169). One could of course just as easily depict them as a leisured class freed from manual labor. Similarly, Cheng Nensheng states that the status of the *shi* in traditional Chinese society was not high (p. 74). Perhaps in comparison to the Qianlong emperor or the Liang-Jiang governor-general the status of a student at *Zhongshan shuyuan* was not high, but if in local society the sons of wealthy landlords and merchants who could afford to provide for their sons the years of education necessary to be identified as *shi* were not people of high status, then who was? If we are to begin to understand the larger social impact of academies, it is necessary to consider their impact on the people who would have seen academy teachers and students as members of a wealthy, high-status class. And Xiao takes us in this direction.

Xiao's central argument about the social impact of academies is that academies played an important role in social control, both state control of *shiren* or scholars, and the dissemination of *shi* values in local society. Academies were places where *shiren* from different sectors of society came together and were imbued with Confucian values (p. 290). Academies thus functioned to connect Confucianism and *shiren*. Despite variations in place, time, and scholarly orientation, Xiao asserts, all academies promoted a shared set of Confucian ethics. Unfortunately, almost all of Xiao's examples are limited to academies that promoted a Neo-Confucian, or *lixue*, agenda.

Because *shiren* were drawn from different walks of life, Xiao asserts, and because their academy educations instilled in them a Confucian identity and belief, academies thereby served to spread a certain value orientation to the wider society. As evidence, Xiao provides a large number of commemorative and other types of writings penned by academy directors and sponsors. This evidence is thoroughly convincing on one point: that many academy leaders claimed, and

perhaps even believed, that the institutions they were writing about would culturally and morally transform local society for the better (pp. 297–300). Whether their academies in fact had such an impact is another question altogether.

Another way in which Xiao addresses the wider social impact of academies is through an analysis of their rituals. Xiao's take on rituals is very different from Bai's. Bai views the "inappropriate expansion" of ritual functions at academies during the Yuan as a "defect" (p. 58). Some academies, he complains, even carried out exclusively ritual, as opposed to scholarly and educational, activities. In contrast, Xiao comes closer to seeing academy rituals on their own terms, as means of social control. Academy sacrifices to *lixue* masters, local worthies, and meritorious officials imbued *shiren* with Confucian ideals and a sense of social responsibility. Moreover, academy leaders envisioned rituals as having a transformative effect on the surrounding society. Xiao points out that some academy shrines were built outside academy grounds, and that in some cases shrines within academy compounds would also be open to the public. Even when academy grounds were not open to the public, the fanfare of a ritual would have garnered public attention to the ethical ideals manifested in the ritual (p. 364). Again, however, it is important to distinguish between the impact that academy leaders stated that they would have and the impact that they actually did have. What kind of competition did academies face in winning the attention of town or city residents? Conceivably more boisterous activities at temples, monasteries, *huiguan*, temporary opera stages, and even execution grounds, to name a few alternatives, stood a better chance of garnering attention and transforming customs in one way or another.

One aspect of the social impact of academies applies specifically to the *xinxue* movement of the mid-Ming. Both Deng Hongbo and Xiao Yongming call attention to the popularization (*pingmin hua*, 平民化) of academies in the sixteenth century, as some of Wang Yangming's followers targeted an audience across a broad social spectrum of (usually urban) residents in part by simplifying the Confucian message. Many such academies opened their doors to commoners, a rare occurrence in earlier dynasties (p. 323). Xiao also notes that these academies turned to a mass audience that even came to include peasants and artisans. In this regard, Xiao could conceivably use this phenomenon to expand his theory about the social impact of academies. For instance, Deng illustrates the

popularization of academies by pointing to examples of using academies to restore order in the aftermath of rebellions. Wang Yangming himself built a successful bureaucratic career upon the suppression of rebellions and reconstruction in their aftermath. Xiao might then build on this to argue that the targeting of a mass audience was as much about what we might call transforming commoners (*hua pingmin*, 化平民), remolding popular culture with Confucian values, as it was about the popularization (*pingmin hua*) of academies.

All five authors have demonstrated beyond a doubt that academies had a major cultural impact in late imperial China, in the sense that almost every new scholarly and literary trend, even if initiated by the court, was incubated and propagated in academies. The works of Cheng Nensheng and Liu Yucai in particular compel scholars of late imperial literary and intellectual history to contextualize literary and intellectual developments by situating them in academies. I would argue that it is equally important to contextualize the history of academies by situating them in their local environments. And for scholarly academies in the Qing, these environments were urban ones. Xiao Yongming has taken an important step in this regard, but much more can be done. One might begin by taking stock of all of the non-academic institutions, like Qintang's *Yuedong shuyuan* and Jiujiang's *Rulin shuyuan*, whose founders chose to name their organizations "academies."

What We Do Not Know: A Small Sample

The five authors reviewed here have provided a wealth of information and insights; for this reviewer, at least, they also do something that all good books should do: draw attention to gaps in our knowledge and suggest avenues of future research. I will conclude by pointing to three areas that these books have led me to consider.

All five authors agree that at some point, perhaps as early as the Yuan, or maybe in the Ming, and certainly by the Qing, the overwhelming majority of academies specialized in training academy students to write civil examinations essays (mostly eight-legged essays) and poems. In situating Qing intellectual trends within academies, Liu Yucai of course highlights what he calls "scholarly academies." When narrowing the scope of their narratives to discuss particular academies, the other authors also generally choose atypical academies, that is, academies that did not exclusively focus on civil examination preparation.

Famous academies with well-preserved records tended to be atypical academies. As a result, we simply do not know very much at all about the vast majority of academies, at least in the Qing. One way of filling this gap in our knowledge about typical academies is to take them on their own terms. Rather than criticizing these civil-examination-focused academies as lacking in intellectual freedom, perhaps we should conceive of them as freely responding to the market, meeting the needs of their constituencies. Doing so might reveal something about the relationship between state and society, either that such academies were more tools of their constituents than they were tools of the state, or that the state insinuated itself in society more subtly than is often described. Cheng Nensheng has begun to explore this avenue by seriously reading academy students' eight-legged essays and regulated-verse poems and academy directors' comments on them. If historical sources will allow, another strategy would be to conduct focused studies of run-of-the-mill academies at the county, village, and lineage level. Deng Hongbo highlights the large number of popular academies at this level in the Qing; dedicated research on these academies may lead us to rethink the role of academies in the relationship between state and society.

Other gaps in our knowledge might be filled by attempting to write the history of academies based on alternative geographical units of study to the most common ones. All five authors here write about academies in China, a massive and often unwieldy field of study. Some studies have focused on academies in a particular province.[12] A possible path of future research is suggested in Deng Hongbo's book. One can easily conclude that for most of their history academies were largely a southern Chinese phenomenon. Deng's tally of academies by province shows that more (and often far more) academies were located in Jiangxi than in other provinces beginning with the Tang and lasting through the Ming. At one point Deng suggests that the prominence of Jiangxi academies as early as the Tang and Five Dynasties represents an omen of the impending southward shift of culture (p. 59). Alternatively, one might say that academies were a southern cultural element. Deng describes in the Yuan a geographical sphere of academies centered in Jiangxi and radiating to the neighboring provinces (using modern or very late imperial provincial units) of Zhejiang, Fujian, Hunan, and Anhui that together accounted for almost 60% of all academies (p. 204). How might the

[12] E.g., C. D. Li (1993). 江西古代书院研究 [*Jiangxi ancient academies*]. 南昌, 中国: 江西教育出版社 [Nanchang, China: Jiangxi Education Publishing House].

history of academies look if one were to take this as the geographical unit of study, for the moment ignoring imperial or modern provincial boundaries and instead simply mapping academies and connecting them through the movement of people? This procedure would seem like a good fit for Historical GIS. Likewise, Deng points out that, after centuries of being peripheral in the history of academies, Guangdong suddenly became important in the Ming, and in the Qing displaced Jiangxi as having the most academies. This begs for an explanation. It is not enough to say that it reflects Guangdong's higher cultural development than other provinces. Why not Jiangsu or Zhejiang, for example? Simply mapping academies without prioritizing political borders might also tell us something new about the relationship between state and society.

All five authors strive for generalizations by studying empire-wide developments; what is lost in this admirable project, however, is local context. This lacuna is partly a result of a focus on institutional development and intellectual and literary history. Perhaps it is time for historians of villages, towns, and cities to pay more attention to academies. All of the Qing-era academies that appear in these five books were located in cities. Accordingly, each academy belonged to an urban environment and, in larger cities, was part of an urban system of academies. One reason that students could heed Ruan Yuan's call to focus on pure scholarship and literature in the *Xuehaitang* academy examinations is that they could, and did, make use of Guangzhou's other academies to prepare for civil examinations. Urban histories of academies may offer an important means for assessing the social impact of academies.

While Xiao Yongming should be lauded for exploring the impact of academies on society, it is important to remember that society also had an impact on academies. People in local communities put academies to all kinds of uses. *Wencheng shuyuan*, 文成书院, in the eastern suburbs of Guangzhou, was one of the many local academies that never appear in histories of academies, but it may have been a typical academy in many ways. In the summer of 1881 a poor husband and wife came to Guangzhou from a nearby county in search of work. Perhaps because the watchman at the academy was from the same county, the couple was able to rent a room in the academy. After the couple had lived in the academy for two months, the academy grounds became a crime scene, when the husband wanted to move again in search of work and told his wife to pack their belongings. She refused, saying she would rather remarry than to follow such a

desperately poor husband; an argument ensued, and the husband killed his wife.[13] Of course, most academies did not become murder scenes, but the ways in which the local community ended up using this academy may have been quite typical, despite the high ideals that founders of *Wencheng shuyuan* may have expressed.

Perhaps it is time to write a history of academies that includes institutions like *Yuedong shuyuan*, *Rulin shuyuan*, and *Wencheng shuyuan*. Many authors, myself included, have tended to ignore such institutions because they were not "real" academies. We instinctively know what is a "native-place association," what is a shrine, and what is an academy, regardless of the name used. Yet by writing a history of academies that includes a wider range of *shuyuan*, beyond the idealized base of *lixue* masters in the Southern Song or exemplary scholarly academies in the nineteenth century, we may be able to gain a more complete understanding of just how wide the social impact of this institution was in late imperial Chinese society.

[13] 刑科題本 [Board of punishments]. 4065-016 (GX8.5.29).