

national self-identities in the direction of narrowing the gap, the two tigers are destined to collide irrespective of their real interests.

*After The Prosperous Age: State and Elites in Early Nineteenth-century Suzhou.* By SEUNGHYUN HAN. Harvard University Press, 2016. 306 pp. \$42.95, £33.15 (cloth).

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Conventional studies of Qing history have tended to focus on the so-called prosperous era of the eighteenth century and the age of humiliation initiated by the first Opium War. Sandwiched between the two epochs of dramatic transformation, the Jiaqing and early Daoguang reigns (1796–1830s) had long been overlooked as an unremarkable period of dynastic decline. Over the past decade, however, a new generation of scholars has been rejecting this monochromatic view in favor of a more nuanced and positive picture of the early nineteenth century.

Seunghyun Han's book, *After the Prosperous Age*, represents a successful effort in this regard. It traces the social and cultural history of a particular region (Suzhou) in the heartland of traditional China—lower Yangzi delta (Jiangnan). Han takes the rise of elite activism as a prism through which to view the changing state-society relations during this “least researched period in the entire history of the Qing” (6). In so doing, he seeks to provide “a systematic and coherent explanation through which we can relate diverse incidents of the time with one another” (9).

Apart from Introduction and Conclusion, this book is composed of two main sections. They are further divided into seven chapters, organized in terms of the different manifestations of elite activism in diverse dimensions. The first part (Chapters 1 to 3) deals with the social aspect of elite activism, mostly the management of local public works ranging from water conservancy to famine relief and philanthropy. The expanding role of the elites in those arenas, Han maintains, strengthened the governmental claims to formal positions of power in the local society. Therefore it was tolerated or even welcomed by the state, which became increasingly financially and bureaucratically strapped.

The more insightful section of the book, in my opinion, is the second part, which consists of Chapters 4 to 7. It shifts the focus by discussing how the social changes explained in Part One shaped Suzhou's cultural environment in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. This is most evident in the increasing enshrinements as well as the changing nature of the shrines and the choice of those to be worshipped. This period also saw the growing production of local literature and the changing historical memories about such controversial local figures as Zhang Shicheng 張士誠. All these new developments showcase “the relaxation of state power in the cultural realm and the greater freedom of the literati's cultural activities in the early nineteenth century” (132).

It is the central proposition of this book that the early nineteenth century marked a watershed in Qing history because of the dual process of elite activism and state retreat. While it has been customary to link this activism to the Taiping Rebellion, Han traces it back to the Jiaqing and early Daoguang reigns, which “witnessed a

transformation from one ruling style to another, one that embodied a more localized nature and was marked by the devolution of power to local elites.” (11). By illuminating the degree of social, cultural, and political accommodation between the local elites and the state in this period, the author shows how wrong we have been to jump from the late Qianlong reign (i.e., 1760–99) to the Opium War as if nothing that happened in between was of great consequence. This book thus challenges the teleology of dynastic decline and rejects the outcome-based interpretation, both of which have led to the backwater status of the early nineteenth century in traditional historiography.

One particular strength of *After The Prosperous Age* is its methodology. Compared to the other authors who have studied the early nineteenth century, Han is particularly adept at weaving both qualitative and quantitative sources to paint its socio-cultural picture. The quality of presentation is enhanced by the inclusion of various figures and the detailed appendix based on solid archival research. In addition, this work represents an approach in Qing history that combines both the breadth of the long-term view (the unfolding of elite activism from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries) and the depth of the local study (focused on Suzhou).

Effective as it is, this approach can be further supplemented by an examination of key events and representative individuals. First of all, it would have been helpful to study specific episodes of extraordinary crisis that accompanied the transition from late Qianlong to Jiaqing-Daoguang reigns. These crises not only had an enormous impact on the mentality and actions of local elites but also profoundly altered the state-society relationship that Han focuses on. Second, the author could have given his book a more humanistic touch by drawing upon such “private” writings as diaries, letters, and anthologies in order to demonstrate how the elites made sense of the crises they encountered. For instance, what problems in society did they articulate and what solutions did they offer? How did they use the power of grassroots activism to advance their fortune in the ordeal of the crises? Moreover, how did the local elites, most of whom were the landowning gentry (*shenshi* 绅士), interact with the scholar-officials (*shidafu* 士大夫) who staffed the imperial bureaucracy? Did the former try to engage in politics to influence government policies and, if so, how? Answering these specific questions might help one better understand the agency of Suzhou elites as well as the significance, vitality, and complexity of the early nineteenth century.

This book conveys a vivid picture of how social practices, cultural production, and government policies fitted together in an exciting world and period of change. In stressing the inseparability of social and cultural changes, it shows how the social history of China can be enriched when it is interwoven with the history of culture and its institutions like shrines. The book thus creates a fuller picture of the key transitional period and brings together some key themes of late Qing history.

That being said, Han misses the opportunities to explore the connections between the rise of elite activism and other concomitant developments in early nineteenth-century China, including the resurgence of literati activism and the new trends in Confucian tradition. As James Polachek points out, more and more educated elites sought to enhance their influence in both the bureaucratic administration and local communities during the Jiaqing and Daoguang reigns.<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to understand not only the interaction

<sup>1</sup>James M. Polachek, *Inner Opium War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

between elite activism in the local communities and literati activism in the political arena but also what role the literati played in the rise of elite activism.

It is also helpful to study the intellectual impetus behind the sociopolitical changes and vice versa. Traditional Chinese scholarship was a key reaffirmation of the political drives and social responsibilities of the elite. The rise of local activism took place within and was reinforced by new trends in Confucian scholarship. The most important change was the turn away from evidential research (*kaozheng* 考證) to statecraft studies (*jingshi* 經世), which became the key element in the literati response to the Qianlong-Jiaqing crises. Along with the simultaneous resurgence of New Text studies (*jinwen jingxue* 今文经学), these intellectual currents together promoted an approach to governance that emphasized small-scale reforms and piecemeal institutional changes, all of which legitimated gentry participation in local and national political affairs. It is worth studying how local elites contributed to and benefited from the reformist programs of statecraft activism at this time.

Both geographical and historical factors, to be sure, added variation to localized forms of elite activism. The difference was especially evident between the core and the peripheral regions. During the early nineteenth century, elites in many parts of the empire exhibited a similar fascination with the local. Both Canton and Changsha, for example, asserted their strong identity through academy building or reconstruction that took a much more autonomous and localist turn. On a related front, anthologies were also increasingly organized around local themes. These new developments, in turn, helped Guangdong and Hunan emerge as the key centers for Qing statecraft studies. The author briefly mentions some of these parallels across China, but in-depth regional comparisons are needed to explain how these developments contributed to China's changing cultural and political geography.

Last but not least, the book rightly suggests that understanding the Jiaqing and early Daoguang period in its full dynamism and complexity is a critical step toward the evaluation of both the periods preceding and following it. It does a good job in comparing and contrasting this transitional period with the previous century. But more discussion should be included about how the rising elite activism of the early nineteenth century paved the way for that of the post-Opium War era as well as the implication of their key differences.

All in all, *After the Prosperous Age* is a very welcome addition to the growing literature on the Jiaqing and early Daoguang reigns. It makes a vital contribution in showing how the revisionist interpretations of this watershed era have figured in the local society and regional culture. Seunghyun Han's informative and enlightening work is a must read for all those interested in this pivotal but most neglected period in Qing history.

*Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities.* By TERRY F. KLEEMAN. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016. 446 pages. \$49.95, £39.95 (cloth).

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