

After the Prosperous Age: State and Elites in Early Nineteenth-Century Suzhou.

By Seunghyun Han. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. Pp. xvii + 286. \$42.95/£33.95.

The early nineteenth century has long been one of the least explored parts of the Qing. Happily, a number of recent publications have begun to remedy this neglect. Han's book joins Wensheng Wang's *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates*¹ in not merely filling in missing details but attempting to bring the period from 1799 to 1840 into sharper focus.

In seven chapters—divided more or less evenly between the three chapters devoted to public works which make up Part I and the four which discuss elite activism in the cultural realm (Part II)—plus brief Introduction and Conclusion, Han marshals evidence to demonstrate that the shift from official to local elite leadership in both spheres was well underway prior to the Opium War and the mid-century rebellions. Reminding us that the high Qing state under Yongzheng and Qianlong aggressively sought to marginalize private initiative in both realms, Han makes a convincing case that this was not simply continuation of business as usual but a radical redefinition of responsibilities. Although centred on Suzhou prefecture, the discussion is not primarily intended as a contribution to local history. It deploys the rich sources for Suzhou to facilitate detailed study of empire-wide phenomena. It thus deepens and enriches Wang's argument that this period saw a deliberate attempt to redefine the relationship between state and society, a redefinition which (Wang has argued) goes a long way toward explaining the ability of the imperial system to survive down to 1912.

While broadly persuasive, this portrait occasionally presses its case farther than the evidence would seem to justify. The prosperous age is for example never defined. It was always at some level imperial propaganda: Xu Yang's 徐揚 1759 *Gusu fanhua tu* 姑蘇繁華圖 (Portrait of Suzhou's prosperity) and his 1764–1770 work commemorating Qianlong's first Southern inspection tour (1751) were both imperial commissions; they omit any discordant evidence. Silver reserves in the imperial treasury peaked in the late 1770s (pp. 25–26)—but it is not clear that we can equate that with general prosperity for the population as a whole. Philip Kuhn suggested in his *Soulstealers* that, insofar as it ever existed, the “real prosperity of the Prosperous Age extended from the 1780s to the mid-1810s.”² Kenneth Pomeranz has argued

¹ Wensheng Wang, *White Lotus Rebels and South China Pirates: Crisis and Reform in the Qing Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

² Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese sorcery scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 39.

that all of the decline posited as having taken place by the early nineteenth century could be accounted for by deteriorating conditions in the peripheries of macroregions, conditions in the cores remaining very much the same as they had been in the high Qing. When Robert Fortune (1813–1880) made his surreptitious visit to Suzhou in the mid-1840s, he reported that the “whole place has a cheerful and flourishing aspect, which one does not often see in the other towns of China.”³ When, where, and in what senses the prosperous age ends is thus less evident than Han assumes.

Han also starts by emphasizing local agency to the virtual exclusion of official initiative. Yet it soon becomes evident that the catalyst for “ascendant elite activism” (to cite the title of Han’s first chapter) was often the initiative of statecraft officials like Tao Shu 陶澍 (1779–1839), Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅 (1775–1849), and Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850). This is true both in famine relief and in hydraulic works (which, at least in Suzhou in the early nineteenth century, often appear to have been more closely linked than Han’s decision to discuss them in separate chapters would imply). The role of local elites—which Han traces to 1823 (p. 88)—was clearly important, yet even in 1823 provincial officials are credited with having played a critical role in the relief effort’s success (p. 89). Moreover, the level of participation in such activities seems to have declined rather than risen over time: Han notes that 1,950,000 taels were contributed in 1823, 1,420,000 taels in 1831, and 1,390,000 taels in 1833–1834 (p. 95). One can think of all sorts of reasons for this; few are consistent with local elites eagerly seizing the initiative. It remains unclear to what degree we should view this as local activism and to what degree we should view it as hard-pressed officials off-loading burdens the state could no longer shoulder on its own.

The boundaries of the local elite are not clearly specified here, so it is hard to determine what portion of that elite was in Han’s reading involved in these efforts. Jiangsu was divided between the Jiangning and Suzhou financial commissioners; the latter (responsible for the more prosperous parts of the province) reported that in 1833–1834 116 donors contributed at least 1,000 taels to the relief effort, with an additional 791 donating amounts between 300 and 999 ounces of silver (p. 96). While this is impressive, it must have represented a small fraction of elite households in the area. Given Jerry Dennerline’s work on the “landlord representative elite” in nearby Jiading’s Ming-Qing transition and James Polachek’s on Suzhou local elites in the nineteenth century, it is unlikely to have been a random group.⁴ The careful reader

³ Robert Fortune, *Three Years’ Wandering in the Northern Provinces of China, Including a Visit to the Tea, Silk, and Cotton Countries: With an Account of the Agriculture and Horticulture of the Chinese, New Plants, etc.* (London: John Murray, 1847), p. 259.

⁴ Jerry Dennerline, *The Chia-ting Loyalists: Confucian Leadership and Social Change in Seventeenth-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); James Polachek, “Gentry
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will learn from Han that a surprising number of those who figure prominently as elite activists were related to one another—thus, one of the leaders of the 1833 relief effort in Suzhou, Han Feng 韓封 (1758–1834), was maternal uncle of Gu Yuan 顧沅 (1799–1851), who was uncle of Gu Zhentao 顧震濤 (1758–?), who was uncle of Gu Lu 顧祿 (all of whom played a prominent role in the revival of unofficial local history in the early nineteenth century). Shi Yunyu 石韞玉 (1755–1837), who “passed the young Tao [S]hu first in the county licensing examination while serving as educational commissioner of Hunan” (pp. 141–42), was clearly in position to play a critical mediating role. As 1790 *zhuangyuan* 狀元, he served as director of Suzhou’s Ziyang Academy 紫陽書院 from 1816 to his death in 1837. A few moments with *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912)* ties him to Peng Yunzhang 彭蘊章 (pp. 83–85), Wu Tingchen 吳廷琛 (pp. 96, 139–40), and Pan Shi’en 潘世恩 (pp. 65, 187–89, 204). Pan Shi’en’s eldest son Zengyi 曾沂 (pp. 65–66, 205, 206) was a close friend of Lin Zexu.⁵ Exploration of such connections would have aided the reader in better understanding how personal ties, cultural commitments, and vested interests promoted (or inhibited) the assumption of these new roles.

A closer look at temporal boundaries also raises additional questions. In the body of the book, Han often shows that the shift from high Qing to the early nineteenth century was less a clear rupture than the intensification of some elements and diminution of others. He does however at points try to suggest a sharper break than the evidence would seem to justify. He attempts to marshal timing of the creation of charitable estates and of benevolent halls in support of his general picture. Is it however plausible to attribute the rise in charitable estates to “the deterioration of state relief capacities and the general decline of the state granary system after 1780” (p. 99) when only 7 were established between 1796 and 1820? Does the timing of the creation of the benevolent halls (31 under Qianlong, 32 in the much-shorter Jiaqing reign period but only 18 under Daoguang) really fit? Why would foundations of *huiguan* 會館 and *gongsuo* 公所 (24 under Qianlong, 15 under Jiaqing, 23 under Daoguang) not also be considered? Similar ambiguities crop up in the cultural realm. While it was not published until 1820, Qian Siyuan 錢思元 (1730–1803) began work on his unofficial supplement to the Suzhou gazetteer in 1771 (p. 163). Thus, the localist turn does not appear quite as purely an early nineteenth-century departure as he elsewhere suggests.

(Note 4—Continued)

Hegemony: Soochow in the T’ung-chih Restoration,” in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, ed. Frederic Wakeman, Jr. and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 211–56.

⁵ Lin Chongyong 林崇墉, *Lin Zexu zhuan* 林則徐傳 (Taipei: Zhonghua dadian bianyinhui, 1967), p. 72.

On occasion, he also invokes the conclusions of studies from distant (and very different) parts of the empire to provide possible explanations for what is happening in Suzhou. The fact that scholars working on Sichuan have attributed the rise in elite-led “public bureaus” there to “the deficit in government personnel caused by massive migrations into Sichuan” (p. 101) does not really seem to help one understand why the same thing would be happening in Suzhou (which was indeed densely populated but not witnessing anything that could be described as massive immigration in this period). Similarly, invoking Peter Bol’s study of Neo-Confucianism in Jinhua⁶ to explain a “heightened sense of localism” (p. 177 and n. 30) in Suzhou does not really work: Suzhou was not a hotbed of the Neo-Confucian movement in the Ming, a curious fact which seems related to the local prominence of the “Ziyou Tradition 子游傳統.”⁷

Despite these strictures, this is a valuable contribution whose general thrust is convincing. As such, it both fits with an emerging understanding of late imperial development and prompts further questions. The localist turn suggests that the shift from the redistributive policies of “benevolence”—where the wealth of relatively prosperous areas like Suzhou was tapped to cushion fluctuations in less favoured areas—to “mercantilism”—the readiness to leave local areas to prosper or perish largely depending on their own human and material resources—began in the early nineteenth century, not after the Opium Wars and the mid-century rebellions. This would have reinforced the dynamic Pomeranz has posited: that as less-developed regions filled up, they consumed more of their own harvest and (in part at official urging) increasingly engaged in import-substitution rather than buy Suzhou’s exports. One result was that the macroregions looked far more closed in the late nineteenth century—the point G. William Skinner used to define them—than they had in the high Qing.

As Han shows, the shift from state to local elites was not simply confined to Jiangnan—it was an empire-wide phenomenon. Jiangnan had a numerous and affluent elite to shoulder the burden (whether this was done grudgingly or with enthusiasm). One of the many provocative questions this valuable study raises but does not answer

⁶ Peter K. Bol, “Neo-Confucianism and Local Society, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century: A Case Study,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul J. Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp. 269–83.

⁷ See Michael Marmé, *Suzhou: Where the Goods of All the Provinces Converge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 181–85; Li Cho-ying 李卓穎, “Difang xing yu kua defang xing: Cong ‘Ziyou chuantong’ zhi lunshu yu shijian kan Suzhou zaidi wenhua yu lixue zhi jinghe” 地方性與跨地方性——從「子游傳統」之論述與實踐看蘇州在地文化與理學之競合, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 82, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 325–98.

is how areas where the pool of the classically educated was much, much smaller and the level of relative affluence was much, much lower than they were in Suzhou managed to cope. One suspects that it was for such places, rather than for the most favoured corners of the empire, that this truly marked the end of the prosperous age.

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