Imperial Writings:
Rereading the Autobiography of Aisin Gioro Puyi

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on locating the place of the last Qing emperor’s autobiography—Wode qianbansheng (literally “The First Half of My Life”)—in the tradition of imperial writings in China. China has an unusually rich tradition of writings produced by reigning monarchs, which perhaps reflects the exceptional status accorded to cultural competence within Chinese traditional culture leading to the production of texts being regarded as an important sign of authority. The different genres in which emperors wrote are here classified into five main groups: official, literati, palace poetry, religious, and mandate writings. In his autobiography, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty set out to explain his unique perspective on early twentieth-century Chinese history to his contemporaries and later generations. This text can therefore be classified as a kind of mandate writing, retrospectively explaining the last emperor’s actions to his people.

Keywords: Aisin Gioro Puyi, imperial authorship, autobiography, China, mandate writings

Introduction

In 2007, the first unexpurgated edition of the memoirs of the last emperor of China—Aisin Gioro Puyi (1906-1967, r. 1908-1912 as the Xuantong Emperor of the Qing dynasty, r. 1934-1945 as the Kangde Emperor of Manchukuo)—Wode qianbansheng (literally “The First Half of My Life”) was published, following the rediscovery of the two original hand-written manuscripts in 2004 (Aisin Gioro 2007). This paper is neither an attempt to trace the differences between the various different editions of this book nor to discuss the role played by other people in the production of the text; instead the focus is on locating the place of the last Qing emperor’s autobiography in the tradition of imperial writings in China. China has an unusually rich tradition of writings produced by reigning monarchs, which perhaps reflects the exceptional status accorded to ‘cultural competence’ within Chinese traditional culture, leading to the production of texts being regarded as an important sign of authority, and also a generally high level of intelligence among the rulers of successive dynasties. Although individual dynasties elsewhere had monarchs who produced a considerable body of literature, there are few traditions of imperial writings that rival that to be found in China. To place the last emperor of China’s memoirs in the context of this significant textual tradition requires an extended analysis of the different genres in which emperors wrote, here classified into five main groups: official, literati, palace poetry, religious, and mandate writings.
This paper concentrates specifically on works attributed to the brush of emperors, rather than the much broader subjects of imperial literary patronage, works written by junior members of the imperial ruling house, or indeed court writings in general. This is because the writings of the regnant emperors of China were governed by unique constraints, and provide an exceptional insight into the mind of what was often the single most powerful man in the world.

Official Writings
From the time of the Tang dynasty onwards, official writings were the medium through which emperors communicated their will and intentions to the bureaucracy. They demonstrate imperial control over the government. Prior to the Tang dynasty it was not regarded as particularly important for the emperor to produce documents concerned with the day-to-day running of the empire; he was on the other hand the single most significant recipient and reader of letters and memorials submitted by the bureaucracy, and his acceptance of the information contained within was crucial for giving authority to any subsequent government decision (Lewis 1999, 35). Pre-Tang examples of imperial official writings tend to have been produced on the occasion of exceptionally significant events; for example when forty-six officials presented a memorial to Cao Pi, the future Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty (187-226; r. 220-226) requesting that he assume the rank of emperor (a text now known as the “Gongqing jiangjun shang zun hao zou” or “Memorial respectfully presented by ministers and generals”), he responded with three letters of refusal before finally issuing an edict of acceptance (Chen 1962, 1.40, 2.73). The text of the memorial, which quoted one of Cao Pi’s letters of refusal,

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1 A published version of the first manuscript (200,000 characters) was printed by the Qunzhong chubanshe in 1960. With the encouragement of his publishers, Aisin Gioro Puyi subsequently produced an extended version (500,000 characters). This reworked text was published by the Qunzhong chubanshe in an original edition of 1962 and then a revised edition in 1964. The English language translation is based on the longer version; see Jenner 1964. The unexpurgated edition restores the author's preface (common to both versions but never previously printed) and dozens of cut paragraphs.

2 The introduction to the 2007 edition notes the involvement of twenty-five individuals in the production of the 1962 extended text. The previous shorter manuscript seems to have been entirely written by Aisin Gioro Puyi himself. However, inspection of the two manuscripts indicates that Aisin Gioro Puyi remained the primary author in both instances. From the time of the publication of the first expurgated editions, considerable doubt was expressed about authorship, particularly given the way that the last Qing emperor repeatedly emphasized his poor education. Set against that, there is the evidence from his sister-in-law that he was extremely well-read in the Chinese classics. Aisin Gioro 1986, 45.

3 A notable example is that of the Mogul emperors of India; Bābur (1483-1530) produced a memoir entitled the Bāburnāma (Book of Bābur), and his example was followed by his great-grandson Jahangir (1569-1627), who wrote the Jahāngīrānāma. (Bābur’s grandson the emperor Akbar (1542-1605) was the subject of the Akbarnāma, which was not written by himself but commissioned from a major court scholar, Abu'l Fazl.) Numerous English translations have been made of the first two texts, most recently Thackston 1996 and 1999.

4 An alternative analysis would follow the structure laid down by O. A. W. Dilke 1957, in his study of the writings of Roman emperors, which categorizes them according to their relevance to the writer’s position. He posited a four-part division into official writings, semi-official writings (in which the author remains clearly positioned as the emperor), works that have a vague connection with the writer’s status as head of state, and completely unofficial writings. Such an analysis would also be possible for the works of Chinese emperors, but the categorization is somewhat arbitrary.

5 A number of Western scholars have studied this series of texts; see for example Leban 1978; Goodman 1998, and Knechtges 2005.
was copied by the calligrapher Zhong Yao (151-230) and inscribed on stone stele installed at the site of Cao Pi's coronation. A further document by Cao Pi, written in his first year as emperor and recording the honours he had granted to Confucius (the “Feng zongsheng hou Kong Xian bei” or “Enfeoffment of Kong Xian, a descendant of the Sage”), when read with the earlier texts, also served an important function in legitimising his rule (Harrist 2008, 234-35).

From the Tang dynasty onwards, as official writings were recast from documents by bureaucrats sanctioned by imperial authority to those expressing the emperor's own opinion, it became a standard conceit that all edicts and so on had to be treated as if they were the words of the Son of Heaven, even in circumstances where it was perfectly clear that they had in fact been written by someone else. For some hard-working and conscientious emperors this conceit reflects the truth—for example a truly massive body of official writings by the Qing Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1722-1735) survives, testifying to his mastery of even the most arcane and apparently insignificant details of the administration of his vast empire (Feng 2009, 44-111). Given that official writings were often widely promulgated within the bureaucracy, emperors were judged not only on the content of the documents that they produced but also on the quality of their calligraphy. The issue of calligraphic competence is beyond the scope of this paper, but it explains the practice of training palace women—both female scribes and imperial consorts—in the calligraphic styles in favour at court, that they might take some of the burden of writing off the emperor (and perhaps in some cases make up for the deficiencies of the imperial brush) (Lee 2004). Whether actually the product of the emperor's own hand or written by someone trained in the same calligraphic style, these writings conventionally had to be treated with the same formal respect due to an example of yubi (imperial brushwork).

**Literati Writings**

Although the rulers of many countries produced official documents, the emperors of China also often felt under an obligation to produce literati writings; texts that can literally be said to document their mastery of important Chinese cultural traditions. These literati writings take two main forms: original works and scholarly texts such as commentaries on the classics and other canonical works of literature. The tradition of rulers producing original works can be traced back to the Han dynasty. Liu Bang, the first Han emperor (r. 202-195 BCE), though generally regarded as something of a country bumpkin, nevertheless is traditionally said to have composed the text of a song on the occasion of his visit to his old home town in the year 196 BCE. The first performance of this piece is recorded as having taken place at a banquet for the men of Pei (including many old friends of the first Han emperor), on which occasion it was sung by one hundred and twenty local boys and the emperor himself:

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6 A significant body of documents written personally by his father, the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661-1722), also survive; see Qing Shengzu 1966.
A great wind rises and the clouds are swept away.
Having struck awe into the realm, I return to my old home town,
Where will I find the brave knights to guard this vast land? (Sima 1959, 8.389; Ban 1962, 1B.74)

大風起兮雲飛揚，
威加海內兮歸故鄉，
安得猛士兮守四方?

The situation described in this short song strongly affirms the unique position of the imperial author. This song was subsequently performed annually at the Han imperial ancestral temple and carved onto a stele there (Wang 1993). The first Han emperor’s example in writing a song-text was supposedly followed by the seventh Han emperor, Wudi (r. 141-87 BCE). After the death of his favourite, Lady Li, the emperor is said to have composed both a song which he ordered the Music Bureau to write a tune for, and a lengthy poem in mourning for the deceased (Ban 1962, 97.3952-3955). A number of other emperors are also known to have composed songs, including Zhuangzong of the Later Tang dynasty (r. 923-926), whose compositions were apparently extremely popular in the capital region into the Song dynasty. In the official history of the dynasty, however, Zhuangzong’s interest in music and acting is severely criticised as inappropriate for a monarch, and indeed said to have led directly to his downfall and murder.

As it happens, perhaps the single most famous work of literature extolling the importance of education was composed by an emperor. This is the “Quanxue shi” (A Poem Encouraging Study) by Zhao Heng, Emperor Zhenzong of the Song dynasty (r. 997-1022). This fascinating piece appeals to many of the baser instincts of human nature in exhorting people to work hard and study more:

To enrich your family there is no need to buy good fields,
Thousands of tons of grain are to be found in books.
To build your house there is no need to set up high beams,
Golden mansions are to be found in books.
To marry a wife there is no need to worry about a good matchmaker,
Beautiful women are to be found in books.
To travel around there is no need to worry about an entourage,
Many horses and carriages are to be found in books.

7 The importance of this text as an expression of cultural competence is considered in Sanders 2006: 75-77.
8 This is not the only work of literature attributed to Han Wudi to survive—his “Huzi ge” (Song of Huzi) commemorating the disastrous breach of the Yellow River embankment at Huzi in 109 BCE is recorded in both Sima 1959: 29.1413, and Ban 1962: 29.1682-1683. For a study of this emperor’s literary works; see Long 2007.
9 The section concerning Zhuangzong’s interest in music and song has been translated in Davis 2004, 310.
When a man wants to achieve his ambitions, 
All he needs to do is read the Six Classics diligently by the window. (Li 1990, 58)

富家不用買良田, 書中自有千鐘粟.
安房不用架高梁, 書中自有黃金屋.
娶妻莫恨無良媒, 書中自有顏如玉.
出門莫恨無隨人, 書中車馬多如簇.
男兒欲遂平生志, 六經勤向窗前讀.

The issue of cultural competence, and in particular mastery of the complex rules of poetics and historical allusions, would be a particular concern for emperors of non-Chinese ancestry such as the Manchu Qing. The southern progresses of these emperors took them to many famous historical and cultural sites, and the opportunity to produce literati writings on these occasions was not to be missed. However, unlike other literati visitors, the unique status of the Qing emperors placed them under special obligations when interpreting the places that they visited. For example, in 1793 the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795) travelled to Mt. Lingyan in southern Jiangsu province, the site of a major local Buddhist monastery said to have been built on the ruins of the pleasure palace of King Fuchai of Wu (r. 495-473 BCE), the doomed last monarch of that kingdom. It was there that he supposedly enjoyed himself in the company of Xi Shi, a woman of legendary beauty presented to him by his enemy, King Goujian of Yue (r. 496-465 BCE), with a view to distracting him from the business of government. The Qianlong Emperor’s awareness of the historical importance of this site can be seen in his poem “Guanwa gong” (Lodging Beauties Palace), named after Xi Shi’s residence there:

Four plans deluded the heart of [the king of] Wu, 
[Women dressed in] silk and gauze were taught to sing and dance. 
Where could you learn such looks and bearing? 
Some say these city walls are just old earth. 
[Fan] Li presented her and [Wu] Zixu gave his warnings,
But [King Fuchai] did not listen to his words at all. 
I write verse about the Lodging Beauties [Palace], 
And take warning from the mirror of ancient history. (Gao 1970, 555)

10 Cultural competence was a serious issue for Mongol Yuan emperors, but they largely seem to have restricted their efforts to copying out the works of famous Chinese poets in their own calligraphy rather than attempting to produce original works. For a detailed study of the literati works produced by Yuan dynasty emperors; see Franke 1953.

11 The story that Wu Zixu was executed for warning King Fuchai of coming disaster is given in Sima 1959, 66.2179-2180.

12 The Qianlong Emperor’s massive output (the figure of forty thousand poems being often quoted) is frequently cited as evidence that a considerable part of his oeuvre must have been the work of other court poets; see Lowe 2004, 199. The emperor himself calculated that perhaps half the works attributed to him were indeed his own; given the Qianlong Emperor’s extremely long life, excellent education and superabundant energy, it is not impossible that this is indeed the case.
The Qianlong Emperor here presents himself as a monarch-poet, and so his response to seeing the place where King Fuchai of Wu had once held court was conditioned not just by his awareness of the cultural and literary significance of the site but also by his rank and responsibilities. For the Qianlong Emperor, King Fuchai's example was a warning from history; while other poets might have blamed the last king of Wu for neglecting his duties to spend time with a beautiful woman, very few would have taken the legend of the Lodging Beauties Palace in the personal way indicated by the last line. This poem was written by a ruler, visiting a site particularly connected with a doomed king, the last monarch of his line, and as such the place had resonances for the emperor that it would not have had for other literati visitors, no matter how important and distinguished.

The tradition of Chinese rulers producing scholarly commentaries on classic texts may be said to begin with the founder of the Wei dynasty, Cao Cao (155-220), who wrote the earliest extant commentary on the *Sunzi bingfa* (Sun Wu's Art of War) which is still widely studied today as part of the Eleven Masters textual tradition (Cao 1991). The demands of producing such a work, requiring not only considerable familiarity with the text itself but also the history of interpretation and the commentaries by other scholars means that very few emperors attempted such a feat, but there are a handful of other notable exceptions. Perhaps the most impressive scholar-emperor is Liang Wudi (r. 502-549), who wrote a work of Confucian exegesis entitled *Kongzi zhengyan* (The True Words of Confucius), as well as commentaries on the *Daodejing* (Classic of the Way and Virtue), *Xiaoqiang* (Classic of Filial Piety), *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), *Shijing* (Book of Songs), *Shujing* (Book of Documents), *Yijing* (Book of Changes) and *Zhongyong* (Doctrine of the Mean).13 A number of other emperors are also known to have produced commentaries on the *Daodejing*; these include Liang Jianwen (r. 550-551), Tang Xuanzong (r. 712-756), Song Huizong (r. 1100-1126), and the founder of the Ming dynasty, the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368-1398) (Ouyang 1975: 59,1916-1917; Zhang 1974: 98,2451; Liu 1969). Tang Xuanzong's version of the text and commentary (the *Yuzhu Laozi* or *Imperial Commentary on the Laozi*) is the most important of these because it was used for the civil service examinations, and was carved into stone at least twice: in 738 one copy was erected in front of the Longxing Temple in Yizhou and the following year another was placed in front of the Longxing Temple in Xingzhou (Boltz 1993, 279-80).

Emperors did not just produce commentaries on the classics. Other works, particularly those regarded as being of high educational or moral value, were occasionally also issued with imperial commentaries. For example, this

13 For an account of Liang Wudi's intellectual interests see Tian 2007, 47-48.
was the case with the Neize yanyi (Rules for the Domestic Realm), a text of moral instruction for women in sixteen juan which was issued with a commentary by the Shunzhi Emperor of the Qing dynasty (r. 1644-1661) (Qing Shunzi 1983). The yuding (Imperially established) edition of the text was to remain massively popular throughout the Qing dynasty (Liu Jihua 1934, 30; Mann 1987, 49). Though it was much more common for emperors to produce commentaries on the great classics of history and philosophy, the Shunzhi Emperor’s commentary on the Neize yanyi was nevertheless important in another way, demonstrating his concern for the social and moral propriety of his people, a suitable issue for a good monarch to express interest in. A more unusual scholarly project undertaken by an emperor are the historical essays (zonglun) written by Tang Taizong (r. 626-649) concerning three earlier emperors: the founders of the Jin dynasty, Xuandi (Sima Yi, 178-251) and Jin Wudi (r. 266-290), and the founder of the Sui dynasty, Wendi (r. 581-604). These essays offered the second Tang emperor, a man who had played a key role in the founding of the dynasty, to reflect upon the nature of sovereignty and the representation of other emperors who had come to power in similarly controversial circumstances through usurpation and murder.

**Palace Poetry**

Within the vast body of Chinese literature produced during the course of the imperial era, one genre came to be reserved exclusively for the emperor and imperial womenfolk: palace poetry (gong ci). Conventionally this type of verse described the plaint of beautiful women living in circumstances of exceptional luxury and privilege who nevertheless suffer from the emotional poverty of their existence, in some cases exacerbated by active cruelty or neglect. Though other people tried to write palace poetry they were often criticised for doing so, since it was believed that only a personal experience of life within the confines of a palace would qualify an individual to produce works in this genre. Anybody else attempting to do so would have to imagine the sensual pleasures of living in such circumstances, and given that the power of palace poetry over the reader’s imagination comes from the excitement of reading about the women of the imperial harem coupled with the unexpected vignettes of “what it is really like” within the palace, an imaginary recreation of this kind of life would be highly unsatisfactory.

Perhaps the most famous collection of palace poetry produced by an emperor is the series of some three hundred poems attributed to Song Huizong. Though the precise number of poems of this type written by the emperor remains in dispute, as does the attribution of all these works to the emperor rather than to him and his courtiers, the importance of Huizong’s palace poetry is not in dispute, particularly

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14 The two essays on the founders of the Jin dynasty are now conventionally reprinted as part of the official dynastic history; see Fang 1974, 1 20-22 and 3.81-82. Tang Taizong’s essay on Sui Wendi can be found in Wu and Ji 2004, 173-76.

15 The invention of palace poetry is conventionally ascribed to the Tang dynasty poet, Wang Jian (c. 751- c.830), who wrote a cycle of one hundred poems based on information gathered from a palace eunuch friend. Chi 1997. 89-90; He 2009.
as most surviving works in this genre were written by imperial women. As noted by many scholars, the palace poetry of Song Huizong is remarkable both for the sense of purpose found in these verses—the subject (whether the emperor or his ladies) may be living in unimaginably luxurious circumstances but they are also usually portrayed busily engaged in highly worthy pursuits—and any trouble or distress is likely to be merely some trifling embarrassment rather than a serious reflection of the difficulties of living under the constraints of palace life. This latter theme can be seen in the following untitled poem:

The palace lady had a date to play on the swings,  
Tired now but as pretty as ever, her bejeweled hairpiece has been knocked askew.  
Afraid of meeting someone who would laugh at her,  
She seeks the darkness of the fragrant path to set straight her hairpins.17

宮娥相約戲鞦韆, 困極盈盈寶髻偏.  
卻恐逢人多謔笑, 暗尋香徑整花鈿.

Palace poetry was a genre of limited appeal to most emperors, no doubt for a variety of reasons. For those monarchs who wished to project an image of hard work and concern for both the business of government and the sufferings of ordinary people, the frivolous overtones of palace poetry were not attractive. Likewise, in the dynasties following the Northern Song, the strong association of this genre with Song Huizong, the ruler blamed for the loss of the whole of Northern China to the Jurchen invaders, was deeply unappealing. Nevertheless palace poetry represents a genre of imperially-produced literature which allowed an emperor to reflect on his private life within the palace, as opposed to the literati and official writings that were inextricably bound up with his public persona.

Religious Writings
Religious writings by Chinese emperors are often regarded as the most problematic area of imperial textual production, not least because the conventional interpretation of these texts by modern scholars has been highly cynical. In discussion of such texts, it seems to be axiomatic that temporal and spiritual authority were always in conflict, and that by producing religious writings the imperial author was hoping to subvert or suborn an alternative source of power. While it may be true that at some level many emperors were concerned about the potential threat posed by charismatic religious leaders or religiously-motivated

16 The most famous exponents of this genre include Lady Huarui, thought to have been the concubine first of Meng Chang (r. 934-965), the last ruler of the Later Shu dynasty and then subsequently of Song Taizu (r. 960-977). Other important writers of palace poetry include Empress Yang, the wife of Song Ningzong (r. 1195-1224)—her works were published with those of Huizong in the collection Erjia gongci (Palace Poetry by Two Members of the Imperial House)—and Xiao Guanyin, the empress of Liao Daozong (r. 1055-1101). Idema and Grant 2004: 292-304.

17 Mao 1983: A.17a. For an alternative translation and a study of this and other palace poems by Song Huizong; see Egan 2006.
resistance to the demands of the state, it would seem harsh to deny them the possibility of a genuine expression of faith. The cynical interpretation of rulers’ motives is particularly problematic in the case of rulers who played an important role in the promulgation of religious faith in China.

Just as Liang Wudi was perhaps the most scholarly of emperors, he also produced the most significant religious writings. This emperor was famously a devout Buddhist, for which he was the subject of considerable criticism in some quarters.\(^{18}\) A strict vegetarian, the emperor was instrumental in enforcing this practice as an integral part of Buddhist monastic regulations in China. As part of his advocacy of vegetarianism, the emperor was the author of the *Lianghuang chan* (Liang Emperor’s Confession) which was intended for the use of monks or nuns who had eaten meat or drunk alcohol and subsequently came to be popularly used in a wide variety of Buddhist confession rituals continuing to the present day (Xu Liqiang 1998). Liang Wudi was not the only emperor of this dynasty to demonstrate a considerable interest in Buddhism. His son, Emperor Jianwen (mentioned above in the context of his scholarship on the *Daodejing*), is known to have demonstrated a considerable knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and to have been consulted in the event of unusual religious manifestations. Such an event is described in the *Wudi ji* (Record of the Lands of Wu), a Tang dynasty gazetteer for the city of Suzhou:

At Hu Canal, the fishermen at night saw a light shining above the sea, which illuminated the waters and pierced the heavens. The following day they saw two stone religious statues floating on the waters. They all said: “These are water gods.” That very day they welcomed this apparition with a sacrifice of three animals. The statues came floating along on their backs. At that time there was a Buddhist believer, Zhu Ying, who together with a nun from the Dongling Temple, led the multitudes out to the seaside [carrying] fragrant flowers, bells and stone chimes, to welcome [the images], and then carried them back to the commandery seat (Lu 1999, 91).

It was Emperor Jianwen who eventually identified these two statues, which were at that time housed in the Tongyuan temple, as representations of the Kassapa Buddha and the Vipasyin Buddha, and his writings on the subject are now collectively known as the “Shifo bei” (Inscription on the Stone Buddhas).\(^{19}\) This emperor’s mastery of Buddhist knowledge can be seen from the fact that it was he

\(^{18}\) See for example the famous polemic, “Lun fogu biao” (Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha) in Han 1994, 456-57.

\(^{19}\) The two inscriptions are individually known as the “Shijawen foxiang ming” (Inscription on the Image of the Kassapa Buddha) and the “Weiwei foxiang ming” (Inscription on the Image of the Vipasyin Buddha). Zhang Pu 2001, 828.239; Ouyang 2007: 77.1317. Given the short length of Emperor Jianwen’s reign, it is likely that the majority of writings by him were produced before his accession. Only one poem, “Beiyou shuzhi” (Imprisoned, Recounting my Ambitions), can clearly be dated to his time as a puppet emperor under the control of the warlord Hou Jing (d. 552); see Marney 1982, 172.
who served to identify these statues, rather than a religious specialist. Although the Jianwen emperor is also known to have composed funeral inscriptions and eulogies for important members of the clergy, such events may reflect his social position rather than his devotion to religion.\(^{20}\) It is only in the event of more unusual occasions, such as the supernatural appearance of the two floating statues, that the emperor’s religious understanding could really be demonstrated.

**Mandate Writings**

Mandate writings are a genre of literature only produced by emperors, and the term is derived from the mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), a very important and ancient concept in East Asian statecraft. Mandate writings represent an attempt by the monarch to reach out to the people, both of his own time and often to later ages as well, for understanding and support. Under normal circumstances the writings of the emperor would be readily available only to a tiny fraction of the population: members of the royal family, courtiers, and officials might individually have the opportunity to read imperial writings, or specific groups within the ruling elite might collectively be given a text to read (as would, for example, potentially be the case with an edict). Mandate writings on the other hand were often widely disseminated, since they represent an attempt by the emperor to communicate with the populace en masse. These writings often appear to be one-way, that is they explain the position and actions of the emperor to the people in a form that seems to negate the possibility of response. In fact, however, it is unlikely that the emperors who produced mandate writings viewed it as a unilateral process; often they show signs of clearly being aware of the importance of popular opinion—that is after all the reason for taking such an unusual step as to write this kind of text and present it for reading by their people.\(^{21}\)

The earliest surviving examples of mandate literature are the texts produced by the First Emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (r. 221-210 BCE), which were inscribed on stone steles erected on the tops of sacred mountains. Though these stone inscriptions are now long gone, the texts of six stele inscriptions are preserved in the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) and the seventh was transmitted through rubbings. Four of these six texts make reference to the violence of the late Warring States era, and criticize the monarchs of these kingdoms for the suffering they inflicted on their people. According to these inscriptions, the First Emperor was entirely meritorious when he ordered his armies to “exterminate the six violent and cruel [kings]” (Mt. Yi inscription); elsewhere it says that thanks to his efforts “disaster and harm were warded off, and fighting ceased forever” (Mt. Zhifu

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\(^{20}\) Liang Jianwen is also known to have written funerary inscriptions for important members of the clergy; see for example the inscription: “Liang Xiaohuangyan si Daodu chanshi bei” (Stele [Commemorating] the Chan Master Daodu of Xiaohuangyan Temple of the Liang dynasty) which is preserved in the Korean collection the *Sŏgwŏn sarim* (A Forest of Words from the Sākyā’s Garden); see Tongguk 1976, 193.660-662. The significance of this event is discussed in Benn 2007, 1-16.

\(^{21}\) For example Tang Taizong’s mandate writings stress his awareness of the importance of public opinion; although the emperor is in a position of supreme power, he is also subject to constant observation by his subjects, ever on the lookout for his weaknesses and failings. J. Chen 2010, 88-89.
inscription). These references allow the First Emperor to portray himself as a benevolent man, determined to prevent further suffering for the people.

These texts also provide people with instructions to follow in their new position as subjects of the Qin empire; for example the Mt. Langye inscription recommends the new standardized weights and measures and reformed script, while the Jieshi Gate inscription notes the redundancy of defensive walls and suggests that people turn their attention to farming (men) and weaving (women), whereas the Mt. Kuaiji inscription discusses the legal implications of adultery and widow remarriage (Sima 1959, 6.245, 6.252, and 6.262). Finally, these inscriptions stress the concern of the First Emperor for his people and the hard work that he engaged in to assure the peace and prosperity of the empire; “personally touring the distant regions” (Mt. Yi inscription), “rising early and going to bed late (Mt. Tai inscription) and so on (Rong 1935, 131; Sima 1959, 6.243). In these public texts, the First Emperor emphasizes his achievement in bringing peace to his vast realm and seeks support for his reforms. The decision to site these steles on more or less inaccessible mountain-tops suggests that the audience for these mandate writings were deities rather than ordinary people; however the text of the Mt. Yi inscription states that it was recited by the First Emperor’s officials (Rong 1935, 132). Although it is not known if these documents were actually written by the First Emperor in person, authorship is clearly attributed to him, and hence they must reflect the way he wished his rule to be seen by his subjects and later generations.

The second Tang emperor, Tang Taizong, also left a significant body of mandate writings, most famously the “Jinjing” (Golden Mirror) composed in 628 shortly after he ascended the throne and the “Difan” (Plan for an Emperor) written in 648 just before his death, with a view to instructing his son and heir, the future Tang Gaozong (r. 649-683), in the necessary principles for successful imperial government. These writings provide no explicit autobiographical details; they were instead intended as a mediation upon the nature of the ruler’s position written by someone with personal experience of this unique role. The first of these two texts is thought to have been written for dissemination among Tang Taizong’s ministers at a time when the dynasty still faced considerable external threats as well as internal dissention as a result of the controversial circumstances in which the emperor had come to the throne. However, it quickly fell into obscurity thereafter. On the other hand, the “Difan” text, which was originally written as instructions for a single individual, the Crown Prince, after Tang Taizong’s health collapsed in the wake of his disastrous campaigns against Koguryo and he realised that he would soon die, seems to have been much more widely read among the ruling elite. Apart from anything else, this particular text was taken to Japan during the Tang dynasty, where together with the “Chengui” (Rules for Subjects)—

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22 The text of the Mt. Yi inscription is given in Rong 1935, 131-32. For the Mt. Zhifu inscription; see Sima 1959, 6.250. For an alternative translation and study of this group of mandate writings; see Kern 2000, 10-49. The Shi ji transcriptions are also translated in Nienhauser 1994, 139-45, 152-53.

23 The text of the “Jinjing” is given in Wu and Yu 2004, 125-36. The “Difan” has suffered much distortion in the course of transmission and different versions of the text exist in China, Korea, and Japan. The best preserved version of the text is supposed to be that found in Japan. Luo 1924.
a mandate text attributed to the authorship of Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690-705)—it was subsequently used both as a text for instructing members of the imperial house and also studied by Confucian scholars as part of the standard curriculum for an educated gentleman.24

In the history of mandate writings in China, one monarch stands out for the quantity and complexity of his works in this genre: the Ming Hongwu Emperor.25 The first Ming emperor seems to have been unusually convinced of the efficacy of this kind of literature for maintaining popular support for his regime; he certainly produced an exceptionally rich body of mandate writings which have only recently begun to be the subject of serious scholarly research.26 Perhaps the most significant of the Hongwu Emperor’s mandate writings are in the Yuzhi dagao (Imperially Authored Grand Pronouncements) in which he recounts his reasons for prosecuting and punishing a series of corrupt and incompetent officials. Four collections of case summaries were written by the emperor, in 1385, 1386, 1387 and 1388.27 These writings allowed the emperor to explain his actions directly to the populace, bypassing the bureaucracy, seeking their support and understanding in his efforts to root out corruption and mismanagement. Given the exceptionally harsh penalties imposed by the emperor in these cases, the decision to seek public awareness and approbation is an interesting tool in the Hongwu Emperor’s ongoing fight with the officials that he perceived as highly antipathetic to his rule (Fuehrer 2001).

An imperial autobiography can be seen as a kind of mandate writing, given that this allows the emperor to speak directly to his people and to history, in the hope that they will understand and support his decisions. A couple of fragmentary imperial autobiographies survive from the pre-modern period; the difficult textual history of Aisin Gioro Puyi’s work has its equivalent in early eras. The oldest extant imperial autobiography appears to be the “Zixu” (Autobiographical Postface) by Cao Pi, Emperor Wen of the Wei dynasty, which survives in fragmentary form as one chapter of his Dianlun (Authoritative Discourses) (Wei 1985, 1.2-3).28 A

24 For an interesting and detailed study of the reception of both the “Jinjing” and “Difan” in East Asia, as well as a translation of this pair of texts; see Twitchett 1996.

25 The first Ming emperor also produced a short autobiography for inclusion in his tomb, apparently inspired by looking at his own reflection in a mirror. The unusual (in the Chinese context) inspiration for this act is not continued by any special insights in the text into the author’s rise to supreme power. However, this imperial autobiography completely eschews all the usual mystical signs of future greatness included in official biographies of founding emperors. Du 1977, 68. For a translation of the opening section and critical comments; see Wu 1990, 25-26.

26 For example the first Ming emperor’s edicts and ordinances concerning criminal acts committed by his own sons were compiled into two collections: the Taizu huangdi qinlu (Private Records of the Taizu Emperor) and the Jifei lu (Record of Wrongdoing). Neither of these texts was intended for public distribution at the time, for revealing the misdeeds of a member of the imperial house would have been too controversial. In the circumstances it is also clear that the documents contained in these texts must have been derived from the emperor’s own hand. For a study of these unusual and neglected texts; see Chan 2007.

27 This unprecedented series of texts, which the first Ming emperor used as a forum for denouncing his own officials, is discussed in detail in Brook, Bourgon and Blue 2008, 100-21, and Yang 1988.

28 For a translation of the surviving section of Cao Pi’s amusing autobiographical postface, concentrating mainly on his interests and hobbies; see Wells 2009, 129-33.
much fuller account survives from Xiao Yi, Liang Yuandi (r. 552-555): the Jinlouzi (Master of the Golden Tower), which in addition to a “zixu” chapter, also contains much autobiographical information elsewhere in the text. The author of this much neglected text, as the younger brother of the Crown Prince, was never intended to become emperor; it was only a disastrous series of wars and internecine conflicts in the Liang state that brought about his accession. However, he apparently continued to work on his text after he came to the throne, right up until the time when he was murdered by the Western Wei army in January, 555 (Xu 1969).29 This remarkable account is the most extensive imperial autobiography to survive from pre-modern times in China. Given that few Chinese rulers were drawn to the autobiographical mode of writing, the paucity of early examples of this genre means that there was no strong tradition for the last Qing emperor to draw upon when framing his own autobiographical account.

Interpreting the Autobiography of Aisin Gioro Puyi

The autobiography of the last emperor of China fits very naturally into the form of a confessional life narrative, and discussions of this format within the Western tradition are normally dominated by the Confessions of Saint Augustine (Augustine 1961). The Confessions were to prove one of the most influential autobiographical texts ever produced, which in modern times also significantly influenced East Asian examples of this genre. In this format the author remembers his transgressions and attempts to apologize or justify them, before climaxing in the description of a profoundly transformative life event.30 Just as Saint Augustine’s life was portrayed in this text as leading up to the climactic moment of his conversion to Christianity, Aisin Gioro Puyi’s life in Wode qianbansheng may be said to be leading up to his decision to accept the reform programme that the Communist authorities wished him to undertake. The success of this programme in breaking through the last emperor’s defences relied on the enormous shock of discovering that he would not be executed for war-crimes committed in Manchuria during the time when he headed the Japanese puppet government, and the resolute efforts of the authorities to force him to think about someone other than himself. The confessional note dominates much of these memoirs, and as noted by earlier scholars, there is no reason to suppose that the last emperor’s “conversion” was not entirely sincere; he had no reason to expect mercy and would have shown little himself, therefore the decision of the authorities to send him to prison rather than the execution grounds must sooner or later have provoked a profound soul-searching (Fairbank 1998, 209-10).

The dominance of the confessional theme obscures the fact that Wode

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29 Only a handful of studies of this interesting text have been carried out in modern times; see Zhong 2004; Tian 2006: 478-85.

30 There is a similar genre of conversion narrative within traditional Chinese autobiographical writings, though significantly less developed, largely as a result of Chan Buddhist influence, which regarded the achievement of illumination as an end in itself, and the subitist tradition, which argued that enlightenment when it came was not only total and absolute, but also completely personal and incommunicable to others. See Wu 1990, 118, 140.
qianbansheng is also an example of mandate writing. In this book, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty deliberately set out to explain his unique perspective on early twentieth-century Chinese history to his contemporaries and later generations. He asks for understanding of his position based initially on the fact of his peculiar upbringing, his ignorance and his poor education, and later on his intense fear of death. In the chapter concerning his education, the last Qing emperor particularly bewails the fact that he was not taught either Manchu or English properly. Likewise he complains of the failure of his instructors to mention anything concerning either world history or science (Aisin Gioro 2007, 42-50). His argument here seems to be that his ignorance not only hampered his decision-making process, but that his poor education also made him peculiarly vulnerable to manipulation by others. Having stressed his bizarre upbringing in luxurious isolation in the Forbidden City, the last Qing emperor goes on to document his terror when trying to survive in a situation where his destiny was always at the mercy of forces beyond his control. After his move to the Manchukuo capital this fear is articulated as the belief that the Japanese authorities there would have killed him if he did anything to oppose them. At other times this fear was even more pervasive; the last emperor was apparently convinced that if his younger brother had a son with his Japanese wife, that he would be murdered to allow this child to come to the throne. Such was his intense suspicion of his younger brother’s wife, Saga Hiro (1914-1987; Chinese name Aisin Gioro Hao) during the first years of her marriage, that the last Qing emperor refused to eat anything that she gave him or which had to be consumed in her presence (Aisin Gioro 2007, 270).

The belief that he might be killed not for what he did but simply for who he was is a strong theme throughout the book, and allows the imperial author to present himself as a victim of circumstance, condemned by the fact that out of all the princes of the Manchu ruling house, he was unlucky enough to be chosen to succeed the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875-1908).31 Even before the time of his marriage to Empress Wanrong (1906-1946) in 1922, Aisin Gioro Puyi presents himself as deeply concerned over his future fate, with a highly melancholy awareness of the miserable destinies of other monarchs who had been the last of their lines:

As for the fate of the last emperors in history, starting with Tang releasing King Jie [of the Xia dynasty] at Nanchao, King Zhou of the Shang dynasty immolating himself at Deer Tower, and the Quanrong assassinating King You [of the Zhou dynasty] at the foot of Mt. Li, I could carry right up to Zhu Youjian [Ming Chongzhen (r. 1627-1644)] hanging himself at Coal Hill; no-one knew this branch of history better than myself. (Aisin Gioro 2007, 100)

對於歷代最末一個皇帝的命運，從成湯放夏桀於南巢，商紂自焚於鹿臺，犬戎弑幽王於驪山之下起，我可以一直數到朱由檢煤山上吊，沒有人比我對這些歷史更熟悉的了。

31 A similar theme is explored in the memoirs of one of the last emperor’s distant cousins; see Aisin Gioro 1988.
It would be a mistake to take this kind of statement at face value. As with so many of the apparently candid comments made by the last emperor in his autobiography, the play for sympathy found in this sort of passage was carefully crafted. By stressing his awareness of the terrible fates suffered by other last emperors, Aisin Gioro Puyi attempts to gain the reader’s empathy over his difficult and dangerous situation, implicitly suggesting that he could himself easily have fallen victim to just as cruel a destiny. What he fails to mention are the numerous last emperors of dynasties who survived more or less happily by doing deals with the succeeding regime, which was a regular feature of Chinese history from the time of the abdication of Han Xiandi onwards. It was a strategy of this very kind that would see the last Qing emperor successfully negotiate more or less favorable terms with a series of different regimes after the fall of the dynasty.

It is a theme to which the author continually returns in the course of *Wo de qianbansheng*: the idea inculcated in him virtually from birth that as the Qing emperor he represented a different order of creation from the rest of humankind, even though he only sat on the throne for four years when still a small child and any actual power was lodged in the hands of regents. Aisin Gioro Puyi consistently presents himself as a man who believed that his personal survival represented the survival of the whole dynasty; a worthy aim to which the interests and indeed lives of anyone else could be sacrificed. In a telling passage from the chapter concerning his wet-nurse’s attempts to prevent him from tormenting others in the palace with cruel practical jokes, the last emperor wrote:

My wet-nurse was the only person in the palace who told me that other people were people just like myself, she was the only person who reminded me that other people were also human beings. I had teeth and other people also had teeth; my teeth couldn’t bite down iron filings and neither could anyone else’s; I needed to eat but other people would also be hungry if they didn’t get anything to eat, other people also felt pain, and being struck by a lead pellet would hurt them just as it hurt me. This kind of common knowledge was something that I did understand but wouldn’t come easily to mind in the circumstances in which I was situated, because fundamentally I didn’t think about other people and certainly wouldn’t consider them in the same light as myself. In my eyes other people were slaves, subjects, or commoners. (Aisin Gioro 2007, 56)

乳母是宫中唯一告訴我別人是和我同樣的人的人，是唯一曾使我想起了別人也是人的人。不但我有牙、別人都有牙；不但我的牙不能咬鐵砂，別人都不能咬；不但我要吃飯，別人也同樣不吃。

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32 This point is made extremely forcefully in Wang 2006, 178-99. According to Professor Wang, the treatment meted out by the last emperor to his wife was truly appalling. This subject is glossed over in his autobiography which seeks the reader’s sympathy and understanding by apparent openness about those of his failings that can safely be blamed on other people or historical events, while concealing those for which he would have to take personal responsibility. This impression is enhanced by reading the expurgated editions of the memoirs; the original text is less favourable to the author; see Aisin Gioro 2007, 2.

33 The last emperor’s profound commitment to his imperial legacy can be seen in his strong reaction to the looting of the Qing tombs by Sun Dianying (1887-1947) in 1928. It is at around the same time that he records himself as saying: “As long as I am alive, the Qing will never perish!” Aisin Gioro 2007, 166.
飯要餓肚子，別人也有感覺。別人肉皮打了錫彈會一樣的痛。這些用不著講的常識，我並非不懂，但在那樣環境里，我是不容易想到這些的，因為我根本就想不起別人，更不會把自己和別人相提並論。別人在我心里，只不過是奴才、阿哈、庶民。

Through passages of this kind, Aisin Gioro Puyi makes plain his arrogance and lack of concern for those around him. Nevertheless, these statements have to be included within the body of his autobiography, for without them it would be impossible to explain his subsequent decisions. At the cost of appearing profoundly unsympathetic, the last emperor can claim the reader's understanding for his actions.

The majority of surviving mandate writings come from the hands of founding emperors, attempting to explain the new rules by which their empire would be run and seeking support for their ideas from the contemporary populace or from history. The memoirs of the last emperor of China are somewhat different, for although the audience is the same, Aisin Gioro Puyi was aware from the age of six that he was to be the last ruler of the Qing dynasty. Though he seeks the support of history through his autobiography, it is from the vantage point of an abdicated emperor living under a different regime, hoping for understanding for his attempts to revive the dynasty in the face of hopeless odds. Wo de qianbansheng therefore represents a historical document of exceptional value and human interest, being not only the very last piece of imperial writing to be produced in China, but also one of the few pieces to be written by an abdicated emperor. The paucity of autobiographical writings by Chinese emperors means that this text is difficult to contextualize; although not the first monarch to write his memoirs, Aisin Gioro Puyi was the only abdicated ruler in Chinese history whose autobiography has survived. This autobiography is also highly unusual for its portrayal of the decadence and corruption of the court—unavoidable given the combination of powerless isolation and great wealth in which the members of the tiny imperial circle lived within the confines of the palace after the end of the dynasty in 1912. It is this aspect of Puyi's memoirs which has had the greatest impact on popular perception of the Qing dynasty and the imperial system as a whole, ignoring the fact that it was a product of unique circumstances.

Conclusion
The rediscovery of the original manuscript of the autobiography of the last emperor of China opens up a number of interesting new avenues for research. However, given that so few attempts have been made to date to categorize imperial writings in China, it is very difficult to understand Aisin Gioro Puyi's text in the context of the works produced by earlier emperors. The tradition of administrative, literary, scholarly and religious imperial writings is an unusually long and rich one, with virtually every dynasty producing an extensive body of texts, which deserves much more attention than it has hitherto received. Perhaps it is this very richness and complexity—as well as the ever- vexed question of authenticity of attribution—that has served to discourage scholars from attempting to categorize the work of Chinese monarchs.
As described above, the writings by Chinese emperors can be grouped into five main categories. Official writings and mandate texts were by far the most closely linked to the emperor’s position as the ruler of a great realm. Although almost all emperors produced official writings, only a handful were ever tempted to produce mandate texts, and they were mostly written by the founding monarch of a new dynasty. Palace poetry meanwhile provided a forum for describing the emperor’s private life; a genre restricted almost entirely to the ruler and members of his immediate family. Through literati and religious writings, emperors were able to reflect their own interests, though their works would be subject to unusual constraints and open to great criticism. Given the amount of interest displayed by their subjects in the writings of emperors, it is amazing that so many Chinese rulers had the confidence in their own abilities to stand up to such intense critical scrutiny.

The autobiography of Aisin Gioro Puyi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, is a unique text within the tradition of Chinese imperial writings, being a memoir written by an abdicated emperor. It represents an effort by a ruler to retrospectively seek the support and sympathy of his former subjects at a time when history had already moved on. This remarkable document thus allows its author to present an account of his personal involvement in the transfer of the mandate to a new regime.

GLOSSARY

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**TITLES OF LITERARY WORKS**

- “Beiyou shuzhi” 被幽述志
- “Chengui” 臣軌
- Chunqiu 春秋
- Daodejing 道德經
- Dianlun 典論
- “Difan” 帝範
- Erjia gongci 二家宮詞
- “Feng zongsheng hou Kong Xian bei” 封宗聖侯孔羡碑
- “Gongqing jiangjun shang zun hao zou” 公卿將軍上尊號奏
- “Guanwa gong” 館娃宮
- “Huzi ge” 狐子歌
- Jifei lu 紀非錄
- “Jinjing” 金鏡
- Jinlouzi 金樓子
- Kongzi zhengyan 孔子正言
- Lianghuang chan 梁皇讖
- “Liang Xiaozhuangyan si Daodu chanshi bei” 梁小莊嚴寺道度禪師碑
- “Lun fugu biao” 論佛骨表
- Neize yanyi 内則衍義
- “Quanxue shi” 勤學詩
- “Shifo bei” 石佛碑
- Shiji 史記
- “Shijiawen foxiang ming” 釋迦文佛像銘
- Shijing 詩經
- Shuojing 書經
- Sogwon sarim 釋苑詞林
| Sunzi bingfa | 孫子兵法 | Yijing | 易經 |
| Taizu huangdi qinlu | 太祖皇帝欽錄 | Yuzhi dagao | 御製大誥 |
| “Weiwei foxiang ming” | 維衛佛像銘 | Yuzhu Laozi | 御注老子 |
| Wode qianbansheng | 我的前半生 | “Zixu” | 自序 |
| Wudi ji | 吳地記 | Zhongyong | 中庸 |
| Xiaojing | 孝經 |

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