

## BOOK REVIEW

Seunghyun HAN. *After the Prosperous Age: State and Elites in Early Nineteenth-Century Suzhou*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. 306 pages. ISBN 978-0-674-73717-4 (Hardcover). 42.95 USD.

In recent years there has been a growing paradigm shift in views about China during the early nineteenth century. Rather than seeing this period as a time of sharp decline and social decay following the glorious “prosperous age” (*shengshi*) of the three powerful eighteenth-century emperors (Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong), a number of scholars, including Jane Kate Leonard, Daniel McMahon, Stephen Miles, Matthew Mosca, William Rowe, and Wensheng Wang, have offered a more positive picture of the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820) and his policies.<sup>1</sup> Seunghyun Han’s book *After the Prosperous Age* is also an important contribution challenging the once dominant failure narrative of early nineteenth-century Chinese history. Focusing on how the Jiaqing emperor’s innovations shaped the social and cultural history of Suzhou, a region known for its economic affluence and cultural richness, Han argues that, contrary to his predecessors, this emperor encouraged a policy of elite activism which involved “the increased participation of elites in local public affairs in terms of their monetary contribution and the assumption of managerial roles” (14). Based on substantial archival research and local historical records, this book demonstrates how in the first decades of the nineteenth century the Suzhou elite expanded their public managerial roles while enjoying a renaissance of local cultural autonomy. The author aims to show how, in contrast to eighteenth-century central state activism, which basically monopolized public works and relief management activities, the Jiaqing Emperor encouraged local elites to take responsibility for the maintenance of local infrastructure and the administration of disaster support.

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, this volume is composed of two main parts divided into seven chapters. Chapters 1 to 3 examine how the Suzhou local elite administered and funded public institutions, such as hydraulic installations, and actively engaged in famine relief. Han argues that the Jiaqing government’s promotion of elite activism originated in the state’s declining revenues. In exchange for symbolic honors, the local elite would urge the wealthy to donate to local causes. The Suzhou local elite solicited not only individuals, but also charitable estates and benevolent halls, to offer financial patronage for the care of the sick and elderly as well as support, both monetarily and administratively, for local famine relief. Seunghyun Han also contends that the Qing government had, at this point, shifted its own attitude toward the local elite, considering this body of persons more reliable than the “government underlings” who had supervised public institutions for the central government during the eighteenth century. Although Han focuses primarily on Suzhou, he also shows, based on his study of Board of Rites archives, that the elite-activism of the Jiaqing reign was also empire-wide.

Chapters 4–7 look at the development of locally-oriented cultural practices. Chapter 4 examines specifically the growing number of enshrined persons as the central state gave recognition to local worthies. Chapter 5 explores the significance of the Suzhou literati's collective efforts to build a memorial, known as the General Shrine of Former Worthies of Suzhou Prefecture, devoted to the worship of more than five hundred local ancestors. Chapter 6 discusses the steady-stream of local gazetteers and writings by the local elite that were published with the encouragement of the central state. Even some once-forbidden books that dealt with the Ming-Qing transition were allowed to be published. Chapter 7 investigates local literati attempts to legitimize the rule of Zhang Shicheng, who was a local contender for power in the late Yuan but was defeated by the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang. In sum, Han offers a new vision of the early nineteenth century in which the central state may have actually encouraged historical memory, even about those persons who seemingly undercut a central cultural order.

This book definitely shows that the Jiaqing era and the early Daoguang reign (1821–1850) represent a watershed in Chinese history before the Opium War. But there are some deficiencies, as well. There is little analysis of the Suzhou elite: names of a number of particular scholar-officials are noted, but little to no information about their immediate families and extended lineages is provided. While Han lists the archival resources in a detailed appendix documenting the “local worthies,” he does not make clear their particular circumstances. Wealthy Suzhou families, such as landowning gentry (*shenshi*), do not receive explicit attention, and thus the reader will not learn much about this stratum of the elite. The author, admittedly, had to limit his focus, but he should have been more precise at the start of his book that he would not examine a broad spectrum of the Suzhou elite. Moreover, with regard to these local scholar-officials, there is no mention of their “private” writings, such as their letters, anthologies, or diaries, from this period. One would like to learn more about their hands-on approach to these crises.

Despite these objections, *After the Prosperous Age* does reveal the reality and impact of elite activism long before the post-Taiping reform era in the second half of the nineteenth century. For that reason it is a significant work and a welcome addition to the growing revisionist wave of modern Chinese history.

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to this scholarship, see William Rowe, “Introduction: The Significance of the Qianlong-Jiaqing Transition in Qing History,” *Late Imperial China* 32, no. 2 (2011): 74–88; Daniel McMahon, *Rethinking the Decline of China's Qing Dynasty: Imperial Activism and Borderland Management at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).