MISCELLANEOUS

CULTURE, THE STATE AND CHINA STUDIES

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This essay addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges raised by a collection of papers that combines the works of intellectual, political and social historians with those of literary studies scholars. The disciplinary diversity evident in the contributions is matched by a variety of topics spanning the last one thousand years of Chinese history. These sorts of longue durée interdisciplinary compilations are now somewhat rare in American sinology, having given way to ever more intricate periodization and more refined fields of specialization. Also rare are compilations that announce themselves at the outset as explicitly revisionist. In this case, revisions to earlier interpretations are represented by pieces which, almost without exception, combine new thematic elements for historical investigation with critical theories drawn from literary studies and cultural history outside the China field.1)

Given the breadth and range of subject matter and the variety of theoretical and disciplinary concerns represented, this collection would pose a number of challenges to any reviewer. My approach will be to begin with a broad

1) There have, of course, been a number of publications in recent years that make similar gestures at engaging theoretical and methodological developments from outside of China studies and Asian studies. Among these were Angela Zito and Tani Barlow, eds., Body, Subject & Power in China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and the essays in volume 1 of positions: East Asia Cultures Critique. More recently, the essays collected in Lydia Liu, ed., Tokens of Exchange (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999) address interdisciplinary issues with specific reference to questions of translation.
overview of the contents of the volume and then attempt to place it in a comparative perspective. However, rather than setting this project alongside other work now being done in the field of China studies, the point of comparison will be with earlier collective efforts that dealt with long spans of Chinese history. Specifically, I will juxtapose it to compilations from the 1950s, when works like this one were not uncommon. Then, too, cooperative efforts were seen as one strategy for dealing with the complex question of the relationship between the Chinese state and culture and for engaging fundamental issues of knowledge production.

Let me begin with the structure of the volume and the contributions of its authors. The book is divided into four parts: Elite Education and Cultural Conventions; The Power of Faith; Accommodations and Critiques; and Visions of Community and Social Order. Part one, made up of four essays, addresses the issue of ideological orthodoxy in the late imperial state. Focusing on Song-Yuan Neo-Confucianism, Peter Bol demonstrates the high degree of independent thinking among literati of the period, and discusses the efforts of successive generations to maintain a philosophical tradition of “seeking the Dao.” These findings lead Bol to conclude that from the Song period forward literati secured a basis for independence from the imperial state, one that simultaneously accepted the enshrining of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy in the state examination system while maintaining a strong sense of intellectual independence in local societies. Benjamin Elman extends the discussion to the usurpation of the Ming emperor Yongle and literati reactions to it. The usurper dispatched countless dissenting literati to early graves, while ensconcing Cheng-Zhu Dao learning as state orthodoxy. This privileging of a particular strain of what has come to be called Neo-Confucian thought involved imperially sanctioned text-editing projects, which not only established and delimited a canon of acceptable versions of the classics, but created a precedent for later emperors, Chinese and otherwise, to draw from. As Pauline Yu demonstrates in her paper, such endeavors extended into many domains of writing, such as poetry, which became one of the writing skills of the state examination system. High Tang masters were elevated to the stature of the Song philosophers whose writings were being canonized. Yet, as with other examples of intellectual independence at the local level, canonization served to stimulate interest in other older poetic forms and the development of new ones. There were limits to such innovations, however. By the late Ming, poetry was seen to be in an almost irreversible state of decline. As Stephen Owen points out, the classic poetic forms themselves no longer seemed capable of carrying authentic expressions of feeling. This did not mean that poetry disappeared. Rather, it migrated into new expressive forms