Ruan Yuan, 1764-1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before the Opium War. By Betty Peh-T’i Wei, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2006. xx + 392 pp. 6 Maps, 14 Tables, 1 Fig., 6 Appendices, 3 Bibliographies, Glossary and Index. ISBN 962-209-785-5 (hb)

Perhaps because many European and North American historians of Qing China only turned their attention to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries after scholarly biographies were no longer in vogue, there is a surprising dearth of biographies of major figures of this period. One recent and welcome exception is William Rowe’s study of the eighteenth-century official Chen Hongmou (1696-1771). Another important figure for whom we desperately needed an English-language biography is the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century official Ruan Yuan (1764-1849). Because Ruan Yuan served for so long as a provincial official and was so active in promoting scholarship and literature both in his native Yangzhou and in the places where he served, he is an important subject for historians interested in a wide array of topics. Betty Wei is to be commended for her effort in producing such a biography in the book under review here.

Aside from an introduction and conclusion, this book is divided into five parts, arranged topically and semi-chronologically. Part One, “The Making of a Scholar-Official,” consists of three chapters that describe Ruan Yuan’s family background, education, and early assignments as educational director in the two provinces of Shandong and Zhejiang during the 1790s. In Part Two, “The Provincial Official at Work,” Wei devotes individual chapters to some of the important tasks with which Ruan was charged as a provincial official: piracy suppression in Zhejiang during the first decade of the nineteenth century, containment of secret society activities in Jiangxi during the 1810s, management of relations with the British and other foreign powers in Guangdong during the late 1810s and early 1820s, control of ethnic minorities and border disturbances in Yunnan in the late 1820s and early 1830s, and social welfare (using as an example Ruan’s activities in Zhejiang during his term as governor there in the first decade of the nineteenth century). Much of Part Two is drawn from the author’s dissertation. A single chapter makes up Part Three, “Ruan Yuan at Leisure;” here, the author discusses Ruan Yuan’s role as patron of scholarship. In Part Four, “The Private Ruan Yuan,” the author provides readers with a chapter describing Ruan’s relationship with his father and clan, and another portraying his relationship with his wives, concubines, and daughters. Two chapters in Part Five, “The Senior Statesman,” explore Ruan’s service in the capital during the 1830s and his retirement in Yangzhou after 1838.

Wei has collected a large number of very interesting primary sources on Ruan Yuan, ranging from unpublished letters (e.g., p. 38) to materials from the Qing archives in Beijing and Taipei. She also incorporates and translates poems by Ruan Yuan, his wife Kong Luhua, and various associates. As a result, scholars beginning research projects on a number of topics will find this book a very handy guide to Ruan’s life and work. Due to sloppy editing, however, even
specialists will have to use this book with care. In the interest of space, I will provide just a few examples to suggest the range of errors that I encountered. In note 35 on page 68 there is a helpful reference to an important work on the academy that Ruan Yuan founded in Hangzhou, the Gujing jingshe 話經精舍; regrettably, the mistaken romanization ("Gujing Jiushě") and mistaken Chinese character ("話經精社") presented here could easily be incorporated into a researcher’s notes and own future published work. On the following page, Ziyang 紫陽 Academy is described as being located in "Ziyang," “in Zhejiang” province; known as one of Hangzhou’s four major academies during Ruan Yuan’s era, Ziyang Academy was located in that city. Likewise, due to misspelling, readers will look in vain for a maritime merchant named “Wu Guoyong (Hawqua I)” (p. 146, note 34) or for Chen Li’s “Dongyuan dushuji 東原讀書記” (p. 207). Despite the frequency of such errors, thanks to Betty Wei’s diligence in bringing together so many sources on Ruan Yuan this book can be very useful for serious researchers if approached with caution.

In bringing together a wide variety of materials, Wei also lays the groundwork for scholars to explore Ruan Yuan in relation to his political, social, and cultural context. Given Ruan’s importance in so many areas, the material in this book allows one to speculate on a number of issues, such as the power dynamics of central and regional administration, the relationship between local and “national” orientations, and the scholarly debates between what contemporaries referred to as "Han Learning" and “Song Learning.” For example, the materials in this biography could shed light on the relationship between a major provincial official in the person of Ruan Yuan and the three emperors under which he served. The most interesting and potentially revealing case, which resulted in Ruan Yuan’s dismissal from the governorship of Zhejiang province in 1809, is found in an appendix (Appendix V, on a civil service examination cheating scam involving the Zhejiang educational director Liu Fenggao, who earned the jinshi degree in the same year as Ruan Yuan and who became the son-in-law of Ruan’s patron, Zhu Gui). In the main text of the biography readers will find passing references to this case (e.g., pp. 117, 246), and even mention (on p. 131) of the fact that after this incident the Jiaqing emperor no longer wrote to Ruan Yuan personally in government communications. Utilizing such materials to their full advantage, future scholars will be able to explore with much nuance the relationship between Ruan Yuan and his emperors. Wei should also be thanked for including a fascinating description of the presentation of imperial gifts to Ruan Yuan during his retirement in Yangzhou (pp. 294-295). Such descriptions point the way toward a discussion of the role of ritual in forging and maintaining the relationship between an emperor and his officials.

Betty Wei also provides vivid descriptions of Ruan Yuan’s activities in Yangzhou: important information on his relationship with the Ruan clan; the production of reeds on the shore of the Yangzi as a source of family income; Ruan’s efforts at constructing tombs, shrines, and residences in Yangzhou; and his circle of friends—dubbed the “Society of Five Old Men” and including