

## The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture

By RICHARD J. SMITH

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Reviewed by Robert A. Kapp

Early in his monumental portrait of Qing Dynasty China, Richard J. Smith writes about the Kangxi Emperor's (r. 1661–1722) commission of a massive encyclopedia of Chinese culture: [The Emperor's] *most ambitious effort to celebrate traditional Chinese Culture*. . . [was] the *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (*Complete collection of writings and illustrations, past and present, 1726*) . . . *Begun in 1700, this massive (more than 100 million words) and well-organized encyclopedia, repository of "all that was best in the literature of the past, dealing with every branch of knowledge," was intended not only as a moral and practical guide for the Qing emperors and their officials, but also as an expression of the unity and totality of traditional Chinese culture.* (73)

"More than 100 million words"? Those five words distill the challenge—for teachers everywhere, but especially for non-Chinese teachers facing non-Chinese classrooms—of "teaching about China."

The accumulated history, political systems, language, literature, art, thought, religion, multiethnic complexities, and social customs that constituted China at the end of two millennia of Imperial history have clung tenaciously to the transforming China of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This massive body of knowledge is, for most contemporary academics and interpreters of China, immeasurably dense, unimaginably heavy, and only sporadically reachable.

The immensity of the burden of "understanding China," for those who choose to immerse themselves in academic training, can go in several directions. Some people, as the void unfolds before them, throw up their hands and leave for greener pastures. Some people turn to the social sciences, including the quantitative social sciences, to define their intellectual progressions while excusing them from the fathomless depths that sinological training would have opened.

Most, noting realistically that life is short, choose to "define their topics" around the ultimate necessity of bringing *some* project to completion especially in a short-enough period of time that a book can be produced, a course designed, a professional advancement achieved. For most China specialists, the existential immersion in the gigantic Chinese heritage—call it an "ascent" or a "descent," depending on temperament—is not in the cards. These modern China specialists know a little about a lot and a lot about a little. They may view with awed respect, as I do, the truly cultivated, broadly civilized figures in contemporary China scholarship (Yu Ying-shih or Wang Gungwu, for example), but they have classes to teach, families to raise, committee meetings to attend. They must somehow make do, deciding how to know how they know and what they know.

This is the contemporary reality that Smith boldly confronts in his portrait, at once magisterial and engaging, of China under the Manchus. For the rest of us, teachers or interpreters of China to less highly informed contemporary audiences, Smith's grand distillation is a stimulating and helpful guide through a labyrinth from which, if one ventures to step off the path and disappear into its entrails, one might never emerge. This kind of distillation requires several things.



First, erudition. Consider the appendices, notes, and bibliography here, constituting 177 pages out of 584. The appendices to this book are marvelous. Imagine! One appendix provides us with a translation of the *Three Character Classic*, for example, one of the most formative instructional tools for the education and socialization of the youngest sentient members of Chinese society in Qing times. Another appendix offers an introduction to deep-rooted regional and local stereotypes.

But anyone who dips a toe into Sinology instantly realizes that encyclopedic erudition alone is, for all but the rarest personalities, as much a trap as a requirement. It must be accompanied by discriminating judgment.

Discriminating judgment takes many forms. Here are some of them.

Smith must decide how to balance the actuality of nearly infinite variety with the need to generalize and summarize. This is the core challenge, and the core dilemma, of his book. He does not conceal from us his awareness of the problem. From time to time, he speaks directly to us about the perils of overgeneralizing from widely disparate instances. How to discuss "Marriage"? "Religion"? "Poetry"? "Political Administration"? Everything he touches reveals a spectrum of temporal, geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic, or other variables. He can't itemize every point on the spectrum, so he labors bravely to make sense of all that he sees in order to tell us what we can take home from his explorations.

He has to decide when to—and when not to—translate quintessentially Chinese terms into a readable English that, simply by being translation, must fail to do full justice to their meanings in their own time and cultural space. He knows the dangers of going too far, of falling for the weepy temptation to convey China in "All mothers love their babies" generalities. But he can't simply write the book in classical Chinese in order to be faithful to the original dialogue. He must make choices if he is to reach his readers and present them with a manageable, even useful, book. He negotiates this difficult path by sifting through voluminous amounts of primary texts and contemporary scholarship.

Smith has also more than kept abreast of developments in modern Western scholarship on China. His portrait of late Imperial China must be anchored in frameworks of analysis built by others; it must be a contribution to a meaningful, structured dialogue to which many others also contribute. Smith generously refers to numerous scholars' researches within the body of his text, thus anchoring his ideas in a current intellectual context and inviting readers who wish to go further to pursue his colleagues' work through his footnotes.

Two examples stand out. First, this volume envisions Qing China as a profoundly multicultural landscape, rather than a society in which Han traditions and social forms simply devoured and subsumed those of other cultures, especially those of the Manchus, within the Imperial borders. Second, Smith returns in virtually every chapter to themes of gender, sexuality, and the roles of women. Some of this occasionally feels a little obligatory to this reviewer, but I concede that Smith is writing in a conceptual universe that has evolved profoundly since I last engaged in research scholarship.

Perhaps most importantly, I want to reflect on the ways in which this skillful portrait of late Imperial culture can serve the needs of teachers who are themselves not deeply bathed in Chinese studies and whose students may be new to any encounter with China at all.

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Let's start with the basics. In my view, assigning this entire book for undergraduates as a sort of text would be unwise, except in very unusual cases of individual students with either a consuming curiosity about the unfamiliar or considerable prior background in Chinese studies. But for instructors working to synthesize and distill the vastness of the Chinese past into absorbable and reasonably faithful renderings, I believe this book can be of great use.

Smith's chapters include "The Ming Dynasty Legacy," "Conquest and Consolidation," "The Qing Political Order," "Social and Economic Institutions," "Language and Symbolic Reference," "Patterns of Thought," "Religious Life," "Arts and Crafts," "Literary Trends," "Social Life," and "The Late Qing and Beyond." Each chapter is usefully divided into several sections.

For teachers with different thematic interests of their own, different chapters may serve very well. Each chapter is fully footnoted, so the teacher who seeks to pursue a certain theme can use this book as a sort of jumping-off point to propel further explorations, from which he or she can derive personally engaging, deliverable content for students. We all know from our own student experiences that a teacher who speaks with enthusiasm and in depth about the subjects he or she has found compelling can be a wondrous guide into unfamiliar territory.

For those instructors who have not developed particular areas of personal and professional concern that specific chapters of Smith's book would address, I find that some of Smith's chapters will provide more pedagogical assistance than others. Other readers of this review, and of the book itself, however, might well come to different conclusions. To me, the following chapters lend themselves most readily to instructors' efforts to equip themselves better for engagements with students who have a minimal China background: "The Ming Dynasty Legacy," "The Qing Political Order," "Social and Economic Institutions," "Social Life," and "The Late Qing and Beyond." These chapters, while never intended by the author to stand alone, are clearly bounded, well-constructed, and amenable to absorption by teachers and students who are able to benefit from content that might be called "intensive synthesis."

Absent from my "most useful for teachers" list are Smith's chapters "Language and Symbolic Reference," "Patterns of Thought," "Religious Life," "Arts and Crafts," and "Literary Trends." Omitting these chapters is not a comment on their quality; they are as thoroughly researched and well-ordered as the others. Smith, in fact, has spent much of his intellectual career in the study of classical Chinese thought, most notably *The Classic of Changes* (or "Book of Changes" or *I Ching*, as it is widely known in the West), and his grasp of the varieties, or "schools" as he terms them, within the main identified currents of Chinese thought is admirable. The problem with these chapters, from the standpoint of pedagogy, is that they simply cannot sufficiently transcend the chasm between the remoteness of the late traditional Chinese cultural world and the contemporary world of nonspecialist understanding. Smith tries his best to put into meaningful English the central concepts and the core Chinese formulations on which Qing ideas, beliefs, and cultural expressions were founded. But his task is daunting, as it has been for his intellectual predecessors. As Smith

enumerates the myriad "schools" within late Imperial Confucianism, or within late Imperial literature, the thicket of his findings and listings becomes difficult to penetrate. The instructor seeking to find teachable content is likely to find himself or herself marking the margins, or taking notes and circling keywords so frequently that ultimately he or she winds up holding a near reproduction of what Smith has cataloged, rather than a body of ideas, absorbed and internalized, that can be introduced in the classroom.

There really is no solution to this, I think, except to make a conscious decision to remain superficial in these areas or else choose a finite topic here and there for a deeper dive aimed at personal understanding and the development of stimulating content for students. But, until the great nineteenth-century transformation that Smith depicts in his final chapter gets underway, deep diving on single topics can be very demanding. Read, for example, the most renowned work of Qing Era literature, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*—or, better yet, read two worthy translations side by side—and ponder how to integrate what you read into undergraduate teaching plans.

Perhaps the best way to maximize the pedagogical value of Smith's rich synthesis would be to combine portions of it with carefully selected texts from original Chinese sources. William Theodore de Bary's *Sources of Chinese Tradition* still offers translated texts of historical significance and marvelous insights. Successive editions of Patricia Ebrey's *Chinese Civilization and Society: A Source Book* offer a widely scattered array of brief, vividly translated items, from classical philosophy to the most down-to-earth elements of popular social life, grouped chronologically by dynasty and then through the twentieth century. Devoted readers of *Education About Asia* will surely have their own favorite collections of translated source materials.

Today's China lives ambiguously with its enormous and inescapable past, whose rejection was an integral element in the revolutionary movements that have led to today. Its rulers try consciously to corral the historical inheritance, saddle it, ride it, and above all turn it for contemporary purposes, even as they and the civilization/party state they manage lurch ahead in a world on whose contours China has, until now, had limited impact. The Chinese people and their leaders, having come a very long way in a very short time since the end of the 1970s, seem now to be saying that the time has come for China to contribute more prominently to the definition of the world order of the future. To do that, both the Chinese and the wider world must find meaning in the Chinese past and recognize the power of deep-rooted habits of thought and behavior, even as they acknowledge the nature of the disruptions and discontinuities that have taken China from its late Imperial identity to its still-evolving contemporary character.

Smith has provided us with a stimulating portrait of a complex civilization over a three hundred-year period. *The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture* is well worth reading now and will merit reconsulting in the future, as China's progress on the global stage continues, and as our students face a world increasingly subject to the realization of Chinese interests and Chinese influences. ■

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