

INTRODUCTION

Historical mind-sets are difficult to gauge. Historians of modern China quickly learn, for example, that in 1898 New Text Confucianism, the first of all imperial Confucianisms, became the last stand for radical Confucians. During that fateful year the mercurial New Text advocate K'ang Yu-wei and his coterie (including Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and T'an Ssu-t'ung) came to the attention of the Kuang-hsu Emperor, who with K'ang's support initiated the eventful but abortive Hundred Days' Reform in Peking.¹ Earlier New Text scholars like Wei Yuan and Kung Tzu-ch'en are characterized in twentieth-century accounts of modern Chinese intellectual history as the stalking-horses for late imperial reformers. In the Hundred Days' Reform forty years after Wei Yuan's death, New Text ideas were quixotically appropriated in place of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy to legitimate imperial sovereignty and to promote extensive political reform.

The uproar over New Text Confucianism in late imperial scholarly circles has, however, led to the misrepresentation of the historical circumstances within which that movement incubated and developed. Linear accounts that organize the historical record in neat cadences from K'ang Yu-wei back to Wei Yuan and Kung Tzu-ch'en too often reflect unexamined assumptions about the key issues and important

1. See Liang, *Intellectual Trends in the Ch'ing Period*, pp. 85-110. For a revisionist account see Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days*. For a discussion see T'ang and Elman, "The 1898 Reforms Revisited."

figures in modern Chinese intellectual history. A phenomenal number of books and articles have been published on K'ang, Liang, Kung, and Wei since 1900, and essays on them continue to proliferate in Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarly journals. Although hundreds of works that touch on the nineteenth-century vicissitudes of New Text Confucianism have appeared, few scholars have explored the roots of New Text ideas in the late eighteenth century beyond some perfunctory paragraphs. The roles played by Chuang Ts'un-yü and Liu Feng-lu in the reemergence of New Text Confucianism have, when acknowledged, been conveniently subsumed within a linear historical agenda that makes 1898 the target of explanation.²

New Text Confucianism is unfortunately a case in point that scholarly expectations have colored scholarly research. It has long been assumed that the story of New Text Confucianism centers on K'ang Yu-wei and the 1898 reforms initiated by the Kuang-hsu Emperor. It therefore comes as a surprise that opposition between a well-placed but aging Chinese imperial grand secretary (Chuang Ts'un-yü) and a youthful Manchu palace guard (Ho-shen) who gained the ear of the Ch'ien-lung Emperor should be at the heart of the classical reemergence of New Text Confucianism in the 1780s.

Who was Chuang Ts'un-yü? Normally he appears as a curious footnote in accounts by historians who are satisfied that Wei Yuan and Kung Tzu-chen accurately represent the reformist ethos of nineteenth-century China. Who was Liu Feng-lu? Usually he is depicted in historical accounts as no more than the teacher of Wei and Kung. When the historical documents, genealogies, and manuscripts of Chuang and Liu are examined, however, a scholarly vertigo sets in. Chuang Ts'un-yü was on center stage in the political world of late imperial China. Indeed, by comparison Wei Yuan and Kung Tzu-chen were marginal figures whose historical importance has been determined largely by a consensus of twentieth-century scholars.

Furthermore, it is curious that Confucians first actively dissented from the late imperial state's orthodox *raison d'être* beginning in the late Ming, not after the Opium War. When New Text Confucianism reemerged in the late eighteenth century, after centuries of neglect, its advocates were retracing political agendas that had been raised and

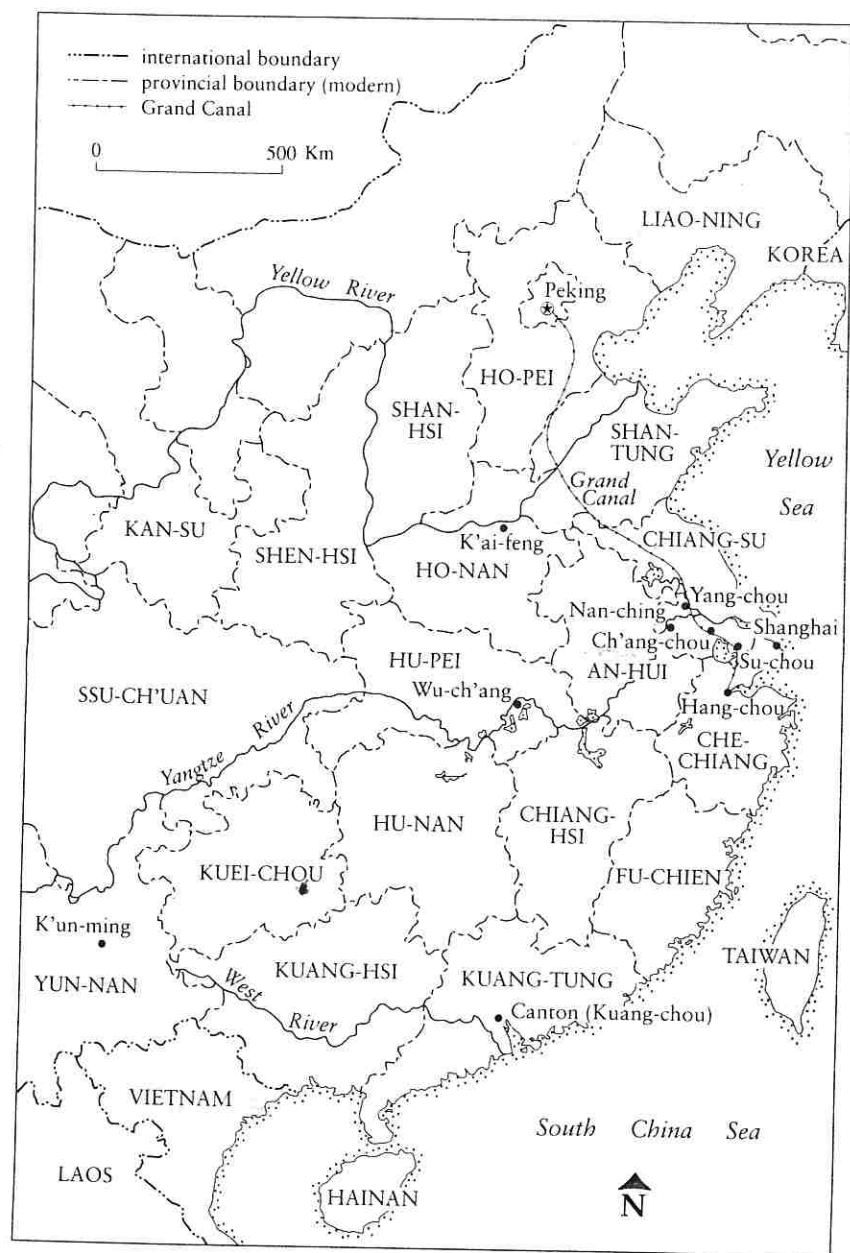
then rejected in the seventeenth century, when Manchu armies destroyed the Ming dynasty. Sixty years before Western imperialism began to transform the political, military, economic, and social institutions through which the Ch'ing (1644–1911) state legitimated itself, Confucians were already showing an interest in alternative forms of political discourse. Why?

Such dissent raises intriguing questions about the history of Confucianism and its links to the imperial state. They force us to reconsider the tensions within Confucian political culture that gave rise to dissenting movements such as the New Text reform initiative. What continuities existed in Confucian political discourse following the Western incursion? Why did New Text studies reemerge in the eighteenth century? Why was the New Text agenda first rearticulated in Ch'ang-chou Prefecture, a trading center on the Grand Canal in the prosperous Yangtze Delta (map 2)? After all, Ch'ang-chou had been the center for much of the gentry political dissent in the 1620s, which challenged the usurpation of Ming imperial power by palace eunuchs.

Accounts of the 1898 reform movement have presented New Text Confucianism as a subset of what historians considered "more important" events in late-nineteenth-century political and intellectual history. To remedy this situation, I will reevaluate the origins of the New Text revival during the Ch'ing dynasty in light of long-standing political battles to control the interpretation of the Classics in the imperial state. The reemergence of New Text Confucianism in eighteenth-century Ch'ang-chou also provides us with an interesting example of the interaction of scholarship and politics in the late empire before the advent of Western imperialism.

The origins of New Text Confucianism will tell us a great deal about long-term historical developments in late imperial China—more, in any event, than its political climax in the 1890s revealed, when K'ang Yu-wei briefly rose to national prominence in Peking. By 1899 New Text was already passé as a political force, although it remained important among intellectuals and scholars. In contrast, New Text Confucianism in eighteenth-century Ch'ang-chou reveals important features of gentry intellectual and social life. The Chuang and the Liu families, whose high social standing in Ch'ang-chou society lasted from 1450 until 1850, exemplify the interaction of classical scholarship, corporate lineages, and Confucian politics in the rise of the Ch'ang-chou school of New Text Confucianism.

2. An exception to this general trend is On-cho Ng's "Text in Context: *Chin-wen* Learning in Ch'ing Thought" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1986), which was



Map 2. Administrative Map of China

Source: Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*. Reprinted with the permission of the publishers, the Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University. © 1984.

Text during the Ch'ing dynasty by not focusing on the achievements of Wei Yuan, Kung Tzu-chen, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, or K'ang Yu-wei. They appear in these pages to help elucidate the accomplishments of Chuang Ts'un-yü and Liu Feng-lu. Whether this substitution of beginnings for endings will stand up over time is unclear. My aim is not to downplay the importance of New Text Confucianism in the 1898 reforms. Rather, my intent is to discover the beginnings as beginnings, without the historical teleologies commended by hindsight.

In my earlier work I have suggested that the philosophic rebellion spawned by the Ch'ing dynasty *k'ao-cheng* (evidential research, lit., "search for evidence") movement set the stage for the social and political conclusions drawn by New Text scholars. In the present work I shall try to document this claim. New Text Confucianism must be understood in light of its ties to classicism and philology, for without such an understanding, it may appear to be a peculiar Confucian aerolite that depended entirely on the nineteenth-century Western influence for its visibility.³

During the Ch'ing dynasty *k'ao-cheng* scholars advocated a program to reconstruct missing sources from antiquity. They first sought out T'ang (618–906) and then Later Han (25–220) sources to overcome limitations they found in Sung (960–1279) and Ming forms of Neo-Confucianism. Because Later Han classical sources were relatively unaffected by the Neo-Taoist and Buddhist notions that had influenced T'ang, Sung, and Ming Confucians, Han Confucians received increased respect and attention from textual purists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The debate between those who favored Later Han classical scholarship (that is, Han Learning [*Han-hsueh*]) and those who adhered to the Neo-Confucian school (that is, Sung Learning [*Sung-hsueh*]) was philologically technical, but its political repercussions were considerable. Han Learning represented more than just an antiquarian quest. Its advocates cast doubt on the Confucian ideology enshrined by Manchu rulers when they legitimated imperial power. When tied to classical studies, philology thus had a political component.

Reconstruction of Han Learning during the eighteenth century

3. Levenson's account in his *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate*, vol. 1, pp. 79–94, remains the most influential interpretation of New Text Confucianism. See also Chang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition*, pp. 3–34, and Philip C. C. Huang, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Chinese Liberalism*, pp. 13–24. Cf. Hsiao, *Modern China and a*