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A Review of *Classicism, the Imperial Civil Examination System, and Cultural History: Selected Works of Benjamin A. Elman*

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Abstract: In his personal collection of writings titled *Classicism, the Imperial Civil Examination System, and Cultural History: Selected Works of Benjamin A. Elman*, Elman reveals the cultural-historical orientation of his research on classicism and imperial examinations. Through his own “contextualization” research, Elman re-examines the changing of the academic paradigmatic shift of Chinese classicism and the shift in the themes and content of the Imperial Civil Examination System. He discovers that the popularity of textology dispelled the ideology shaped by Neo Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties, which contributed to the ideological liberation and scientific consciousness of scholars in the Qing Dynasty. The Imperial Civil Examination System, as an institution that shaped the value identity of the cultural elite, also showed the gradual dismantling of the dominant discourse in the Qing Dynasty. The thematic changes also indicated the gradual deconstruction of the dominant discourse of the Qing, and the abolition of the Imperial Civil Examination System signified the collapse of imperial ideology. Ultimately, Elman reflects on the role of Confucianism, concluding that it was involved in the complex transformation of China from ancient times to the present, and that its own vicissitudes played a crucial role in the turn of China’s modernization.

Keywords: Elman, contextualization, classicism, the Imperial Civil Examination System, cultural transformation

Since the publication of several of his influential monographs, including *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Elman, 1985a, 1985b), and *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: The Ch’ang-chou*

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School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China (Elman, 1990), Benjamin A. Elman has gained great renown with researchers of Qing classical studies as well as among sinologists outside China. *Classicism, the Imperial Civil Examination System, and Cultural History: Selected Works of Benjamin A. Elman* (Elman, 2010) published in 2010 can be regarded as Elman's summary of his own achievements. The book not only embodies Elman's most important academic findings in various explorations in the field but also integrates these views in a comprehensive framework, showing the author's consistent problem awareness for decades.

Whether it is the textual research on the origin of philology of *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, the consideration on the social background of "Changzhou School in the Qing Dynasty's Contributions to the Revival of Modern Confucian Classics" in *Classicism, Politics, and Kinship: the Ch'ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China*, or the later discussion on the origin of science in *Science in China (1550–1900)* (Elman, 2016), the prototype or epitome can be seen in Elman's *Selected Works*. However, the volume of his *Selected Works* represents not simply a collection of his various research projects, but also a unified account, in a broad spectrum, of his humanistic concern for cultural history. Thus the title *Classicism, Civil Examinations, and Cultural History* should not be read verbatim at face value, but, more logically, as "Cultural History of Classicism and the Imperial Civil Examination System (科举)." can be seen that his focus on classicism and the Imperial Civil Examination System is oriented to the study of the vicissitudes of Chinese civilization and cultural replacement in history, which Elman tries to track down to their causes by delving into the depths of specific cases in Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) academia.

1 The Historical Context of China

Early in a dialogue with Wang Hui (汪晖) in May 1993, Elman cast his doubts on John K. Fairbank's exclusive attention to socio-economic history and showed dissatisfaction with his historical narrative approach. Instead, he embraces a contextual mode of study that connects China's history of thought to its contemporary conditions of economics, politics, and the social background of the time (Wang & Elman, 1994). The latter approach is brilliantly illustrated in *Selected Works*, for Elman rejects both the hindsight of modernism and the predominance of a Eurocentric narrative. He attempts to return to Chinese history per se and to decipher Chinese thought by a coherent explanation of Chinese social, academic, and cultural history.

As a collection of writings devoted to research on Chinese classical studies throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1616–1911) dynasties, Elman places his essay, “Nietzsche and Buddhism,” as the opening chapter of *Selected Works*, which seems oddly irrelevant to the theme. For that paper is an inquiry into both Nietzsche and Buddhism, pertaining to nothing of Chinese the Imperial Civil Examination System. However, it could serve as a thematic outline of the whole book. As Elman points out, the treatise not only discloses the various mistaken notions about Buddhism by Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche from their perspectives of Western discourse, but reiterates that a reinterpretation of Eastern philosophies may bring about a deeper understanding of Western thought as well as renew our philosophical insights.

He has persistently adhered to this concern and tries to use more suitable methods to approach ancient Chinese thought in the subsequent study of Confucian classics and the Imperial Civil Examination System in the Ming and Qing dynasties. He gives an account of how the stories of the Duke of Zhou (周公 dates unknown), regent of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.E.–771 B.C.E.) for the young king Cheng (成王 1055 B.C.E.–1021 B.C.E.), have been interpreted, reinterpreted, and exploited in the historical context of the Ming. Such analysis is kept in the historical setting of the time, reveals the varied concepts of “classicism” and “power” by scholars of different eras, and grasps the major clues that inform the shifts of classical studies and dynastic changes in Chinese history.

The most brilliant chapters which shine through Elman’s contextualization approach form the kernel of *Selected Works*, namely, his copious treatises on textology and the Imperial Civil Examination System. His attention to the context of Chinese history enables him to shed light on the great significance of many hitherto neglected materials marginalized by historians. These materials have brought into focus and sharpened the features that characterize classicism and the Imperial Civil Examination System during the Ming–Qing periods. Starting with these, Elman reevaluates the role of Confucian classics and the Imperial Civil Examination System in the process of ancient and modern changes in China from a broader perspective of cultural history.

2 Debates on Han Learning and Song Learning, with Respect to the Turn of a Civilization

Since Jiang Fan (江藩 1761–1830) and Fang Dongshu (方东树 1772–1851) began a debate on the comparative merits of “Han Learning versus Song Learning,” the event has been regarded as a dividing line of the bifurcating schools of Qing

scholarship. Jiang and his associates had long observed that mainstream scholarship of the Qing was categorically different from the Neo Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, and was thus a worthy topic for discussing their respective merits and demerits. In *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (1984), and the articles—“The Unraveling of Neo-Confucianism: From Philosophy to Philology in Late Imperial China” (Elman, 1983) “Criticism as Philosophy: Conceptual Change in Qing Dynasty Evidential Research” (Elman, 1985a, 1985b), of which the latter two are included in *Selected Work*. Elman tries to explore how philology in the Qing Dynasty was very different from Neo Confucianism in the Song and the Ming, which can also be regarded as a further study of the Han–Song controversy. However, Elman does not care about the comparative merits of “Han Learning versus Song Learning” as debated by Jiang Fan and Fang Dongshu. He is more concerned with the conceptual shift and cultural transition that occurred while Neo Confucianism as the mainstream Qing scholarship gave way to philological and textology.

Jiang Fan in his genealogy, *Record of Sinology Masters in the Qing Dynasty* (《国朝汉学师承记》) (Jiang, 1983), classified the Qing-dynasty philologists from Wu (present-day Suzhou of Jiangsu Province) and those from Wan (present-day Anhui Provinces) as successors to Sinology. The textology of the Qing Dynasty during the Qianlong (乾隆 1736–1796) and Jiaqing (嘉庆 1796–1820) reigns seemed to be an academic form as a study of exactitude in the fashion of the Han-dynasty masters, while textual research on ancient documents, and relevant etymological studies are regarded as the hallmark of the Qing version of Sinology. Such a narrative has continued to enjoy a general consensus to this day by scholars of Qing classical studies. Therefore, such philological research was also known as the “plain learning” (朴学) of the Qing, which was often denigrated as text-based history not much concerned with moral philosophy or ethics (义理). It was seldom recognized to be of any value for philosophical thought.

If the more profound concerns of Qing philologists are given adequate attention, however, it will be found that their evidential research is by no means for the purpose of mere knowledge devoid of thought. Elman points out, “The writings of Dai Zhen demonstrate that the Chinese language, with its locale conceptualizations and organizational strategy, could be exploited to develop systematic stances of philosophy” (Elman, 2010, p. 60). Philologists such as Dai Zhen (戴震 1723–1777), who apparently focused on etymological scrutiny, eventually constructed a system of theories on human nature and the cosmos through etymological analyses of such key Chinese concepts as *Qi* (气) and *Li* (理), a system distinct from that of Song-dynasty Neo Confucians.

Moreover, the difference between textology and Neo Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties does not lie merely in specific points of view, but in their disparate paradigms of research. If Neo Confucianism was a constructive philosophy, that is, aiming to establish a unitary system of truth. The textology of the Qing would be a deconstructive philosophy, which critically questions previous understanding of philosophy and aims to establish a new philosophical system by means of textual research and language. The paradigmatic shift means more than it appears. As Elman points out: “When critique prevails as the core of the new philosophy, textology would no longer accept a uniform or conflated interpretation of classical learning. In Michel Foucault’s terms, ‘It desacralizes language’” (Elman, 2010, p. 111).

Elman finds that the textual research scholars in the Qing Dynasty painstakingly employed language to deconstruct the Neo Confucian orthodoxy by means of language criticism until they completely subverted the official academic discourse and ideology that had been established since the Ming Dynasty. By tracing the variation of the modes of narrative about the Duke of Zhou assisting young King Cheng, Elman has gained insight into the characteristics of Ming scholarship, on which he commented, “Universal ‘truth’ legitimated by the state in the form of the hegemony of Cheng–Zhu Confucian discourse in late imperial official and educational life drew the Classics and Four Books into its own conservative agenda, rather than following, for example, the more reformist agendas of earlier Northern Song or Former Han Confucians” (Elman, 2010, p. 40). It was precisely an ideological construction for cementing their political legitimacy by virtue of a universally accepted doctrine that motivated the imperial governments of the Ming and Qing to sanction philosophical theories of Song scholars as the state’s orthodox ideology. “In contrast, evidential scholarship of the Qing Dynasty opted for a critique paradigm of study, which means that at this level of analysis, Dai Zhen’s critique, which was driven home by Ruan Yuan (阮元 1764–1849) and Jiao Xun (焦循 1763–1820), certainly was liberating’ (Elman, 2010, p. 40).”

Textual research seems to be a drudgery of exploring ancient knowledge, but it was destined to end in unraveling the imperial state ideology thanks to its modality of conception, i.e., a preference for seeking solid facts of history at the sacrifice of metaphysical abstraction.

If further reflection is given to such a mode of thinking for factual accuracy and objectivity, it will turn out to be miraculously akin to the demands of modern science. Elman has proven this hypothesis by investigating the studies of textual research scholars in the fields of mathematics and astronomy. In his article “Western Learning and Evidential Research in the 18th Century” (18 世纪的西学与考证学), Elman suggests that a critical mode of thinking enabled evidential scholars to see great value in the natural sciences, and that they not only embraced

the sciences being transmitted from the West to China, but even took them as part and parcel of classical studies (Elman, 2015, pp. 103–138). In fact, Liang Qichao (梁启超 1873–1929) had long noted that Qing scholars paid great attention to knowledge of hydraulic and astronomical studies (Liang, 1998, pp. 55–57); he even regarded phonological studies then as the “precursor of science” (Liang, 1998, p. 104). Whereas Liang never explored deeper into the origins of the “precursor of science,” Elman goes a step further when he not only clarifies the key points of Qing paradigms of scholarship, but also gives a good answer to Needham’s question as to why modern science did not emerge in China.

Michael A. Gillespie (2008, p. 274) points out: “To put the matter more starkly, in the face of the long drawn out death of God, science can provide a coherent account of the whole only by making man or nature or both in some sense divine.” In Europe, when Rene Descartes took nature instead of transcendental God as the object of belief, from which he expected to obtain the most indubitable and objective knowledge, science and modernity represented by it came forth in time. Elman’s narrative invests evidential research or “plain learning” of the Qing philologists with a similar significance. As a branch of learning in pursuit of precise truth, textology no longer followed the metaphysical system constructed by Neo Confucianism, but took an objective and empirical stance toward the Classics as well as natural things. Therefore, this shift in the academic paradigm, from Song Learning to Han Learning, reveals the connotations of a deeper motivation—indicating a transition from the metaphysical *Li* School of Confucianism (理学) to “practical” learning or “concrete studies”—which meant more than an academic event. It played a critical role in the transformation of modern Chinese culture, and even meant, in a sense, Chinese-style “modernization” shift. To put it bluntly, the shift of emphasis from Song Learning to Han Learning during the Qing Dynasty brought about unprecedented freedom of thought, which opened the way for China to embrace modern science.

3 The Imperial Civil Examination System and the Changes of Social Thought

The Imperial Civil Examination System has been taken as the major source for the study of social and institutional history of China by Fei Xiaotong (费孝通 1910–2005) and Pan Guangdan (潘光旦 1899–1967) in “The Imperial Civil Examination System and Social Mobility” (Fei, 1947, pp. 1–21) and by He Bingdi (何炳棣 1917–2012) in *Social History of the Ming and Qing* (《明清社会史论》) (He, 2019). Many previous researchers believed that the reason why the Imperial Civil Examination

System was important in the society of Ming and Qing dynasties was that it could promote social mobility and mold a more open and free social order.

However, the fact remains that the Imperial Civil Examination System, after all, helped only a select few to be admitted into the ruling class, whereas its more profound influence on the evolution of Chinese institutions and ideology in history has rarely received attention. From his “contextualized” perspective that focuses on the interaction between social history and ideological history, Elman noted that the Imperial Civil Examination System played an extremely important role in value-molding, for the many candidates who failed the examinations as well as for the few that succeeded. He said, “We realize that the Imperial Civil Examination System was embodiments of Confucian cultural values and in the interests of the empire” (Gillespie, 2008, p. 274).

Preparation for the Imperial Civil Examination System by the intellectuals of the Ming and Qing dynasties required the extensive mirroring of imperial mainstream culture, which, in the process, enhanced their self-identification with Confucian culture and imperial state ideology before they were disciplined into an obedient elite group sharing common values with the privileged ruling class.

There were three sessions of tests for the Imperial Civil Examination System candidates during the Ming and Qing dynasties, but the most important session was the first one, in which candidates were required to compose an “eight-legged” essay (八股文). Since the end of the Qing, the “eight-legged” essay has been denigrated as a crafted, stereotyped genre of writing and consequently has been detested and feared by scholars for so long that few have attempted its study. It was Elman who picked up the subject, taking it as important historical material for inquiry into Ming–Qing the Imperial Civil Examination System. He has made a systematic investigation on the semantic requirements and writing purport of the “eight-legged” essay. Through minute analyses of paragon essays such as Wang Ao’s (王鏊 1450–1524) in his “The Interpretation and the Meaning of Classics in Ming and Qing dynasties (经典释传与明清经义)” of *Classicism, politics, and kinship: The Ch’ang-chou school of new text Confucianism in late imperial China*”, Elman finds that the model of crafting examination essays embodied a confirmation of interpretation of the orthodox commentaries authorized by Ming and Qing imperial ideology. The cultural elites, through composing seemingly “formalized” essays, tacitly expressed their approval of Confucian values and enhanced their self-identification with the imperial ideology. Elman thus came to the conclusion: “The internalization of a literary culture that was in part defined by the civil examination curriculum influenced the literatures’ public and private definition of his moral character and social conscience (Elman, 2010, p. 227).

The Imperial Civil Examination System as a form of testing contemporary ideas implies that an inquiry only from external perspectives of social and institutional

history is inadequate for justification. According to Elman, “The overcrowded examination hall became a contested site, where the political interests of the dynasty, the social interests of its elites, and the cultural ideals of Confucian classics were all competed and compromised” (Elman, 2010, p. 150). As the cultural intersection of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the specific themes and ideological purports of the Imperial Civil Examination System should be paid more attention by scholars. That is why Elman grew interested in the changing themes for the Imperial Civil Examination System, from which he expected to trace the general trend of Ming–Qing scholarship and its transition in modes of thinking.

Elman first selected policy questions from local provincial and metropolitan examinations (乡试、会试) from the early to the late Qing. He finds that the themes of policy questions in late Qing imperial examinations differ greatly from those of the early Qing. As he concluded, “Policy questions from late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century began to reflect a change of trends that shaped the future of Confucian examinations” (Elman, 2010, p. 179). The policy questions in the early Qing were often based on the Neo Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, but those of the late Qing were tinged with heavy textology; the academic methods and problem awareness of textology became the chief trend of the period. Elman points out that though disputes between advocates of Han Learning versus Song Learning did not upset the Qing rulers, it is sufficient to show how the Cheng-Zhu *Li* School of Confucianism (程朱理学), as state orthodoxy in the Imperial Civil Examination System, was being undermined in the late Qing, which hinted the gradual crumbling of the state-sanctioned ideology of the Qing.

Similarly, through case studies of policy questions in provincial examinations in southern China throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, Elman finds that historical studies were also breaking their confinement from the Learning of Dao (道学) and the study of Confucian Classics (经学). The trend reminds us of Zhang Xuecheng’s (章学诚 1738–1801) later announcement that “The Six Classics are all histories” (六经皆史), a declaration indicating that the prestige of the Classics, though outwardly unchanged, actually had diminished appreciably with the rise of historical studies.

In regard to this effect, Elman remarks: “Historical studies were no longer the dependency of the Classics and, of course, classical studies were not forced into the purview of historical studies, either. The prestige of historical canons remained unchallenged. Changes were in the brew. A century later, Zhang Xuecheng at the end of the 18th century challenged the authority of the Six Classics and brought them into the purview of historical research” (Elman, 2010, p. 193).

Chen Bisheng (陈壁生) points out the cultural shift as indicated by the rise and fall of classical and historical studies since early modern China: “Confucian

classics was thoroughly incorporated into historiography as an academic discipline, and thoroughly unraveled in value.” (Chen, 2014, p. 142)

Elman’s study on the Imperial Civil Examination System unfolds a fuller picture of this disintegration process. The changing themes of the Imperial Civil Examination System show that historians had begun to detach themselves from the Confucian Classics during the Qing, when they gradually refused to recognize the authority of canonical texts. The process also presages that historical studies would eventually dismantle the orthodox discourse that had been constructed for thousands of years, before they finally swallowed up traditional Classics scholarship.

The vicissitudes of themes for the Imperial Civil Examination System had forewarned the unprecedented cultural upheaval to occur during the Qing Dynasty. Even the Imperial Civil Examination System, which were designed for shaping mainstream ideology, could not escape the disintegration of values of the traditional Neo Confucianism by textual research and by historical trends of thought. In comparison, the abolition of the Imperial Civil Examination System at the end of the Qing (1905) only meant the complete collapse of the legitimacy of the Qing as an imperial regime. Elman observed:

“The abolition of the system put an end to the nation-wide imperial orthodoxy of more than 500 years as well as the faith of belief and values by cultural elites and men of letters for thousands of years” (Elman, 2010, p. 154). The end of the Imperial Civil Examination System was a close causal event to the dynastic replacement of Qing rule. As a system for inculcating Confucian ideas into the minds of millions of households, its fate determined the fate of imperial ideology of the Ming and the Qing and even the future of Chinese civilization. From that point on, China underwent a tremendous change accompanied by social and political upheavals.

4 Conclusion

As the *Li* School of Confucianism represented authoritative intellectual discourse in the Ming and the Qing, the Imperial Civil Examination System embodied its institutional fortresses that served to safeguard such ideologies. Behind the challenges and quandaries encountered by both of them lies a hidden logic for their necessary fate: philological learning of evidential research as a philosophical critique was day by day eroding the authority of the *Li* School of Confucianism, while the change of themes for the Imperial Civil Examination System questions time and again announced the irrevocable demise of such authoritative discourse until, in the end, the abolition of the Imperial Civil Examination System brought the downfall of an imperial ideology. The findings of Elman’s study of Ming–Qing

classicism and the Imperial Civil Examination System represent the final conclusion about this outcome of cultural history: the ideological emancipation and the advent of modernity in China.

In Elman's narrative, the changes encountered by Ming–Qing scholarship and politics not only heralded the replacement of political power and specific institutions, but also unveiled China undergoing a cultural change from the past to a modern age. The change had its omen of beginnings in the rise of “plain learning” at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and its completion was secured by the abolition of the Imperial Civil Examination System. During the process, the imperial ideology was dying out and Chinese intellectuals were enabled to accept new ideas and modern science.

The concluding chapter of Elman's *Selected Works* is titled “Rethinking Confucianism,” in which the author demonstrates that the transformation of Confucianism is closely tied to the change of China from an ancient society to a modern one. As he points out, it is inadvisable to simply regard “Confucianism” as a hindrance to the modernization of East Asian countries. A rethinking of Confucianism in the historical context of East Asia will help us to reexamine its pluralistic nature and its complex interactions with power and society. Such cultural and political complexity in the relationship of Confucianism with East Asian countries has continually intervened in the modernization of East Asia and played a vital role in the process (Elman, 2010, pp. 228–252).

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