

Introduction

Scholars have presented contrasting views of the relationship between Chinese state and society. Swayed by both the past self-presentations of the Chinese state and its extraordinary reach in the mid-twentieth century, some have argued that it closely controlled society.¹ “In China political action of the state has been the single most important factor in determining social change,” as a recent study of Mao Zedong’s imitation of the founder of the Ming dynasty put it.² No church, no parliament, no aristocracy pressed independent claims to challenge the absolute rule of the emperor. The extensive bureaucracy that governed the empire was imagined as an extension of imperial authority.³ Individual officials might protest, but they could not openly organize to combat imperial power.⁴ Even the members of the social elite who did not serve in office often extended, rather than threatening, state control.⁵ This view of China as the homeland of despotism has been important in Western ideas about self and other from the Greeks through Hegel to Jared Diamond.⁶

At the other extreme is the view that from early times up to the modern age, a stable substratum of village organization obstinately withstood state intervention.⁷ Combined with China’s great size, and with the decreasing ratio of officials to subjects as the population grew, this perspective has suggested that the late imperial state was rarely able to organize local society directly. Resident administrators—the magistrates, subprefects, and prefects who constituted the lowest authoritative rung of the imperial bureaucracy—had to rely on local elite men.⁸ These men were of the same social class as the resident administrators, but they had their own agendas and bases of power, so that by the late imperial period “the state was of at most limited relevance to local order.”⁹

Seeking a middle ground that might qualify China for the historically conditioned transition to democracy, American scholars in the late twentieth century

looked for some kind of civil society or public sphere between Chinese state and society, particularly in the Qing period (1644–1911). The fascinating body of scholarship that resulted demonstrated instead that official and private initiatives were usually intertwined.¹⁰ The state neither totally dominated society, nor was irrelevant to it, nor left aside spheres in which elites could act independently for the public good. Yet not only recent scholars, but also the statecraft thinkers of imperial China, have distinguished state from society.¹¹ Clearly government, especially in a nondemocratic society, is in some way separate from the governed. We need a new way of thinking about the relationship between the late imperial Chinese state and the early modern society it governed.

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) is often considered a high point of autocracy. To consider the nature of that autocracy in relation to society, this book provides a detailed examination of one centrally-mandated local institution, the community school. The community school was not an independent local institution, but neither was it merely an instrument of imperial control. It was sponsored, debated, and manipulated not only by emperors, not only by central and local officials, but also by gentry and commoners all over the empire. Initiative in establishing community schools shifted down through the levels of state and society as the Ming period wore on. Schools in China have often been studied as part of a process of Confucianization from the Han period onwards; a recent incarnation of this approach has been a debate on whether the Ming state had effectively usurped the independent moral authority of Confucianism.¹² I am asking, instead, how and why various players, including those who self-identified as Confucians, participated in community schools as state enterprises.

The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang or the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398), posthumously named Ming Taizu, embarked on a full-scale reconstruction of China after a long period of division and foreign domination. He and his officials and successors drew on past institutions and new approaches in a fundamental Chinese governing process: *jiaohua*, or transformation through education. Depending on one's point of view, *jiaohua* (also translated "enculturation" or "civilization") can be condemned as indoctrination to control the masses, or praised as a way of improving morality and broadening participation in the high-status pursuit of humanistic study and self-cultivation. The building of schools at all levels, the promotion of study of the classics, the printing of didactic morality books, the civil service examination system for recruitment into the bureaucracy, community rituals of moral improvement and incorporation into the state, government distribution of Neo-Confucian ritual manuals, and the like were techniques of *jiaohua* that went hand in hand with more immediate government tasks such as defense, tax collection, and criminal justice. As another part of *jiaohua*, the Ming founder, in a move nothing short of extraordinary

in the fourteenth-century world, mandated not only an advanced school for every county and prefecture in the empire, but also an elementary school, called a “community school,” for every village, to educate every boy.

Although in a general sense they were all implicated in *jiaohua* as one of their functions, no educational institution in China was the same all the time, or had an essential nature apart from its historical existence. While county-level Confucian schools (*ruixue*) sometimes really provided higher education, by the mid-Ming they were generally no more than places for students to register. Academies (*shuyuan*) variously housed high-minded Confucian masters and their disciples, educated students for the civil service examinations, or brought down the wrath of the state as centers of dissent. Similarly, attempts to identify the true or essential nature of community schools have yielded contradictory results. Angela Leung, for instance, considers the charitable school (*yixue*) and the community school (*shexue*) fundamentally different. The former was “more genuinely a school of the community than the state *she-hsüeh* [*shexue*] and its charitable aspect was essential.”¹³ William Rowe believes the opposite: that it was the community school that was funded by and belonged more closely to “‘the people’ themselves—[to] the subcounty local community.”¹⁴ In fact, community schools lack an essential nature. Over time their nature changed; in different hands, their nature varied.¹⁵

For the study of education, scholars like Evelyn Rawski, Chi Xiaofang, and Joanna Handlin rightly take the two (and more) types of primary school together, arguing that in practical terms there is “no clear and consistent distinction” between the terms “community school” and “charitable school.”¹⁶ This book takes a different approach, focusing only on community schools. It does explain administration, attendance policies, teacher qualifications and curricula, but it is not primarily a work in the history of education. Rather, this book looks at Ming governance as a relation between state and society through the particular window of the centrally-mandated local institution labeled “community school.”¹⁷ In tracing the community schools’ shifting fortunes, the book explores what the institutions with this name show about the fate of an imperial policy.

Community schools are usually associated with the Ming founder, and it was to gauge the extent of his power over society that I initially took up the task of counting them, a task eased by the efforts of Wang Lanyin in the 1930s. I found about 9355 Ming period community schools listed in gazetteers, and the where and when of these figures make up part of my argument. But in reading the rich post-Hongwu materials on community schools, I began also to see patterns of change in imperial policy, in who promoted schools and why, and in writing about schools: patterns that reflect relations between dynasty and

bureaucracy, and between state and society more broadly. In the early Ming (1368–1430) community schools appear mainly as an imperial enterprise, aimed at teaching boys the law that the Ming founder hoped would prevent social change (Chapter 2). In the mid-Ming (1430–1470) they were sponsored most saliently by high officials for security and recruitment, and appear predominantly in memorials, prefaces, and commemorative records (Chapter 3). In the high Ming (1470–1530) community schools were founded mainly by resident administrators, were recorded most often in commemorative records and gazetteers, and were sometimes closely connected with attacks on religious institutions (Chapter 4). Later in the high Ming period, the schools were taken up as well by higher profile officials, including Wang Yangming, who left records of the orders and curricula they issued (Chapter 5). In the late Ming (1530–1644), earlier patterns coexisted with a further downward shift in initiative on community schools, to the local community itself (Chapter 7). In all periods, of course, schools affected and were shaped by pupils, teachers, and others in the community (Chapter 6). Many other points emerge, but at a minimum, since community schools were promoted by so many different groups for their own reasons, their success cannot simply be attributed to the power of the Ming founder.

The window of community schools also looks out onto practices of historical writing over the last six centuries and more. State and society interacted through documents about institutions as well as through the institutions themselves. As Philip Kuhn says, the written record left by the state reflects both its daily tasks and the maneuverings, views and relations of its personnel, so that “every document ... must be read both as a description of an outer reality and as a reflection of the political needs of its author.”¹⁸ Ming subjects and officials, as well as emperors, pursued their own interests by both creating and writing about institutions in genres that were intimately connected with the state, and which presented different parameters and opportunities. Those same documents leave a trail for the historian, who often deploys them again for present purposes. The Ming state generally, and community schools in particular, played roles from Ming times through the end of the twentieth century in debates on state and society, society and the individual, education, nationalism, and absolutism. In gathering material for these debates, there is no clear division between “traditional” scholarship and “modern” scholarship. Asian and Western scholars of different periods, nations and persuasions all rely on the same set of sources and even repeat the same conclusions as answers to different questions.

What is the relationship between historical phenomena and the contemporary texts that report them? At one extreme, positivists take the text as a record of the phenomenon. At the other extreme, some theorists claim that texts can be

analyzed only on their own terms, as discourse: that the “facts of the matter” are irretrievable or perhaps never existed. More moderate historians take the text as an imperfect reflection of reality, or the phenomenon as a context that shaped the text. I propose that we look at text and phenomenon together, as products of the same, or at least simultaneous, historical processes. Critical examination of the text must go hand in hand with consideration of the phenomenon it reports; neither can be understood without thinking about the other. This tandem effort is also crucial in understanding the historiography of a given phenomenon, for later writers respond both to their own reality and to earlier texts. I incorporate into the story of community schools the purposes for which sources on them were written, and the positions of historians.

This book, then, is a case study of community schools in the Ming period, meant to illuminate two facets of history. First, as centrally-mandated local institutions, community schools exemplify Ming state building and illuminate state–society relations. Second, tracing the schools’ roles as discursive objects provides insights into the nature of some commonly-used sources of Ming history, what we may consider documentary institutions. The two facets together also add up to a theory of the Ming state: that its strength lay in its ability, often against the will of the center, to serve as a field—not the only field, not a level field, but a wide one—for social cooperation and competition. To emphasize participation is not to deny exploitation; some of the Japanese scholars who see the traditional Chinese village as a semiautonomous and cooperative unit, for instance, still present its class inequities.¹⁹ Ming people suffered under, worked for, praised, and criticized aspects of the state.²⁰ Alexander Woodside has written that “Each participant in the government, from the emperor down to the county director of schools, might carry his own unique imaginary map of the ideal government in his head.”²¹ State personnel and those they ruled not only served and thought about the state, but also turned it to their own uses. The Ming state was built from below as well as from above; as people colonized government institutions and documents for their own aims, they lengthened the reach of the state.