Introduction

FEW WOULD DISPUTE the pivotal position of the middle eighteenth century—roughly 1725 to 1775, or the Yongzheng and early Qianlong reigns—in the long-term history of China. Epitomizing the era that Western scholars have admiringly viewed as "high Qing" and historians in China itself have characterized as "the prosperous age" (*shengshi*),[1] these years saw the empire's highest attainment of material and political success prior to its crisis of confrontation with the West and inundation by Western cultural influences. If preceding generations had suffered the devastations of dynastic decline, conquest and repression by an alien regime, and the reputed "general crisis" of the seventeenth century,[2] and if the later Qianlong reign saw renewed problems of bureaucratic degeneration, ecological and hydraulic decay, and growing security threats from both within and without, the mid-1700s were the standard by which other, less happy eras were gauged. They were the years when things went right.

It was a time of relative peace and prosperity but also of vigorous growth and change. Domestic unrest was largely absent. The population grew dramatically, due in large part to a declining mortality rate, as disease and malnutrition were better controlled than in the past. The geographic scale of empire grew enormously as borderlands on all sides were effectively incorporated. Internal expansion was also impressive, with China's traditional lowland civilization moving uphill—clearing and settling highlands—and with the reclamation of massive stretches of seacoast, lakeshore, and riverbank. Agricultural output expanded greatly in aggregate, and productivity intensified, certainly per unit of land and possibly per capita as well. Commerce and industry likewise intensified, and regional patterns of exchange began to coalesce into a vast national market. Overseas trade with both Southeast Asia and the West recovered from its seventeenth-century depression and underwent a steady growth unaccompanied by serious diplomatic tensions. The mid-eighteenth century also saw a continuing rise in literacy and popular education, a further expansion of publishing and the print culture, and a flourishing of the arts, perhaps most notably in theater and the novel.

There were many causes for all of this, but political factors certainly played a part.

The era saw a remarkably high level of bureaucratic discipline and morale, spawned in good measure by unusually capable and energetic occupants of the throne itself. Potentially devastating ethnic tensions within both the ruling elite and the overall society were kept in check. A complex currency system was managed with great success. Fiscal stability was brilliantly achieved, with the burgeoning economy tapped to provide a comfortable level of government finance without increasing, and probably even reducing, the popular tax burden. The empire's hydraulic infrastructure, all-important for purposes of flood control, irrigation, and (increasingly) commercial transport, was effectively maintained, indeed greatly expanded, despite population growth. The bureaucracy of "high Qing" enjoyed nearly unprecedented success in managing the massive problems of food supply and food prices and in controlling instances of local or regionalized dearth. Not least, it demonstrated satisfactory responsiveness to the accelerating rate of civil litigation and provided facilities for popular conflict resolution. It was not without reason that later generations of Qing literati wistfully remembered these years as a classic era of good governance.

There is perhaps no better single window on this era, and most especially on the mentality of its ruling elite, than the figure of Chen Hongmou (1696–1771). Chen was arguably the eighteenth-century Qing empire's most influential Chinese official; certainly, he was its most celebrated field administrator. Between 1733 and 1763 Chen served as governor-general, governor, or in lesser provincial posts in more than a dozen provinces. He served longer as a provincial governor, and received more separate gubernatorial appointments, than any other man in Qing history.[3] In each of these posts, covering the span of the empire from Yunnan to Jiangnan, Gansu to Guangdong, Chen was both famously attentive to local societal conditions and profoundly ambitious in crafting administrative responses to them. Widely heralded in his time—the eminent Fang Bao (1668–1749) pronounced him "the only official today who devotes himself wholeheartedly to the people, like the great statesmen of antiquity"[4]—he increasingly over his career came to be used by the throne as a regional crisis manager. Chen was hardly an original thinker, nor did his style of administration differ substantially from that of his most capable colleagues, but his energy level and his thoroughness in addressing the needs of his various jurisdictions was nothing short of astounding. In the last years of his life Chen rose to the exalted posts of grand secretary (the first man from his native Guangxi to achieve this honor in the Qing, and the third in imperial history) and senior guardian of the heir apparent.[5] After twice rejecting his terminally ill minister's request for retirement, the Qianlong emperor in 1771 wrote him this poem:

> You've trod the Empire's breadth in diligent service
> And guided and instructed Me here in the palace.
> None can match your administrative experience and skill. . . .
> How grievous that I must at last let you leave![6]

Chen Hongmou's importance, however, derives less from his durability or his bureaucratic accomplishments than from his stature as a model official, specifically as an exemplar of the style of governance known as "*jingshi*"—usually translated "statecraft" but (because the notion of "state" is not explicitly invoked in the Chinese) more appropriately rendered as "social management" or, better yet, "ordering the world."[7]

Chen was the official most closely associated by later scholars with the reputed "statecraft revival" of the mid-Qing. In the *Huangchao jingshi wenbian* (Statecraft compendium), the bible of *jingshi* thought compiled in the 1820s by Wei Yuan, no fewer than fifty-three of Chen's writings were reprinted, making him the second most represented individual, after Gu Yanwu, in this incomparably influential collection. Statecraft as a political creed has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, from both Chinese and Western scholars,[8] but there remains considerable ambiguity about what it did and did not mean. One of the goals of the present study is to contribute to sorting this out. In the view of one well-informed scholar the essence of *jingshi* was a turning away by officials from a normative Confucian style of administration (based on moral exhortation and personal example), a renewed preference for practical manipulation of institutions and organizations (a style of governance tainted in the more orthodox view by association with amoral Legalist agendas), and an unabashed acceptance of pursuing wealth and power as proper political goals.[9] Accordingly, Chen Hongmou was revered by subsequent generations of Chinese scholar-officials as a pioneer of a pragmatic, technocratic, "hands-on" approach to governance—the opposite of what Joseph Levenson termed the "amateur ideal" of the late imperial Confucian elite[10]—and was praised for his demonstrated expertise in such diverse technical areas as hydraulic engineering, agronomy, fiscal administration, and military logistics.

Yet herein lies one of the seeming paradoxes that make Chen such an intriguing subject of study. This man, who epitomized a hardheaded, "learn truth from facts" style of technocratic social management, can also be seen, and routinely *has* been seen, as the sincere and zealous promoter of a rather stern and at times almost simpleminded moralism as the basis of benevolent government (*renzheng*) and the good society. Chen's activities in the development of educational curricula stressing indoctrination in cultural values served as models for later officials, and the moral treatises he compiled on proper child rearing, proper behavior for women, proper community values, and integrity in public life have served as texts for Chinese educators, both private and governmental, down to the present day. In his own conduct of office Chen laid heavy stress on inducing popular participation in rituals of moral reaffirmation. One of my goals here will be to attempt a resolution of this apparent tension—the juxtaposition of pragmatism and moralism—which often appears to lie at the heart of late imperial political style.

A related tension involves the balance of power between the central imperial state and its local agents, on the one hand, and local societal self-management on the other. Landmark studies by Philip Kuhn and by Min Tu-ki have highlighted a strand of alternative political discourse in the Qing (and earlier) that systematically critiqued bureaucratic rule and called for governance as much as possible through the agency of indigenously generated economic and cultural elites.[11] Usually termed "*fengjian*" (very loosely, "feudal"), this political persuasion intertwined with *jingshi*, or statecraft, through the discernable association of such key thinkers as Gu Yanwu (1613–82), Wei Yuan (1794–1856), and Feng Guifen (1809–74) with the histories of both discourses. The actual degree of linkage between the two, however, remains less clear. Because of Chen Hongmou's own association with these figures (to be discussed below), it is

tempting to see him as falling into this lively countertradition of political thought. And, indeed, there is no shortage of evidence of his interest in empowering indigenous elites and cultivating the mechanisms of local community self-governance, as well as his consistent attack on what he and others saw as the predations of the central state, fiscal and otherwise. On the other hand, the conclusion is inescapable that in practice Chen was a state-maker of the highest order, continually devising techniques for making state control more efficient and its penetration of the society ever more thorough. How can these seemingly contrary directions of his thought and policy be reconciled?

Yet a third apparent paradox in Chen Hongmou's thought and policy will also prompt our concern. That is the juxtaposition in Chen of a very deeply felt sense of the value and autonomy of all human beings, regardless of gender, ethnicity, cultural status, or economic class—an urge that in some contexts seems to warrant description by such terms as *populist, egalitarian*, or even *democratic*—with his also very committed hierarchical and authoritarian view of properly functioning human society. Put another way, we can see in Chen both an emergent valuation of the individual, and his or her needs, desires, and even perhaps "rights," and a simultaneous assertion of the primacy of the group (family, lineage, local community, state) and the need for the individual to subordinate self to the dictates of his or her predetermined functional role (*fen*) within such groups. This complex, and to our eyes at times contradictory, view of human nature and the human condition provided the foundation for Chen's practical social and economic policy formation.

To the extent that these juxtaposed strands of thought appear paradoxical, they do so in terms of categories we impose based on our modernist experience. Were they so in terms of the universe of attitudes and assumptions in which Chen Hongmou himself functioned? Perhaps not. They may, in fact, have been fundamental to the Confucian worldview itself, of which Chen was a remarkable but not altogether unrepresentative exemplar. Using Western categories of analysis (such as "individualism" or economic "liberalism") and sociohistorical models (such as "early modern") is useful up to a point, and in this study we will not shy away from drawing parallels and contrasts with the early modern European experience when and where that seems instructive. To avoid doing so would be to cavalierly discard one of the most potent frameworks of reference and analysis available to the contemporary Western historian, as well as to ignore the fact that by the eighteenth century China and the West were already operating in a global setting of significant mutual contact and influence. But ultimately our goal in this book is to comprehend, as fully as possible and on its own terms, the ground of consciousness occupied by Chen Hongmou and his colleagues in the late imperial official elite.

Chen Hongmou as Model and Informant

Chen Hongmou's iconic status as a model official was essentially a nineteenth-century product. Interest in him as a man, a moralist, and a pragmatic administrator seems to have arisen rather suddenly, from many diverse quarters, in the Daoguang era of the 1820s and 1830s. It coincided with the gathering sense of crisis of these years, sparked

variously by hydraulic breakdown, economic depression, and awareness of the gathering foreign threat. Attention to Chen increased progressively after that time, but it did so in spurts, the timing of which seem again not accidental. He proved especially interesting during the frenetic years of post-Taiping reconstruction in the 1860s and early 1870s, the desperate reformist era of the late 1890s and early 1900s, and once again in the war-torn 1930s and 1940s. When scholars and policy makers troubled by their times sought a guide for intensifying their personal resolve and a blueprint for social action, they turned repeatedly to Chen.

Other than a few recollections by younger acquaintances, such as Peng Qifeng (1701–84) and Yuan Mei (1716–96), I have found few appreciative notices of Chen by scholars or officials in the half century following his death. He seems to have faded from the cultural memory or, more precisely, to have not yet developed his cult. After the energetic publication project undertaken by his descendents in the 1760s and 1770s, virtually none of his many works were reprinted until the 1820s.[12] The colossal Imperial Library bibliographic project (*Siku quanshu*) brought to completion in 1782, barely a decade after Chen's death, turned up (or found worthy of notice) just four books attributable to him, only one of which—the *Sourcebook on Reform of Social Practice* (*Xunsu yigui*)—would be among those for which he would subsequently be known and admired.[13] The *Qiewenzhai wenchao* (Writings compiled in the Qiewen studio), a 1775 anthology by Lu Yao often cited as predecessor of Wei Yuan's half-century-later *Statecraft Compendium*, included but a single essay by Chen Hongmou, his popular but highly uncharacteristic treatise on exorcizing a flood dragon.[14] Chen did only slightly better in Wang Chang's massive compendium of Qing-dynasty nonfiction prose, the *Huhai wenchuan* of ca. 1800, being limited to five fairly innocuous entries.[15]

The great wave of republication of Chen's works began rather abruptly with the new edition of his *Sourcebook on Bureaucratic Discipline* (*Zaiguan fajie lu*) by Chen Xi in 1821 and of his personal correspondence by Fei Bingchang two years later. Both men's prefatory comments are revealing. Chen Xi (no relation to Hongmou) tells us that Chen's various sourcebooks on personal, communal, and official conduct had long been required reading in his lineage school in Yaojiang (Zhejiang), where they were prized for the honest and unpretentious (*shixin*) guide they provided to the motivation of both self and others. Because of the critical relevance of the text at hand to pressing issues of popular livelihood and effective governance, Chen Xi was reprinting it for circulation among his "fellow bureaucrats" (*tongliao*). Fei Bingchang notes that he came across Chen's collected correspondence through word of mouth of his colleagues while serving as Guangxi provincial judge and was astonished at the eloquent way they spoke to current problems of economics and government finance, so unlike the self-aggrandizing drivel served up in the published letters of other officials.[16] The pattern was set. Numerous new editions of Chen's works throughout the succeeding decades would come at the hands of reform-minded serving officials—typically provincial-level officials like Chen himself—who felt the need to bring to their colleagues' attention the model of this newly discovered, like-thinking predecessor. (Indeed, between 1829 and 1854 twenty-nine such officials produced written testimonials on Chen's exemplary status, which were collected and published by Hongmou's sixth-generation descendent Chen

Qinghong.)[17] Chen Hongmou had clearly become something of a vogue, at the center of which were his letters, by turns preachy and self-critical but always imbued with a depth of seriousness his devotees found refreshing in their own day.

The major political anthologies of the Daoguang era show how deeply Chen had caught the imagination of the scholar-official class. Chen's fifty-three selections in Wei Yuan's 1826 *Statecraft Compendium* have already been mentioned and were a far cry from his single entry in that work's 1776 antecedent, the *Qiewenzhai wenchao*. In Wei's work Chen is cited authoritatively on a broad spectrum of topics, both technological (water conservancy, agricultural improvement, fiscal administration) and cultural (personal morality, ritual propriety, educational reform). We have noted that Gu Yanwu was the figure most represented in Wei's landmark compilation, with ninety-seven entries, but no other individual comes remotely close to Chen—the next most represented by my count are Lu Shiyi, with a mere twenty-three entries, and Fang Bao, with nineteen. In Xu Dong's influential handbook for local officials, the *Muling shu* of 1838, there were forty-seven selections from Chen (more than 7 percent of the total of 667), ranking him behind only Wang Huizu and Wang Fengsheng.[18] Even in Li Zutao's less politically focused 1839 compendium *Guochao wenlu* (Prose writings of the present dynasty), the fashionable Chen Hongmou could not escape notice and was represented by some eleven miscellaneous works.[19] As the Cantonese scholar-official Zhang Weiping wrote around 1825, "Nowadays, a great many readers receive the benefit of Mr. Chen's instruction."[20]

Chen Hongmou's collected moral treatises, the *Five Sourcebooks* (*Wuzhong yigui*), also first captured a national audience in these years. Li Fuyuan, headmaster of the Doushan Academy of Hanzhong (Shaanxi), noted in 1828 that he had been featuring these works in his curriculum for some time, prior to bringing out his own new edition in that year.[21] After a lull of some decades and the chance discovery of a copy in a Liulichang (Beijing) bookshop around 1850, Li's version became the basis for a number of new editions in the post-Taiping decades, produced by quasi-official provincial presses in Nanjing, Wuchang, Nanchang, and Hangzhou. Chen's official papers, known today as the *Peiyuan tang oucun gao* (Draft writings from the Peiyuan studio) and probably now the most valued of his works, were the last to gain wide circulation. Compiled initially by his dutiful son while the author was still serving as a metropolitan official in 1765, the work was expanded and republished by his descendents during Chen's Daoguang revival in 1837 (interest had been sparked no doubt by inclusion of some of its contents in Wei Yuan's *Statecraft Compendium* a decade earlier). The version that has become standard today, however, is an official edition published by Hubei provincial treasurer Zhang Jiamou in 1896. The coincidence of this major publication with reformist Viceroy Zhang Zhidong's tenure in Huguang and the still more ambitious Hunan reform movement of 1895 could not have been accidental. In his preface Zhang Jiamou laments that this blueprint for "vigorous action" (*lixing*), of so much utility for building a healthy economy and a financially sound state, has for over a century been in circulation almost exclusively in Guangxi, where few officials ever get posted. Now through the agency of his *yamen* he is making it available to all.[22]

It was in this light, as a hero to be emulated by like-minded colleagues (*tongzhi*)

who would reform the degenerate ways of the times (*shidao*) and regenerate the human spirit (*renxin*), that Chen came to be venerated by his nineteenth-century partisans. He was acclaimed for his personal conduct (*weiren*), his simple genuineness and freedom from pretense (*pushi*), and his avoidance of convention and routine in assessing the tasks he confronted (*shixin ticha*). His writings served as a textbook for penetrating the complex workings of the economy (*jingji*) and the demands of popular livelihood (*minsheng*). They also pointed the way to resolving the problem that increasingly perplexed nineteenth-century thinkers: how to bridge the gap between state and society, to "serve as an official while remaining close to the people" (*juguan linmin*). Chen did all of this, his nineteenth-century admirers noted, while proceeding from a thoroughly Song neo-Confucian moral-rational construction of the universe. His life and work exemplified the way that ethical substance (*ti*) and technological function (*yong*) might be seamlessly combined.[23]

Although Chen found professed latter-day disciples (*houxue*) in many regions of the empire, nowhere was his influence more pronounced than in the Xiang River valley of Hunan—Chen's presumed ancestral home, the empire's self-proclaimed heartland, and the spawning ground of a succession of deeply reflective yet highly activist scholar-officials who, following their fellow provincial Wei Yuan, saw themselves as keeping alive the statecraft (*jingshi*) tradition in radically changing times.[24] Chief among these was the great soldier-statesman Zeng Guofan (1811–72), who saw Chen's works as something that "constantly must be read and reread." Writing home in 1847 to his younger brother Guohuang, the delegated household manager, Zeng instructed him as follows: "You must read the *Five Sourcebooks* on a daily basis, and ruminate on them line by line. What I expect of you, my brother, is this above all else."[25] Four years later he wrote to another brother, Guobao, that in order to become a sage it was necessary to read just two works, Chen's *Sourcebooks* and Zhu Xi's *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue*). "There will be no immediate loss if you do not read other books," he wrote. "What is important is to abide by [the teachings of these two], and put them into practice as much as possible."[26]

Jiang Yili (1832–74), Zeng Guofan's landsman from Xiangxiang County, and like him an anti-Taiping general and Restoration-era governor (Guangdong), perhaps typified the kind of activist autodidact to whom Chen Hongmou most appealed. In a preface to his 1865 edition of Chen's *Sourcebook on Proper Official Conduct* (*Congzheng yigui*), Jiang wrote:

> When I was young, I gave up my studies and joined the army. Through Imperial grace I received promotions into important [civil] posts. Since I long ago had put aside my pen, I was ashamed and fearful lest I prove ignorant of the proper way to lead my subordinates and govern the people. Last year, when the war was concluded, I returned to reading and discovered this book. It is both substantive and practical [*you ti you yong*], and warrants emulation and passing on to others. Whoever bears responsibility for overseeing the people's affairs ought to get this book, learn from it, and keep it close at hand. I myself have had little time for serious study of the classical canon, and yet whenever I open this anthology I feel as if I had deep learning. Consequently, I am reprinting this book . . . and distributing it to my fellow officials. It is a small one-volume work, which they can easily carry around on their person and use as a guide for action.[27]

In the course of China's turbulent twentieth century, Chen Hongmou remained a potent cultural icon, even as his significance was gradually redefined. Leading scholars and politicians who venerated him still respected his technological prowess, to be sure, but his reputation rested not so much on his practical know-how as on his sagacious moral advice. In the process Chen became less a model for a self-conscious elite of reformist scholar-officials (although he did to an extent remain this) than a guide to good behavior for the masses. The process began as early as the "new policies" (*xinzheng*) reforms of the late Qing. Between 1899 and 1908 the fledgling Ministry of Education brought out its own official editions of Chen's moral treatises, in cheap pocket-sized editions (one copy I have examined was priced at twenty-two cents) stripped of all scholarly apparatus, as a component of its new national elementary school curriculum.[28] Chen's books indeed became so central to the educational practice of this era that the missionary Evan Morgan opted in 1912 to prepare a sixty-page bilingual selection from the first of them, the *Yangzheng yigui* (Sourcebook on childhood education), to serve simultaneously as a primer for Westerners in classical Chinese and a handy guide to Chinese moral norms.[29]

In this incarnation Chen became a darling of the Nationalist Party, with its sometimes awkward combination of moral traditionalism and self-conscious modernism. Li Zongren (1891–1961), for instance, Chen's fellow provincial and erstwhile president of the Republic of China, extolled him as both an exemplar of the revivalist "Guangxi spirit" and a behavioral model for all contemporary Chinese.[30] Xie Kang, a longtime Guomindang establishment intellectual and legislator, wrote of him in maudlin tones:

> My grandfather loved best of all to read Chen Hongmou's letters. He kept them always beside his chair, to serve as a constant remonstrance to his conduct. When I was young, he frequently read them to me, and they have had a deep and lasting influence on my development. Ten years ago, when I was assigned to serve in Guilin, I rode the Hunan-Guilin train. When we passed by Chen's native village of Hengshan, my thoughts inevitably turned to this lofty man. This region of entrancingly beautiful mountains and streams, and luxuriant growth of cassia forests, reminded one of the deep spiritual power of nature. Mr. Chen's conduct was similarly incomparable, and serves as a beacon to subsequent generations.[31]

Chen's works were republished in large editions by Shanghai's Commercial Press in the 1930s and in various dramatically abridged popularizations in Chiang Kai-shek's Taiwan (including, for example, a slender volume of selections from the *Five Sourcebooks* published by the "Moral Commitment Press" in 1961).[32] The high point of this proselytizing may have come in March 1987, when Taiwan Television ran a three-minute nightly spot over the course of several weeks, introducing homilies drawn from Chen Hongmou's moral treatises, explicated by a narrator as a guide to good citizenship.[33] It should be added here that this popularization of Chen's work, crude as some of it may have been, was by no means totally out of step with his own intentions, as we shall see in chapters to follow.

Chen Hongmou has assumed a pivotal importance for our own contemporary understanding of late imperial China in yet another way: as an informant. His *Peiyuan tang*

oucun gao, a record of the downward bureaucratic correspondence of a field official probably unique in its scale and scope, was one of the major sources for Hsiao Kung-ch'uan's epochal 1960 work *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* and was also used extensively in Ch'u T'ung-tsu's *Local Government in China Under the Ch'ing* (1962), still the standard work in English on that subject.[34] These works—which seem to me to occupy a liminal position between contemporary Western historical scholarship and China's own indigenous tradition of *jingshi*-style political criticism—do not attempt in any significant way to individualize Chen, as much as they rely on him, but instead employ him as a faceless (albeit eminent) reporter of the conditions of his day. What Chen sees is what we see as well.

More recently, Chen's written testament has been drawn on by a number of historians interested in more specific elements of Qing administration and of late imperial culture. Examples would include studies of penal law by Fu-mei Chen, of subsistence crisis management by R. Bin Wong, of hydraulic planning by Peter C. Perdue, of economic policy by Gao Wangling and Helen Dunstan, of educational policy by Alexander Woodside, and of women's history by Susan Mann and Tani Barlow.[35] In these studies Chen is somewhat more individuated than in the earlier works of Hsiao and Ch'u in the sense that he is typically seen as articulating a particular position that may or may not be assumed to be representative of his times. Yet even here there is little effort to understand where Chen is coming from culturally or politically or to view the positions he takes on the issue at hand as part of a fully developed approach to the world. (None, for example, reveal that he hailed from the highly distinctive Guangxi Province.) One could argue, of course, that there is no reason these authors ought to do so, given the topics of inquiry they have selected. Nevertheless, given the increasing salience that Chen has come to assume in formulating what we know of so many aspects of the Qing era, it seems ever more critical to try to comprehend just who he was and why he spoke and acted as he did.

And although Chen has been much utilized by historians, he has not been very much studied by them. There exists but one full-length biography (excepting the *nianpu,* or chronological record of his life, compiled after his death by Chen's son), and that is essentially a work of homage to a local hero by the Guilin scholar Gao Jiren in 1945. Beyond this, my research has turned up only four very brief articles done in the People's Republic (two of these, like Gao's book, the work of Guilin local historians), one short chapter in a collection of exemplary biographies produced in Taiwan, two entries in Japanese historical dictionaries (one by the great Marxist historian Shigeta Atsushi), an entry in the Qing biographical dictionary compiled by Cai Guanluo, and another by Rufus O. Suter in Arthur Hummel's *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period.*[36] For a figure who was at the center of so many of the major developments of mid-Qing history, for so long, this is a remarkably meager corpus of work.

There is one exception to all of this: the work of Pierre-Étienne Will. In Will's various published and unpublished studies of mid-Qing governance—dealing with famine administration, agricultural improvement, bureaucratic corruption, public opinion, and so on—Chen Hongmou appears regularly as a central actor.[37] Although Will has not to date addressed Chen's position either directly or holistically, and although his

geographic focus is usually restricted to the single province of Shaanxi (where Chen served as governor four times in the decades from 1740 to 1760), the volume and range of Will's work on this individual comes as close as anything we have to a comprehensive effort to come to grips with who and what he was. The present study has been accomplished as part of a cooperative effort with Professor Will, which I hope we would both agree has been mutually beneficial.

Some Considerations of Method

Academic fashions change. I began thinking about writing this book in the heady atmosphere of the "social history revolution," pioneered by scholars of the *Annales* school, in which the biographies of "great men" seemed an anachronistic way of doing history. Sympathetic as I was to this movement (and having myself written two books in which dominant individual actors were appropriately absent), I took solace in such things as Lawrence Stone's pronouncement that narrative history not only seemed on the point of revival but also perhaps deserved that revival as well, and Jack Hexter's somewhat cautious suggestion, in a judicious review article on the work of *Annales* demigod Fernand Braudel, that there might yet be a place in historiography for studies of critically situated individual lives.[38] If, as Hexter reminded me, social historians of no less stature than E. P. Thompson and C. Vann Woodward could write biographies, so then could I.[39]

Then came another revolution, that of "the new cultural history." This brought me both consolation and yet another cause for worry. Narrative writing and the intensive study of historical texts now seemed fully legitimate, and the new emphasis on "microhistory" even gave the detailed investigation of past individual lives (à la Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*) a place of honor in the project of historical scholarship. But once again I was given to question whether the study of an elite male, and an important political figure at that, was really the most effective way the scholar, in this day and age, could spend his or her time. And again, one of the current genre's most vaunted practitioners, Giovanni Levi (writing in, of all places, the *Annales*), came to my aid, arguing with eloquence that, properly handled, biographies of the great and powerful, as much as of the common man or woman, can have a certain utility in our efforts to come to grips with the past.[40]

Through all of this I emerge convinced that study of a well-situated, well-documented individual can indeed assist more than distort our understanding of that person's milieu. It can offer, I believe, a kind of personal testimony to history of the sort that I found naggingly absent in my own previous work. I hope at the same time that my reasonably extensive exposure to the concerns, innovations, and insights brought to the fore by both social and cultural history allow me to produce that study in a way that would have been difficult if not impossible before those two historiographic revolutions took place. One of the virtues of the biographical genre that I most welcome, for example, is the opportunity it offers for deep immersion into the textual output of a single historical person and, through that immersion, for an unusual appreciation

both of rhetorical strategies and of habits of mind, which can tell us much about the social and cultural context in which that individual operated.

Of course this book is not a biography at all in the conventional sense, that is, a chronological narrative of an individual life. Only the first two chapters are chronologically arranged—offering information, respectively, on Chen's life before and after his entry into official service—and even here the chronology is often subordinated to other, topical concerns. The bulk of the chapters are strictly topical. There are problems involved in this presentational strategy, to be sure, such as the relative neglect of Chen's personal development over time. And in fact, although there are certain moments, such as Chen's effective discovery of the "Guanxue" school of neo-Confucian thought in the 1740s, that may be seen as markers of change in his approach, for the most part I do see his entire adult life and career as representing a consistent outlook to which Chen had already come by the time he became interesting historically. His administrative policies in the field responded to some extent to changes in the macropolitical environment (most notably the Qianlong succession) and to differences in the specific provinces he was charged with governing, but to an even greater degree he tended to repeat himself from one jurisdiction to another and did so ever less creatively over time. My relative deemphasis on personal development, moreover, is expressive of the fact that this is less a book about Chen himself than about the eighteenth-century official elite of which he was a part.

By "official elite" I mean to refer to classically educated adult males whose intellectual orientation was significantly directed toward problems of governance, whether or not they were currently—or indeed ever had been—in actual official service. Thus I would include not only career civil servants such as Chen himself but also figures such as Gu Yanwu and Li Yong, who actively abjured government office and/or sitting for the civil service examinations, and Yuan Mei, who, although primarily a poet, had briefly held minor office and continued to reflect on political matters in private life. As we shall see, Chen Hongmou had a sense of common identity with such an official-elite cohort, which he sometimes referred to in his personal correspondence as *wubei* (people like us).

One of the highest items on my agenda here is to bridge the rather enormous gap between intellectual history and social history that has characterized the field of Chinese studies (with but a few recent exceptions)[41] over the past decades. I hope to do this in part by developing a middle ground, which an *Annaliste* historian might call "the history of *mentalité*" or a cultural historian "the history of consciousness." It will be seen readily enough that I do this with no great concern for theory. Put simply, what I want to do above all is to root Chen Hongmou's practical administrative policies, those things for which he is best known, firmly in the way he—and others among the official elite—understood the nature of the cosmos, the human condition, and the bases of social relations. "Consciousness," here, would include both articulated thought and unarticulated mental sets or attitudes. What, for example, does Chen assume to be the feasible parameters of human action? How are males and females alike or different? How does society function? What would the ideal society look like? What does it mean to be

"civilized"? What is wealth and where does it come from? It works to my advantage here that Chen was not a very profound or original thinker; he was rather, as J. G. A. Pocock described Sir John Fortescue, "the kind of amateur of philosophy who helps us to understand the ideas of an age by coarsening them slightly."[42]

I proceed on the assumption that a fruitful way to get at this history of consciousness is by paying close attention to language and discourse. Again, I must stress at the outset that I harbor no ambitions to make any contribution to the highly sophisticated body of theory that has developed on this issue in recent decades. What I have found most useful for my purposes within this (perhaps overly fertile) field have been the reflections on how language functions by historians of political thought such as John Pocock and Quentin Skinner and by intellectual historians such as William Bouwsma.[43] I understand language to be a vital and relatively autonomous thing, which grows and mutates, and which constrains as well as enables. As Skinner explains it:

> Consider the position of a political actor who is anxious to engage in a particular course of action which he is also anxious to exhibit as legitimate. Such an agent may be said to have a strong motive for seeking to ensure that his behaviour can plausibly be described in terms of a vocabulary already normative within his society, a vocabulary which is capable of legitimating at the same time as describing what he has done. . . . The problem facing [such] an agent . . . cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must be in part the problem of tailoring his projects to fit the available normative language.[44]

At the same time, as Pocock in particular has stressed, this "available normative language" is neither stable nor uniform. Idioms in the common political discourse are continually appropriated by certain parties within the discourse community, contested by others, and stretched and applied, often with deliberate ambiguity, to actions those parties seek to validate. Furthermore, a speaker may frequently through language choice reveal much that is unintended of the underlying assumptions about how his or her universe of meaning is ordered. Chen Hongmou was, as we shall see, both a member of a community sharing an extraordinarily fecund and fluid discourse—that of neo-Confucian literati and the imperial bureaucracy—and a vigorous independent actor capable of creatively turning this shared language to the promotion of his own sociopolitical vision.

Finally, the reader will already have noticed, quite likely with alarm, that this is a large book. I would apologize for this but at the same time insist that a certain exhaustiveness is key to what I hope to accomplish. It is precisely its attempt to explore how Chen Hongmou's notions regarding such things as gender roles and funerary ritual related to his economic thought, or the way his experience negotiating the perilous Qing bureaucratic culture conditioned his approach to social policy, that I hope will make this work a useful step toward illuminating the consciousness of late imperial China's official elite.