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This essay focuses on two questions. In answer to the first—Why do we study the late Ming and Ch'ing as one historical unit?—we argue that this era, the late imperial period (sixteenth through nineteenth centuries), was substantively different from its predecessors and was characterized by considerable continuity in key institutions and socio-economic structure. In investigating this continuity, we discuss three major phenomena: economic growth and change, which led to shifts in the composition and character of the elite; an expansion of the educational system, produced in part by economic growth; and the onset of large-scale printing, stimulated by prosperity and expanded education. These three factors all have direct bearing on a second question, the concern of many papers in this volume: namely, the degree to which Ming and Ch'ing citizens shared ideas, values, assumptions, and frames of reference. The final section of this essay briefly considers the relationship of long-run economic and social trends with the forces of cultural integration and diversity.

THE LATE IMPERIAL ECONOMY

Despite profound differences of opinion on the contours of the historical landscape, Chinese, Japanese, and American historians seem agreed on one thing: that Chinese society underwent significant changes in the course of the Ming dynasty, changes that produced the political, social, and economic institutions of late imperial China.

One major economic development during the Ming dynasty was the monetization of silver. This trend was reflected in the sixteenth-century Single Whip fiscal reforms, which simplified tax levies and commuted them to money payments. Monetization was based on an expanded marketing system that
shift to water was critical: “Even a small sailing ship could in one voyage carry Asia, but the effect was still the same: a large expansion, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in the volume of trade accompanying the shift of focus from China’s inner frontiers to the southeast coast.

The influence of the foreign trade was first felt in the flow of Japanese and Mexican silver into China. According to William Atwell, who compares domestic silver production with silver imports, foreign trade accounted for the bulk of the new supplies of silver entering China’s economy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. He concludes that “Japanese and American silver may well have been the most significant factor in the vigorous economic expansion which occurred in China,” an expansion that ended in the 1630s when Spanish efforts to restrict the Manila trade and Japanese efforts (after 1638) to bar the Portuguese from trade in Japan succeeded in substantially reducing trade volumes and in bringing a deflation to China. While this deflation was probably important in stimulating the crises at the end of Ming, China’s involvement in the world economy suffered only a temporary setback. In subsequent centuries its involvement increased and deepened.

The economic upsurge of the sixteenth century, which G. W. Skinner identifies as the ascending phase of the second great macrocycle in Chinese history, brought increased commercialization of agriculture, further growth in rural and urban handicraft production, and more rural markets in the Southeast Coast, Lower Yangtze, and areas in North China adjoining the Grand Canal. The growth of rural markets occurred in sixteenth-century coastal Fukien and sixteenth-century Ningpo. In Fukien, cash cropping in sugar cane and expanded production of cotton and porcelain appeared in response to new opportunities for trade with the Portuguese, Japanese, and Spanish. In the Lower Yangtze the sixteenth century saw further development of handicrafts, particularly cotton weaving, which was a rural industry. The size of the handicraft sector is revealed indirectly in the development of specialized regions for cotton cultivation along the Grand Canal in North China: we know that cotton grown here was sold to traders from the Lower Yangtze for spinning and weaving in Kiangnan.3

Thus, the sixteenth century saw developing markets and commercialization of agriculture in three macroregional cores: the North China core along the Grand Canal, and the cores of the Lower Yangtze and the Southeast Coast. Although we know less about the Lingnan regional economy, the onset in the sixteenth century of Portuguese trade at Macao and the increase in numbers of private academies suggest that this region also experienced growth and prosperity.

The creation of rural markets outpaced population growth and altered the hierarchy of central places. According to Skinner, the regional city systems that developed in the medieval era were immature and uneven: capitals and market towns were only very imperfectly meshed into an integrated system, and the urban population as a whole was concentrated in the largest cities. By contrast, city systems of the late imperial era were more mature and more fully fleshed out: capitals and market towns were better integrated into a single hierarchical system, and the total urban population was more evenly distributed throughout the hierarchy.

Integration of the urban hierarchy and increased ties between towns and villages facilitated what James Liu calls the “radiating diffusion” of urban culture into rural areas and was thus an important factor in shaping the contours of Ming-Ch’ing popular culture.4

Market development and economic growth also prompted relaxation of direct government controls over the economy. The Ming founder had continued the Yuan practice of registering certain households for special service as salt producers, soldiers, or artisans, but this system collapsed in the sixteenth century and was replaced by commuted payments in money. Goods obtained for Imperial Household use with corvée labor in early Ming were now acquired

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2 Atwell, “Notes on Silver.”
3 For a detailed exposition on macroregions, which will be referred to throughout this essay, see G. William Skinner, “Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China,” in The City in Late Imperial China, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977). Also G. William Skinner, “Urban Development in Imperial China,” ibid., p. 23; Yoshiofu Shiba, “Ningpo and its hinterland,” ibid., pp. 399, 401; Mark Elvin, “Market Towns and Waterways: The County of Shang-hai from 1480 to 1910,” ibid., pp. 470-471; E. S. Rawski, Agricultural Change and the Peasant Economy of South China (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 62-68; Katsuo Shikako, “Market development and economic growth also prompted relaxation of direct government controls over the economy. The Ming founder had continued the Yuan practice of registering certain households for special service as salt producers, soldiers, or artisans, but this system collapsed in the sixteenth century and was replaced by commuted payments in money. Goods obtained for Imperial Household use with corvée labor in early Ming were now acquired
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through subcontracts to private firms using wage labor. Government direction of water-control projects was similarly replaced by local financing and management. This tendency for the central government to retreat from direct participation and control of the economy continued in Ch'ing times.

Agricultural productivity increased during the late Ming. The effects of economic development on agriculture can be seen most markedly in the emergence of rights of permanent tenure and multiple ownership of land in the rice-producing regions of South and Central China. Whether or not one agrees with the Japanese scholarship that identifies this development with dissolution of manorial controls on rural peasants and tenants, it is clear that these rights, which are first cited in sixteenth-century Fukien gazetteers, represent an improvement of the tenant's position with respect to the landlord. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, permanent tenure appeared in Kiangsu, Kiangsi, and other rice-producing regions of China. Government retreat from economic intervention, increased social mobility resulting from flourishing markets, and improved tenancy rights are signposts of a cumulative process familiar to us from European examples: the replacement of direct controls over individuals by the indirect controls of the market. Of course, neither the late Ming nor the Ch'ing economy was dominated by the market. The contract, which appears in Ming and Ch'ing times for a wide variety of transactions, was still not ubiquitous, and broad regional variations in the importance of contractual obligations versus those of status undoubtedly persisted. The significance of these developments, however, lies not in their statistical frequency but in their function as signs of a gradual and long-term trend toward the triumph of the market economy.

In the Lower Yangtze core, North China core, and other regions where commercial agriculture was practiced, peasants were subjected more intensively than before to the full influence of the market. On one hand, market participation brought increased productivity, stimulated handicraft production, and encouraged improved conditions for tenants. Increased participation in marketing and the emergence of lower level rural markets meant improvements in communications between town and village, as peddlers, peasants, landlords, and others came together in the periodic markets. The increased flow of trade and heightened market participation thus surely influenced the shape of Chinese culture in both rural and urban places. Those who produced for the market were exposed to the risk of price fluctuations. Bountiful harvests could now have negative consequences for individual farmers, as the price for a crop fell; bad harvests, when prices soared, could benefit the producer whose crop had not been damaged. Exposure to market forces made the economic calculations of individual households much more complex, and tied household welfare to forces operating above the level of the village. Market participation raised the value of knowledge concerning conditions in the larger world. The risks and benefits of market participation must have also sharpened the competitive environment in which villagers lived. The impact of market participation on peasant mentality lies behind Elvin's observation that 'society became restless, fragmented and fiercely competitive.'

Economic growth affected Chinese social structure in several ways. It stimulated a trend toward increased social stratification, which can be discerned at various levels of Chinese society. Scholars believe that village society became more highly stratified during the Ming and Ch'ing. Wage labor increasingly replaced the labor of serflike households. Absentee landlordism increased and a new group of managerial landlords emerged. Village society now included absentee landlords, managerial landlords, self-cultivators, tenant farmers, and farm laborers. Among the literati, differentiation was reflected in several spheres. In elite lineages we find the more successful branches sloughing off poorer descent lines by excluding them from genealogies and lineage benefits. We also find tension between the rural base and the new absentee landlord, whose interests did not coincide. Rural rent-resistance movements sometimes found the rural landlord at odds with his urban counterpart. Differentiation also characterized elites who aspired to leadership of county society. One recent work asserts that there was no cohesive county elite, but at least two, if not more, distinct elite strata, that did not intermarry: a local elite group, which cultivated marriage alliances with similar families within the
county and maintained strong community ties, and a group of more ambitious families, who were oriented toward the larger bureaucratic elite world outside the county boundaries, whose marriages cemented bureaucratic alliances, and who normally devoted little attention to the local community.9

Stratification was probably most marked in the Lower Yangtze core, where absentee landlordism was a prominent development during the late Ming and Ch'ing periods. In advanced economies like the Lower Yangtze core, reliance on contractual rather than personal frameworks of control enabled richer landowners to respond to the economic and cultural opportunities offered by an urban milieu, and they began to move out of villages into towns and cities. Urban residence altered patterns of elite investment and consumption. Landlords residing in towns began to invest their surplus funds in pawnshops, commerce, and urban real estate, ventures that promised higher returns than land investments but that also entailed higher risk. Urban-based landlords and scholar families confronted a more insecure financial future than did their rural relatives, not only because of their greater involvement in the marketplace, but because their expenditures tended to soar once they had moved to town. Towns offered improved access to books and an intellectually dynamic urban culture, but they frequently also offered irresistible diversions from the narrow path of examination studies in the form of wine, women, and song. One man’s reaction to urban life, Chang Ying’s pacan to rural tradition, Heng-ch’ an so- yen (Remarks on real estate), written at the close of the seventeenth century, tells us a great deal about the dangers of urban life for the Chinese elite.10

Elite insecurity and anxiety were the byproducts of another Ming development linked with economic growth—namely, the emergence of a fluid and flexible status system, largely free of effective legal barriers to status mobility.


The economic boom of the sixteenth century stimulated expansion of the school system and thus increased the number of examination candidates competing for degrees. As competition for examination degrees sharpened, so did the anxiety among households with elite status, who saw threats to the perpetuation of their status through their children and grandchildren in the improved chances for upward mobility among persons of lower status. Nor was this the only source of anxiety for such households. The emergence of commercial opportunities and the relative downgrading of landed investment signaled the growing complexity of the relationship between wealth, derived from commerce as well as land, and elite status.

Many descendents of older families might, like Fang I-chih, view money making with disdain, but few could ignore the implications of the new social conditions, which saw rich merchants partaking in such traditionally elite activities as book collection, patronage of the arts, and the creation of elaborate gardens and mansions. Partible inheritance divided the family estate in each generation upon the death of the head of the household. If the succeeding generation failed to win degrees or spent too long pursuing degrees, the family’s prospects of maintaining high status were poor. One common response to this dilemma is evident in P. T. Ho’s case studies of mobility: specialization by sons whereby one made money in order to permit another to pursue studies. Whether this strategy succeeded, however, depended on individual talent and political and economic conditions. There can be little doubt that the psychic pressures on elite households were intensified with the increased competition for examination degrees.11

Our view of late Ming and Ch’ing society rests on the socio-economic developments described above. The growth of trade stimulated commercial agriculture and handicrafts and spurred expansion of rural markets. Greater integration of the central place hierarchy and growing market participation facilitated the flow of ideas as well as goods between city and country, while the trend to urban residence among some elites, notably in the Lower Yangtze core, stimulated urban culture.

Economic growth also sparked competition. The regional club (hui-kuan) appeared when advances in the economy lured merchants outside their own local systems to penetrate new markets. These merchants found that they could best pursue their interests in a sharply competitive urban setting by forming native-place associations. Later, these associations also accommodated degree candidates and officials who shared native-place ties, and formed loci for regional competition in an urban setting. Competition in some rural areas was organized around lineages, which also expanded in the late seventeenth century.
Lineages were used to advance collective interests in a locality, or to enhance elite control in regions where the penetration of the commercial economy had weakened traditional mechanisms of social control. 12  

The competitive environment that gave rise to these collective strategies also produced the anxiety and psychic tension described above—anxiety regarding personal status, the security of household fortunes, and, on the part of the traditional elite, the perpetuation of their preeminence. 13

As noted, these significant changes in the social and economic order began in the late Ming. But they did not end with the demise of the Ming house in 1644; indeed, there are grounds for arguing that the change of dynasties did not affect these fundamental socio-economic trends. As Jonathan Spence and John Wills note, commercial growth, urbanization, and the increasing numbers of examination candidates resulting from the improved access to education were important secular trends that suffered “only brief interruption” from the Ch'ing conquest. 14

In the Lower Yangtze core, despite instances of spectacular resistance to the Ch'ing armies, most regions surrendered peacefully to the changing order. The social order of the Lower Yangtze survived the interregnum and such Manchu attacks on gentry privilege as the Kiangnan tax case of 1661. The Lower Yangtze economy also recovered quickly in the late seventeenth century. The Southeast Coast, especially Fukien, was hard hit by the Ch'ing policy banning maritime trade and evacuating the coastal population during the campaigns against Koxinga, but conditions improved in the eighteenth century as Fukienese migrated to Taiwan, opened up land for cultivation, and developed marketing links between Taiwan and Fukien ports. Lingnan benefited from the misfortunes of the Southeast Coast, receiving a large stream of immigrants from Swatow and southern Fukien, and profiting from Canton’s role as China’s entrepôt for foreign trade before 1840. The late seventeenth century saw North China begin another cycle of growth, which continued until the rebellions of the 1850s. The Upper Yangtze and Middle Yangtze regions, where civil war (particularly in Szechwan) had been very fierce, also received large groups of new settlers in early Ch’ing who helped rehabilitate the local economy. For


officials of the third rank and above who had served in office for a specified term.\textsuperscript{16}

As hereditary privilege narrowed, the groups who were eligible to take the examinations expanded. The examinations were open to all but a very small number of males from certain ethnic groups and occupations. Former slaves, members of families of prostitutes, entertainers, and lictors, and the “mean people” (chien-min) were excluded until 1729 from taking the examinations, but according to P. T. Ho these groups represented less than one percent of the total population.\textsuperscript{17}

If the lure of examination success was a primary cause of the Chinese “profound reverence” for schooling, there were also considerable rewards for literacy in everyday life: innumerable government notices, regulations, and documents to read, fill in, and file, and written contracts for business transactions of all kinds—buying and selling real estate, renting land, borrowing money, and selling children. The Ming and Ch'ing police security (pao-chia) and tax collection (li-chia) systems required record keeping; so did the water-control organizations that passed into local control in the late Ming. Lineages, undergoing expansion in the late seventeenth century, also required written records of corporate property management and membership.\textsuperscript{18} Literacy was thus essential “not only for scholarship and official administration, but for successful farm management and commerce, and it was extremely useful if not essential for those wishing to assume a greater than ordinary influence in the affairs of their neighborhood or village.”\textsuperscript{19}

Families used literacy as a defense against being cheated. P. T. Ho cites a family of agricultural tenants in East China who, bilked by a villager over a land deal, sent a son to school, “for without an educated man the family could not defend itself against local sharpers in the future.”\textsuperscript{20} The incentives for education extended to farmers and traders as well as potential officials.

Educational expansion had several consequences for late imperial society. The structure of the examination system, which had quotas at different administrative levels and regional quotas at the higher level examinations, ensured that the educated elite were scattered through China’s various regions: because there was a unified curriculum, one could assume homogeneity in elite values regardless of locality, and this was an important element in sustaining a unified empire over such great distances under premodern conditions of transport and communications. The significance of China’s written language as a factor working for integration of elite culture cannot be underestimated.

Educational expansion was accompanied by stiffer competition among candidates sitting for the civil service examinations, and the resulting frustration was important in stimulating creativity in urban culture. The sixteenth century, which witnessed great economic growth, was also a period of intense intellectual development, particularly in the cities of the Lower Yangtze core. The frustrations engendered by examination competition and the dangers of factional politics within the bureaucracy had turned many educated youths away from the orthodox career route to contemplate purposeful activity in other realms. Willard Peterson describes the wen-jen (man of culture) model in the late Ming:

For such men, who were only minimally involved in government, or not at all, arts were more than a pastime or entertainment. . . . Seen in the best light, such “men of culture” eschewed ambitions of wealth and standing as officials in order to devote themselves to literature and art. . . . Some men put their efforts and trust into literature and books, calligraphy and painting, collecting and appreciating, as other men might put theirs into moral philosophy or politics.\textsuperscript{21}

The wen-jen model had existed in earlier dynasties, but its importance increased in late Ming, and it became highly relevant for the men born under the Ming who lived as adults under the Manchus. For the K'ang-hsi generation of scholars, ambivalence regarding official careers was intensified by the pressure of the loyalist ideal to avoid holding office under the conquerors. Then, too, as Lynn Struve shows, Manchu policy in the seventeenth century provided few openings for young Han Chinese. The thwarted political ambitions of many in this generation were deflected toward the sphere of culture.\textsuperscript{22}

The fruits of deflected literati energy appear clearly in the seventeenth-century novel, studied by Robert Hegel. Hegel describes the rise of the novel as a serious literary form, a vehicle for political protest and examination of substantive issues confronting intellectuals. Fiction was not escapist, but rather expressed Confucian ideals that were no longer realized in office holding.\textsuperscript{23}

If, as Hegel demonstrates, fiction appealed to a narrow circle of wealthy, well-educated readers, the repercussions of the elite search for meaning in private activities were far broader. While some literati pursued fiction and drama (which had a more socially varied audience than fiction), others turned to religion and the reform of popular mores.

The intellectual ferment of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

\textsuperscript{16} Ho, The Ladder of Success, pp. 149–150.


\textsuperscript{18} Rawski, Education, pp. 9–11.


\textsuperscript{20} Ho, The Ladder of Success, p. 314.

\textsuperscript{21} Peterson, Bitter Gourd, p. 32; see pp. 5, 8 as well.

\textsuperscript{22} Peterson, pp. 32–33; Lynn Struve, “Ambivalence and Action: Some Frustrated Scholars of the K'ang-hsi Period,” in From Ming to Ch'ing, pp. 321–365.

included a revival of Buddhism, led by four great monks. One of them, Chu-hung (1535–1615), the subject of a study by Chün-fang Yü, displays many of the characteristics just cited. Born into an elite family in Hangchow prefecture, Chu-hung studied for the examinations and spent his first thirty-two years in pursuits appropriate to a member of the leisureed class. His decision to renounce this way of life and become a monk was spurred by repeated failures in the examinations, and the successive loss of several close family members. 24

Chu-hung's major accomplishments included the promotion of lay Buddhism. In view of his Confucian education and social background, it is not surprising that he strove to accommodate Buddhism to Confucianism, and acquired a following that included many men from elite backgrounds similar to his own. Chu-hung's tolerance of Confucian ideals, his counsel that believers should first fulfill their filial obligations, and his opinion that officials could carry out all their duties (including execution of criminals) without repudiating their Buddhist commitment, reflected tendencies of late Ming Buddhism that helped promote expansion of the faith: emphasis on moral action in this life, and the belief that individuals could find salvation while fulfilling their social roles within society. 25

Chu-hung's propagation of Buddhism stopped short of organization. He was afraid of potential involvement with heterodox sects such as the White Lotus societies studied by Daniel Overmyer and Susan Naquin, and attacked many practices linked with Buddhist sectarianism. He disapproved of lay associations with female members, believing that women should practice their faith at home. He criticized monks who acted as geomancers, mediums, pharmacists, or healers of female diseases, and he regarded the use of the planchette in spiritual writing as superstitious. 26 On these matters Chu-hung's attitude was entirely orthodox, which helps explain why Buddhist sectarian movements were not led by monks but by lay believers.

Chu-hung's social background was similar to those of other religious leaders in the sixteenth century. His contemporaries, Lin Chao-en (1517–1598) and Yuan Huang (1533–1606), who were both active in promoting variant forms of Buddhism, resided in the prosperous Lower Yangtze delta, which was the center not only of the Ming Buddhist revival but of the seventeenth-century advances in fiction. Lin Chao-en's home province, Fukien, was in the heyday of its trade with the Portuguese, Japanese, and Spanish in the sixteenth century, and might well have been prosperous enough to constitute another intellectual center in the empire. Lin's home county, Pu-t'ien, was a center of illegal trade, as was Chin-chiang (Ch'uan-chou prefecture), the native place of Lin's famous contemporary, the iconoclast Li Chih (1527–1602). 28

The same motives that directed some intellectuals into wen-jen activity thus drew other literati into religion. This religious revival should be seen as another product of the late Ming educational expansion and should be linked to the wen-jen effort not only in terms of the social background and education of religious leaders (and some followers), but also as an alternative in the quest for sagehood.

Earlier we noted the beginnings of a long-term trend in the economy away from direct controls over individuals and toward the indirect controls of the market, one of the essential elements in the complex sequence of transformations to be found in societies undergoing modernization. In the cultural realm we find a parallel trend, reflected in the morality books (shih-chu), which stress the internalization of values and moral autonomy. We may interpret the Ming emergence of morality books in several ways. In their emphasis on man's ability to exert control over his destiny, morality books can be viewed as an expression of economic changes that created opportunities to quickly raise or depress individual fortunes. Further, since these books specify behavior appropriate to various social strata, we might also see them as guides to new social roles for the upwardly mobile. 29 Alternatively, the assumption in these books that moral action was linked to material success may be interpreted as a response to the anxiety produced by enhanced social mobility in the core regions of the Lower Yangtze and Southeast Coast. By drawing on religious beliefs, morality books provided modes of coping with the psychic uncertainties linked with social change. Finally, we may cite status anxiety on the part of the older elite as a motivation for writing morality books, which were seen as a means of halting the moral decline brought about by the rise of new groups to social and economic prominence. The morality books of the late Ming and early Chi'ing represent the private complement to vigorous government efforts in the same...
direction, highlighted by the Sacred Edict lectures discussed by Victor Mair in chapter 11 of this book. 30

Morality books were very popular during the sixteenth century. Both Yuan Huang and Chu-hung enthusiastically advocated one particular text, the Ledger of Merits and Demerits According to the Immortal T'ai-wei (T'ai-wei Hsien-chin kung-kao-kou), a Taoist work dating from the late twelfth century. Yuan Huang testified that his whole life changed after a Ch'an monk presented him with this book; Chu-hung was so taken with it that he had it reprinted and distributed for free. 31 Chu-hung later wrote his own morality book, the Record of Self-Knowledge (Tzu-chih lu), which was modeled on the Ledger of Merits and Demerits. What was new in the Record, and especially striking when compared to earlier Sung morality books, was the nature of the sanction, which was no longer supernatural, but the working of an impersonal karmic law. Individuals could affect their fate by their own actions. Not only did human beings now have power over their own destinies, but they were to be judged by the more subtle criterion not of action but of wish or motivation. 32

Late Ming morality books commonly made this distinction between behavior and motivation. The new emphasis on moral internalization was the product of contemporary religious, intellectual, and social developments. Wang Yang-ming's emphasis on the potential of every man to become a sage encouraged a belief in universal sagehood that paralleled the post-Sung Buddhist focus on the potential of all sentient beings to achieve salvation. Neo-Confucian and Buddhist optimism coincided with the increased social mobility resulting from prosperity, educational expansion, and large-scale printing. 33

Educational expansion and increased social mobility thus had multiple effects on Chinese culture and society. Those climbing the social ladder and those afraid of downward mobility turned to religion for solace and as a tool of social control. The literati and government assigned a high priority to the inculcation of moral and ethical values; social mobility enhanced the receptivity of the commoner population to such attempts. The extension of education enhanced the circulation of written materials in Chinese society. Before we turn to the consequences of the attempt to indoctrinate citizens with appropriate values, we must survey the condition and distribution of the publishing industry, whose expansion was also a byproduct of the sixteenth-century surge.

30 Hegel, The Novel, pp. 106–107, offers a somewhat different explanation. He identifies elite emancipation from traditional roles as a source of confusion and anxiety that stimulated examination of the conflicts between the claims of self and society in the seventeenth-century novel.


32 Ibid., pp. 106–118.

33 Ibid., pp. 113–119.


Movable-type printing required greater skill and education than the woodblock method. A printer was a skilled metalworker who had been trained through apprenticeship in the craft. The early printers were also quite well educated; they had to be, to know enough Latin to set texts correctly. In China, literacy was not required because the texts, written on thin sheets of paper, were pasted onto the blocks. Carving might require some skill, but the other operations such as the inking and pulling of sheets could be done by virtually anyone. A local gazetteer of Ma-kang, a printing center in the Pearl River delta of Kwangtung, notes that “women and children can all do it; the men only carve the text on the blocks, according to the handwritten manuscript. The rest is done with female labor. Because of their cheapness, the books go everywhere.” Unskilled female labor was used in other printing centers such as Fo-shan (Kwangtung) and Hsu-wan (Kiangsi).

Movable-type printing also called for a larger capital investment than xylography. Early sixteenth-century European death inventories show that the major items of equipment in printers' workshops were one or more presses and sets of type, the latter usually valued at several times the value of the press. These costs were all absent in the Chinese industry.

Operating costs were also greater in Europe. Paper had been the one primary component of printing that Europe lacked. Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin observe, “What use would it have been to be able to print with movable type if the only medium was skin, which takes ink poorly, and when only the costliest skin, that of the calf, was flat and supple enough to be used under the press?”

Paper, invented in China, entered Europe in the twelfth century and spread gradually from Italy to other countries in western Europe. By the fifteenth century, paper was available for printing, but its cost remained high because European manufacture relied on rags. Economies of scale, most marked when fixed costs are a high proportion of total cost, were limited in Europe by the high cost of rag paper. Rags were the essential raw material of European papermaking from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and the limited rag supply constrained the potential expansion of the paper industry. As printing developed, the demand for paper soared, and the scarcity of rags became more acute. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the paper cost accounts in many cases for more than half the total cost of a book. Paper was one material that had to be supplied to printers by publishers, no doubt because of its expense. In China, where paper could be made from bamboo fibers, tree bark, and other plant fibers, the cost of ink, wood, and paper was a relatively minor component of total printing costs.

Potential economies of scale in European publishing were further limited by the small market for books and by the production technology. Febvre and Martin conclude that while setting up a print shop was relatively inexpensive, the capital requirement for publishing was very high. Printers and booksellers might have wished to maximize the number of copies in an edition, thus lowering the cost of printing each copy, but the small size of the market limited actual output, since “there was absolutely no point in a publisher printing more copies of a particular book than the market could absorb within a reasonable period of time. To ignore this meant many unsold copies or, at the best, tying up a substantial capital sum in a commodity that sold all too slowly.” An indication of how slowly a book could sell is provided by Florence E. de Roover, who studied an Italian travelling merchant named Girolamo di Carlo di Marco Strozzi. In 1476, Strozzi commissioned the printing of two Florentine histories in the vernacular. He sent 550 of the 600 copies of each title printed to Florence for sale. It took seven years, until 1483, before “almost all” had in fact been sold. According to Febvre and Martin, the search for retail outlets was “the constant and central preoccupation of publishers” through the early period of European printing.

In order to spread risk and minimize the danger of publishing a title that would not sell, European publishers and printers generally produced several titles concurrently; that is, they never concentrated all their efforts on one edition, but tried to print several at one time. This meant that each title took a long time to produce and that the type for a particular page was set, printed, and then broken up for use in another page. Although metal movable type was capable of producing any number of copies, the actual size of editions was very small. Into the 1470s, an edition of several hundred copies was considered good; in the 1480s, the number of copies printed rose to an average of 400–500 an edition, and in the early sixteenth century to 1500 copies. Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the only works that regularly exceeded 2000 copies were religious titles or textbooks, and in the eighteenth century most...
print runs continued to fall below 2000 copies. Fevre and Martin note that the dissemination of popular works such as Luther’s German Bible came not from large printings but from repeated printings, often by different printers. 46

The advantages of metal movable type for expanding the scale of production were thus largely unrealized by European publishers and printers in the early period of printing. When good sales of a particular book stimulated a new edition, the type had to be reset, in contrast to the Chinese woodblock, which, once carved, could be stored for future printings.

Technically, a woodblock carved of the standard wood, pear or jujube, could be used to print 16,000–26,000 copies. We know very little about the actual size of printings in China. Government-sponsored editions ranged from several hundred up to several thousand copies of a title. The size of editions put out by commercial firms is unknown to us. W. L. Idema has complained that our evidence shows that the technical maximum was rarely attained, except perhaps in the case of “readily sold works, like basic schoolbooks and almanacs.” 47

From the viewpoint of cost, however, the size of a “run” was less important in China, where blocks were preserved for future use, than in Europe, where the entire book would have to be reset for a new printing. We do know that printing firms sold engraved blocks to one another. An individual who printed his own work, like Yuan Mei, the eighteenth-century poet, regarded his inventory of printing blocks as a capital asset, leaving them to his heirs as a source of future revenue. 48

There were thus important limits to the expansion of European printing from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries on both the supply and demand side that did not exist in China during the same period. The cost of training, equipment, and raw materials (notably paper) was higher in Europe than in China. It was the Chinese industry and not the European one that profited from scale economics in this era. The limited demand for books was a greater problem for the Europeans too. Europe’s population was smaller, and the size of its premodern elite correspondingly limited. In the mid-fifteenth century, when Latin was still the educated language throughout Europe, publishers sold in an international book market, but the Reformation was followed by a retreat into the empire. The regional quotas in the civil service examinations, which produced an unusually broad dispersion of the literate population, ensured that a demand for books and written materials could be found in every region. Nor were literacy and book purchase confined to cities and towns: how could they be, when the rural and urban sectors were less sharply differentiated than in Europe? In China one could find literati residing in both country and town, and publishing took place in both locales as well. 52

A comparison of Chinese and European publishing and printing indicates that Chinese technology and market conditions were more favorable to expansion of the industry. We have earlier observed that the technical advances in Ming printing did not play a leading role in stimulating expansion; it was, rather, the increase in education and the economic prosperity of the sixteenth century, continued in subsequent periods under the Ch’ing, that was responsible for the effect.

Who were the publishers, and how did the structure of the publishing industry influence the impact of printing on popular culture? Xylography permitted extreme decentralization of China’s printing industry: as long as


one could find carvers, one could print. Most studies have concentrated on what may be the smallest (in terms of volume) if most illustrous sector of the industry—namely, the government and literati publishers—and have neglected the part of the industry producing more humble materials such as elementary primers, almanacs, and religious pamphlets.

Government agencies, private individuals, institutions, and commercial firms all published books. The government had long been a large publisher of official documents, historical records, and Confucian texts. Its concern for the authenticity of the Confucian classics was a primary stimulus in the development of the printing industry. All levels of agencies, from the Imperial Household down to the county yamen, acted as publishers and printers. However, although Ming and Ch'ing emperors sponsored notable compilations of religious and secular texts, the government was not the major source for expanded publications during our period.

The publishing activities of literati, institutions, and commercial firms all increased in the late Ming, as the expansion of education raised the demand for textbooks at all levels. The demand for advanced texts was met most prominently by academies (shu-yuan) and bibliophiles such as Huang Pei-lieh, Mao Chin, and Pao T'ing-po, who collected and reproduced rare texts, thus stimulating what became the major field of Ch'ing historical scholarship. These were books of fine quality, clearly intended for a small and wealthy readership. It was the literati, particularly those residing in the Lower Yangtze core, who also published collections of drama, short stories, and fiction in editions of high quality intended for a limited urban audience.

The demand for educational texts and fiction was also met by commercial firms. Some were famous, like the Huangs of She county, Anhwei, known for their skilled woodcut illustrations, and the Lius of Chien-yang, Fukien, who published collections of drama, short stories, and fiction in editions of high quality intended for a limited urban audience.

The late Ming and early Ch'ing brought a proliferation of primers, including some years than the number continuing on to advanced examination preparation. The greatest demand stimulated by the educational expansion was for elementary primers, since there were many more students attending school for one or two years than the number continuing on to advanced examination preparation. The late Ming and early Ch'ing brought a proliferation of primers, including rhymed works and glossaries (shi-cha). Commercial firms engaged in many other kinds of printing for the market. Popular encyclopedias, filled with homely advice as well as arithmetic aids, contract forms, and information useful for daily life, were printed in greater numbers than before. There were almanacs, identified by C. K. Yang as the most popular literature in traditional China, and other products that fall outside the realm of the printed word, such as the numerous religious prints intended for use in private homes. In Chekiang, according to Clarence Day, these paper gods (ma-chang) were used in "practically every kind of religious ceremonial" by rich and poor alike. Ma-chang were woodcut illustrations, frequently with a few characters written on them and sometimes with longer inscriptions, printed on cheap paper and frequently burned during religious rites. The production of religious prints goes back to the earliest period of Chinese printing and no doubt continued to flourish in every subsequent era, yet we know very little about this industry despite the probability that it constituted one of the most widespread forms of printing during the traditional period. Paper money, used for religious offerings, was a related product in widespread use, whose manufacture also deserves more study.

If the printing activities of commercial firms seemed to be more closely oriented to the practical concerns of a poorly educated consumer, it does not
follow that the products of literati printing affected only the educated elite. The printing and distribution of religious pamphlets was seen as an act of piety, worth a specific number of “merits” in the Record of Self-Knowledge and other morality books. Such pamphlets must have been widely distributed, for nineteenth-century missionaries found them everywhere.59

Printing touched other sectors in the society. Lineages engaged in publishing, for example, and the late seventeenth century saw an increasing number of genealogies being printed. Also, charitable organizations began to publish reports of their activities, as indicated by the documents of Shanghai charitable institutions dating from the early nineteenth century. And Buddhist sectarian groups managed to transmit their scriptures despite government repression, as Overmyer and Naquin show in chapters 8 and 9 of this book.

In comparison with earlier periods, the late Ming and Ch’ing witnessed an increase not only in the volume of printing but in the printing activities of literati, institutions, and commercial firms. The educated elite dominated publishing as creators and consumers, but the expansion of publishing reflected a spread of literate culture that affected a much broader social spectrum. By late Ch’ing times, and probably earlier, even illiterates lived in what was basically a literate culture. This is very evident in James Hayeys’ study (chapter 3 of this book) of the written materials to be found in twentieth-century villages in the New Territories.

Did the expansion of the publishing industry alter the geographical distribution of printing centers? Most secondary literature on printing focuses on the Lower Yangtze printing centers that dominated the national deluxe book market during Ming and Ch’ing. In fact, with the exception of the late developing Yun-Kwei macroregion, each region had its own printing centers. As one sixteenth-century scholar wrote,

There are three regions printing books: Kiangsu, Chekiang, and Fukien. Szechwan imprints were the best in Sung, but recently are very scarce. Peking, Canton, Shensi, and Hupei/Hunan all print books ... but they are not as flourishing as the three. For quality Kiangsu is best, for quantity Fukien is first, and Chekiang is second in both. Kiangsu is the most expensive, Fukien the cheapest, Chekiang is in between.61

In the sixteenth century, outstanding printing centers were thus sited in seven of the eight Chinese macroregions. At the same time, there was a national market in elite books. The center of official printing was the capital city, so the Ming capitals of Nanking and Peking and the Ch’ing capital of Peking stood at the apex of government publishing, which could be found at every administrative level in every region.62

Literati printing was concentrated in the cities of the Lower Yangtze, where many of the most active scholar-printers and writers lived. Nanking, the most important metropolis in the region during the Ming, and Soochow, which replaced Nanking as the central metropolis during the late Ming, attracted large numbers of writers and scholars. Li Yü, the seventeenth-century dramatist, poet, and essayist, spent much of his life in Nanking, the site of his famous bookstore, the Mustard Seed Garden. The litterateur Feng Meng-lung, a native of Soochow, may well have owned a printing concern in that city, where he and Ling Meng-ch’u, the short story writer and scholar, were closely tied to publishing circles. Soochow was also the home of Huang Pei-hsi, who reprinted many Sung texts in facsimile editions. Other Yangtze centers included Ch’ang-shu, where Mao Chin and his son Mao I published about 600 titles, and Hangchow, where the book collectors studied by Nancy Swann also engaged in printing.63

Throughout the Ming and Ch’ing, Chien-yang County, Fukien, was the area producing the largest volume of commercially printed books. Ma-sha chen and Shu-fang chen (“Booktown”) in Chien-yang were known for low-quality imprints. Large centers of commercial printing were also located in the Middle Yangtze and Lingnan macroregions during the Ch’ing. According to Nagasawa Kikuya,

For size of printings, Kiangsi and Kwangtung are the greatest. Kiangsi’s printing is in Chin-hai county’s Hsi-wan; Kwangtung’s is in Shun-te county’s Ma-kang. Both have prospered from large numbers of printings.64

Hsi-wan and Ma-kang were rivals of Chien-yang, producing cheap editions of poor quality with female and child labor. There were similar printing centers in Nan-ch’ang, Kiangsi; Ch’ang-sha, Hunan; and Fo-shan, Kwangtung. Canton was also a major printing center during the Ch’ing.65

In contrast to the centers cited above, the commercial firms in the Lower


60 See chart, pp. 60-61, in Taka Akgoro 多嘉様男, Sēifu no kokyō 宗教の研究 [Research on genealogies] (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunkō 東洋文庫, 1960); Rawski, Education, pp. 121-122.

61 Hu Ying-lin (1551-1602), cited by Liu Kuo-chih, Concise History, p. 78.

62 For size of printings, Kiangsi and Kwangtung are the greatest. Kiangsi’s printing is in Chin-hai county’s Hsi-wan; Kwangtung’s is in Shun-te county’s Ma-kang. Both have prospered from large numbers of printings.

63 In contrast to the centers cited above, the commercial firms in the Lower Yangtze and Lingnan macroregions during the Ch’ing. According to Nagasawa Kikuya.


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TABLE 1. Regional Origins of Ming-Ch'ing Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macregion</th>
<th>Ming No. of books</th>
<th>Regional percentage of Ming total</th>
<th>Ch'ing No. of books</th>
<th>Regional percentage of Ch'ing total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Yangtze</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North China</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast Coast</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest China</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Yangtze</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Yangtze</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lingnan</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yun-Kwei</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside empire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>179</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>119</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Yangtze cities specialized in high-quality, expensive books, although Nanking, Soochow, and Hangchow also published other kinds of materials. The Li Kuang-ning chuang in Nanking, for example, was the largest publisher of elementary primers in the Ch'ing, while the Sao-yeh shan fang, run by the Hsi family in Soochow, was reputed to be the single largest Ch'ing commercial publisher. Some Lower Yangtze bookstore-publishers had regional branches. Liu Ts'un-yan informs us of one such store, the Shan ch'eng tang, which had branches in Soochow, Hangchow, Chekiang, and Fukien. 66

During the Ming and Ch'ing, publishing centers emerged in every region at the same time that the Lower Yangtze cities dominated the national elite book market. Analysis of the regional origins of several extant collections of Ming and Ch'ing books shows both aspects of the regional distribution of the industry. Table 1 presents the regional origins of several hundreds of Ming and Ch'ing editions exhibited at the Peking Library in 1952. This exhibition emphasized nonfiction and included histories, poetry, books on agriculture and technology, local gazetteers, collected writings of scholars, and religious texts. Every region was represented in the exhibition. Peking was the single largest publishing center represented, with fifty-eight titles; Nanking was second, with twenty-eight, Soochow third, with twenty-three, and Hangchow was represented by seven books.


The Peking Library exhibition reveals the importance of Peking as a center of government printing. Analysis of collections of fiction show the primacy of the Southeast Coast and Lower Yangtze centers. Of the ten texts out of twenty-four extant Ming and Ch'ing editions of Romance of the Three Kingdoms (San kuo chih t'ung-su yen-i) whose regional origins can be identified, six were printed in Fukien, three in Soochow, and one in Nanking. 67

Canton's primacy in the Lingnan book market emerges from Liu Ts'un-yan's analysis of the regional origins of Chinese popular fiction held by two libraries in London. The more than 190 books held by these libraries were published by 90 bookstores, 56 of which have been located. Of the latter, 28.5 percent were in Canton; 9 percent in Fo-shan; and 5 percent in Hong Kong, so a total of 42.8 percent of the books in the collection came from the Lingnan macroregion. As Liu explains, the dominance of Kwangtung imprints in a collection that includes imprints from the Lower Yangtze, Southeast Coast, and North China stems from the fact that Canton is the marketing center for the region in which Hong Kong is located. 68 The contrast between this collection and the regional distribution found by Sun K'ai-ti in his survey of Japanese and Chinese collections, in which Southeast Coast and Lower Yangtze books dominated, underlines the regional flavor of the London holdings.

Long-distance trade was probably limited to books intended for a well-educated and wealthy readership. Fiction, histories, and the titles of the books in the collections we have analyzed were mostly read by men-belonging to a small elite. The high prices of books of quality permitted merchants to bear the cost of long-distance transport and still show a profit. The long-distance book trade was dominated by merchants from the major printing centers of the Lower Yangtze and Kiangsi. We find Soochow merchants bringing Soochow imprints to Canton, and purchasing cheaper Ma-kang editions there to take back to sell in Kiangnan. Merchants from Soochow, Hu-chou, and Kiangsi dominated Peking's famous book quarter, Liu-li-ch'ang, from the eighteenth until the late nineteenth century. 69

As the prestige and price of a printed work declined, so did the distance it was traded. If we could find the information needed to study this subject, we could trace a hierarchy of markets and production centers, reaching from the central metropolis of a macroregion down to the central or intermediate market town,

68 Ts'un-yan Liu, Chinese Popular Fiction, pp. 39-42.
depending on the population density and degree of economic advance of the specific region. When we study items such as almanacs, which Ricci noted “are sold in such quantities that every house has a supply of them,” or paper gods, which seem to have been sold in villages, we are likely to be dealing with objects printed at centers only a step or two higher in the central place hierarchy. Further research is needed before we can discuss production of this most popular kind of printed material and the mechanisms that facilitated its dissemination, such as book fairs and peddler’s networks.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON CULTURE

The development of the economy, expansion of education and functional literacy, and penetration of printed culture into rural villages fundamentally influenced Chinese popular culture. We have already described some of these influences.

Increased participation in marketing opened broader horizons for peasants and increased the value of literacy for everyday life while providing households with the funds to pay for schooling. The commercial economy also exposed individuals to a keener competitive environment, in which potential losses loomed as large as the potential profits. Enhanced social mobility was thus linked with increased uncertainty; these dual tensions are reflected in late Ming fiction and morality books in the new stress on the importance of individual action in determining one’s fate and the assumption that material rewards would flow from virtuous action. A mentality resembling that of the marketplace emerges in the “ideology of merit making” to be found in these books: one can think of the ledgers of merit and demerit that appear during this period as spiritual account books, with “target saving”—that is, the belief that achievement of a specified total of meritorious deeds will automatically bring good fortune. Chün-fang Yu provides such a testimonial from Yün Hwang, who ascribed his success in winning the ch‘ü-jen and chhin-shih degrees and acquiring a long-desired son to the accumulation of a targeted number of good deeds.

The ideology of merit making may thus be interpreted as a response to the uncertainty produced by heightened social mobility. The notion of spiritual accounting reveals the penetration of a commercial mentality and rationality into the ethical-religious sphere.

Economic advance and educational expansion changed elite culture. In the Lower Yangtze, the most advanced, urbanized, and one of the most densely populated regions in late Ming China, the movement of large landlords out of villages into towns and cities stimulated urban culture. The Lower Yangtze’s largest cities, such as Nanking, became centers of intellectual and artistic life, as young men, frustrated by the increasingly difficult competition for examination degrees, sought gratification in private pursuits. A shift from public to private activity did not, however, mean abandonment of Confucian values and goals, and the rise of elite concern about declining morals, itself a product of social change, stimulated production of fiction and works on morality during the late Ming and early Ch‘ing.

Educational expansion affected cultural development in several other ways. By enabling more people than ever before to read at least simple materials, this phenomenon encouraged broader use of written communications in society. Educational expansion, most significant at elementary levels of schooling, brought primers into the sphere of popular knowledge as a consequence of the unified curriculum and unified written language. We can explore the implications of this development by briefly examining the primers and their content.

The Ming and Ch‘ing elementary curriculum rested on three primers: the Trimetrical Classic (San tzu ching), Thousand Character Classic (Ch‘ien t‘u wen), and the Hundred Names (Pai chi hsing). The Trimetrical Classic was the primer with which many boys began their studies. Originally written in Sung times, this text existed in many versions in Ming and Ch‘ing. It consisted of approximately 356 lines of three characters each and contained 700 different characters, after repetitions were eliminated. Its famous opening lines present a Mencian tenet: “Men at their birth are naturally good. Their natures are much the same; their habits become widely different. If foolishly there is no teaching, the nature will deteriorate.”

The primer blended factual and historical information with strictures on the reciprocal obligations of parents and sons, teachers and students, elders and juniors. The oldest of the primers was the Thousand Character Classic. Compiled in the sixth century, it consisted of a thousand different characters organized into eight-character couplets. The information presented was very similar to that in the Trimetrical Classic: there were names of seasons, plants, animals but also names of dynasties, heroes worthy of emulation, and bortatory sections on the conduct proper for a Confucian gentleman: modesty in demeanor and dress, caution in speech, mental self-discipline, and humility. Like the Trimetrical Classic, the Thousand Character Classic was designed for ease in chanting (and hence memorization); the characters introduced were those commonly found in the classical texts to be studied later, and its lines used common easy constructions. In Ming and Ch‘ing times many versions of this text were in circulation.

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\[\text{Gallagher, Chün in the Sixteenth Century, pp. 82–83.}

\[\text{Yu, Religion of Buddhism, pp. 121–124; see Philippe Aries, The Hour of Our Death (New York: Knopf, 1981), pp. 103–104, 154, on the thirteenth-century European parallel to this Chinese development.}

\[\text{The translation is taken from Herbert A. Giles, Elementary Chinese: San Tzu Ching (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1910). The description of these primers draws heavily on Chang Chih-kung Preliminary Study, pp. 6–27, 154–159.}\]
Chinese surnames, but since some names were more than one character in length, the book actually contained more than four hundred characters.

Together these three primers provided the beginning student with knowledge of about two thousand characters and constituted the vocabulary acquired by boys in well-to-do households before they enrolled in formal studies with a tutor. The three primers—known as the "San, Pai, Ch'ien"—were also used in village and charitable schools, where they could be read in a year. As the Ming scholar Li K'un wrote,

When first entering the community school, those eight sui and below should first read the Trimetrical Classic in order to practice reading and hearing; the Hundred Names for daily use; and the Thousand Character Classic also has principle. It would be difficult to overestimate the penetration of these three texts into Ming and Ch'ing culture. The Thousand Character Classic and the other texts appeared not only in Chinese but in Mongolian-Chinese and Manchu-Chinese editions. The absence of character repetition and its general popularity made the Thousand Character Classic a useful ordering system for all kinds of things. The Taoist ordination list was "numbered" using the characters (in sequence) from the Thousand Character Classic; carpenters put together furniture that had been disassembled for shipping using the same system. Ichisada Miyazaki tells us that the cells in Nanking's provincial examination hall were arranged in lanes, each lane being identified by a character taken in serial order from the Thousand Character Classic. Since each cell in a lane was given a number, the system permitted identification of every cell in the entire compound. The same system was used for business account books and pawn tickets. Even though the character would be changed each month, no two tickets from the same pawnshop could bear identical code numbers for more than eighty-three years. The widespread use of the Thousand Character Classic for such practical purposes testifies to its popularity among persons of diverse social groups and occupations, including artisans, clerks, merchants, monks, and scholars. Chang Chih-kung's work shows the equal popularity of the San tzu ching, revealed in the numerous primers bearing this title: Geographical San tzu ching (Ti-li STC), Western Studies San tzu ching (Hsi-hsieh STC), and so on.

Testimony on the penetration of the three primers into Ming-Ch'ing society thus comes from school regulations, personal reminiscences, and documentation of the practical applications listed above. This evidence supports the conclusion that the elementary curriculum was known throughout the Ming and Ch'ing empire and among varied social groups.

What was taught in the primers? Primers serve religious causes in many premodern cultures—this was true in Protestant Europe, where religion was the primary motivation for education, true in Catholic Europe, and the Islamic world. In China, the Trimetrical Classic and Thousand Character Classic were vehicles for what we might identify as Confucian doctrines: faith in the perfection of human nature, stress on education as essential to development of man's goodness, presentation of roles (Three Bonds, Five Relationships) central to Confucian society, and the values appropriate to a ch'ao-tzu, or perfect man: jeon ("human-heartedness"), i ("righteousness"), li ("rites"), chih ("moral knowledge"), and hsien ("good faith"). The texts also presented values that fit into the economic climate of late imperial China: diligence, perseverance, and ambition. In the words of the text, "Make a name for yourselves, glorify your father and mother, shed lustre on your ancestors, and enrich your posterity," or "diligence has its reward." The values transmitted in elementary schooling were thus consonant with not only the Confucian orientation of Chinese society but with the heightened social mobility of late Ming and early Ch'ing times. The values and the primers in which they were expressed were not new: as we have noted, the Trimetrical Classic and Thousand Character Classic go back to Sung and earlier. The difference lay in the economic and social changes described above. Educational expansion brought more boys into the schools, where they memorized the primers; the printing boom produced a larger number of "San, Pai, Ch'ien" and many other primers conveying the same values to beginning students. Values taught in the classroom were further reinforced in the larger society, through imperially sponsored programs such as the village lectures (hsiang-yih) and literati efforts to promote morality education among ordinary citizens.

Since education was viewed as a vital instrument of moral indoctrination, it was the focus of imperial, official, and literati attention. This is true in most societies, but the connection between public order and incultication of values (as opposed to simple coercion) was perhaps more explicit in China than in many other premodern cultures. The school curriculum and the textbooks came under intense scrutiny: the unification of the elementary curriculum was thus the product of informal and formal regulation. Officials and literati frequently espoused production and distribution of the proper primers, and we have Ch'ing records of officials providing free texts to charitable schools in their

73 Cited in Chang Chih-kung, Preliminary Study, p. 25.
75 Chang Chih-kung, Preliminary Study, pp. 19, 199.
77 Lines 345-346, 353 in H. A. Giles'"s translation of San tzu ching, Elementary Chinese.
distRICTS.88 But education was very broadly construed to include oral transplantation of values to the populace. This was the intent of the Ch’ing Sacred Edicts studied by Victor Mair and of their predecessors, the Sacred Edicts issued in 1388 and 1399 by the Hung-wu Emperor, Ming T’ai-tsung (see chapter 11). As Kung-chuan Hsiao has observed, these edicts were “the substance of the Confucian ethic reduced to the barest essentials.” Six in number, the commandments of the Ming Sacred Edicts were identical to those promulgated in 1652 by the Shun-chih Emperor, the founder of the Ch’ing: “Be filial to your parents; be respectful to your elders; live in harmony with your neighbors; instruct your sons and grandsons; be content with your calling; and do no evil.” The Hung-wu Emperor ordered that these maxims be posted on school walls and inscribed on stone tablets erected before Confucian temples and examination halls. In addition, they were read aloud to villagers six times a month.79

The Sacred Edicts attempted to transmit core Confucian values to those who had not attended school and were illiterate. What was presented was a simplification of the lessons found in the elementary primers, not to mention the Confucian classics themselves. The public lecture was supplemented by other practices designed to promote virtue: the honoring of the aged, chaste widows, and filial sons. Then there was the negative reinforcement for good behavior, embodied in an elaborate penal code that supported the Confucian family system.80

Government efforts to inculcate values were matched by literati efforts in both the secular and religious spheres. Individuals endowed charitable schools; created vernacular, rhymed primers to teach normative values more easily; sponsored lay Buddhist and other religious associations; and wrote, printed, and distributed religious pamphlets and morality books. Each of these activities, affecting the dissemination of social values, was important in the period we are studying.

The growing integration of late imperial Chinese culture was a product not only of conscious official policy but of the increased integration of markets and hence of rural and urban places. The enhanced communications network helped bring the value systems of the elite and peasant tradition into closer congruence. The final triumph of imperially sanctioned values can be seen in their acceptance by groups who explicitly rejected orthodoxy. The White Lotus sectarians studied by Susan Naqlin (chapter 9, below) expressed in their mantras the same core values found in the Sacred Edicts, although these ethical principles were now set in the context of religious salvation and rebirth after death.

Cultural integration produced the social stability desired by the elite and the state. As James Liu concludes, “It was this closely knit economic, social, and intellectual web that made it possible for the government of such a vast empire to confine its formal structure mainly in the cities, while utilizing the social structure for rural control.”

Of course, cultural integration marched hand in hand with increased social differentiation and social tension, which were engendered by the same socio-economic conditions that produced integration. Economic advance brought greater social mobility and social stratification; increases in trade and marketing heightened awareness of the differences separating regional and ethnic cultures. The new emphasis on striving, expressed in fiction and morality books, reflects the competitive milieu that confronted ambitious Chinese during late Ming and Ch’ing times. It was natural that culture became not only a shared language, but a vehicle for communicating power relationships, as demonstrated in James Watson’s essay in this volume (chapter 10) on the Tien Hou cult in Kwangtung, and that cultural symbols conveyed a multitude of meanings that were different for different individuals in the society.

Cultural integration and cultural diversity: these were concomitant developments of the late imperial period. The importance of each factor shifts with our focus. On the macrosocietal level, when we consider the premodern communication and transportation technology of Ming and Ch’ing, we must count the cultural unity of the empire as a major achievement. China also appears to have arrived at a greater degree of cultural homogeneity than many premodern European countries—for example, France, not to mention the disunited and atomized states in Germany and Italy. Several essays in this volume begin from this perspective to investigate why and how this cultural integration was achieved.

In seeking to understand how late imperial society functioned at the family, village, and local level, both cultural integration and cultural diversity emerged as extremely important topics for analysis and study. Research on syncretic movements, heterodox and orthodox cults, and analysis of drama and fiction provides us with clues to the values embedded in Chinese culture at various times and places and gives us glimpses of the dynamic interaction between the socio-economic context and the ideas and norms guiding individual behavior. We are at the beginning of a relatively unexplored but fascinating field.

79 Hsiao, Rural China, p. 186; Dictionary of Ming Biography, vol. 1, p. 386.
80 Hsiao, Rural China, chap. 6; T’ung-tsu Ch’u, Law and Society in Traditional China (Paris: Mouton, 1961).