Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849

The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China before Opium War

Betty Peh-T'i Wei

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Introduction

> A single biographical study may bring into focus the critical problems and the atmosphere of an age, and thus help bridge a wide gap in our understanding of the history of (an era).[1]
>
> Arthur F. Wright

This study explores the life and work of Ruan Yuan (1764–1849), a scholar-official of significance in mid-Qing China prior to the Opium War, before traditional institutions and values became altered by incursions from the West. His distinction as a scholar and patron of learning has been recognized by both his contemporaries and modern scholars. His name is mentioned in almost all the works on Qing history or Chinese classics because of the wide range of his research and publications. More than eighty titles of his publications are extant, and a number of these are still being reprinted at the start of the twenty-first century. He was also exulted as an honest official and an exemplary man of the 'Confucian persuasion'.[2] Details of his personal life and his work as an official, however, are less known.

His life as a private individual can be gleaned from contemporary writings, including his own poems as well as those by his wife. A certain amount of information on him can be culled from official sources and his own publications. Stored in the Qing archives are a few hundred documents pertaining to Ruan Yuan, enough for a researcher to reconstruct a fuller record of his government service. In addition to chronological biographies (*liezhuan* 列傳) compiled shortly after his death, there are several brief biographies compiled in the

1. Arthur F. Wright, 'Values, Roles, and Personalities', in *Confucian Personalities*, edited by Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett (1962), p. 11.

2. This term, defined as 'a matched set of attitudes, beliefs, projected actions: a half-formulated moral perspective involving emotional commitment', is adapted from Marvin Myers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (1957), as cited by Wright in 'Introduction', *Confucian Personalities* (1962), p. 3.

twentieth century,[3] but there is yet no full-length study of him in English, or in any language that makes use of extant archival documents.

Since this is the first full-length biographical study of Ruan Yuan in English, and since it is also aimed at presenting 'the atmosphere of an age' and 'the critical problems and the atmosphere' of the era immediately before the Opium War as well, as exhorted by Professor Wright, I have included background information such as the private life as a son, husband, and father, and function of Chinese institutions, the training of an official, the route taken by an official from childhood to officialdom, influences other than his ability that led him to key appointments, the background of early nineteenth-century China — including restiveness of the populace, patronage of scholarship, imperial power and gentry official relations, internal control and foreign relations — all in the context of a biographical study of one scholar-official, Ruan Yuan.

The Qing period has attracted the attention of historians writing in English since the middle of the twentieth century. These studies have comprised political, economic, intellectual, cultural, and social history, including gender issues. The two emperors with long reigns have been represented: Kangxi (seventeenth century) by Jonathan Spence and Silas Wu and Qianlong (eighteenth century) by Harold Hahn, although strictly speaking, these publications are not biographies. There are several biographies of individuals of the mid-Qing era, notably those of Yuan Mei (袁枚 1716–98) by Arthur Waley, Zhang Xuecheng (章學誠 1739–1801) by David S. Nivison, and Chen Hongmou (陳宏謀 1696–1771) by William T. Rowe. The men portrayed were active during the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century China of the Jiaqing and Daoguang years to which Ruan Yuan belonged was different. Kangxi and Yongzhen were consolidating the Qing rule, its territory and institutions, firmly establishing the revenue bases, for instance, while Qianlong was able to enjoy the fruits of their labours. Perhaps he ruled too long and overextended the available resources, his successors had to struggle without a sense of positive accomplishments.

This post-Qianlong era is already under scholarly scrutiny. The study on Ruan Yuan is my attempt to be a part of this effort that seeks to redress the need for a biographical study of a man whose life and work can help to enhance our understanding of China of the nineteenth century before the Opium War.

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3. Paul Vissière, 'Le Biographe de Jou Yuan', *T'oung Pao* II: 5 (1904), pp. 561–96 [in French]; Yang Mi (仰彌), 'Ruan Wenda Shishu' (阮文達事述) [Life and work of Ruan Yuan], *Zhonghe Monthly* (中和月刊) 1:9 (1940), pp. 42–61 [in Chinese]; Fijitsuka Chikashi (藤塚鄰), 'Gen Undai to Richo no Kingendo' ((阮雲臺と李朝の金阮堂), *Sho-en* (書菀) 6:2 (Tokyo 1942), pp. 1–14 [in Japanese]; Fang Chao-ying, 'Biography of Juan Yuan', in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period* (hereafter *ECCP*) (1943–4), pp. 399–402 [in English]; Wolfgang Franke, 'Juan Yuan 1764–1849', *Monumenta Serica* 9 (1944), pp. 53–80 [in German].

Looking at Qing China before the Opium War

Susan Mann Jones and Philip Kuhn wrote in 1978 in the *Cambridge History of China* that the early decades of nineteenth-century China had been heretofore studied backwords from the Opium War (1840–1) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64). Instead, they suggested that the era be viewed:

> more accurately from a perspective that looks ahead, out of the context of developments of the late eighteenth century. From this direction, we are able to see more sharply the limits of our understanding of the number of important problems.'[4]

Henceforth, Jones and Kuhn, and other like-thinking historians as well, began to approach this era in its chronological sequence, as a passage from the High Qing of the Qianlong to the era immediately after the Opium War. Writing in Chinese, Huang Aiping (黃愛平) of the Institute of Qing History, People's University, looked at this period as a transition between the eighteenth century and the post-Opium war years, in a chapter entitled 'The Decline of the Jiaqing and Daoguang Era of the Mid-Qing' for inclusion in a general survey of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.[5]

Eighteenth-Century China

Historians have hailed the eighteenth century as 'the last brilliant epoch of the old Chinese Imperial order'.[6] All indicators seemed to point to the successes of Manchu rule. Political control had been firmly established, with power centred in imperial hands exercised through the Grand Council. Economically, both agriculture and commerce were sound and essentially the countryside was peaceful. Learning, literature, and the arts were flourishing. The Qianlong Emperor himself was the personification of a cultured Confucian gentleman. Material attainments attesting to the glories of the dynasty were his enlargement of the palaces, in the capital and outside the Great Wall. The summer retreat in Jehol (Chengde 承德) was doubled in size, and the old summer palace Yuan Ming Yuan (圓明園) was reconstructed in the style of a European

4. Susan Mann Jones and Philip Kuhn, 'Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion', in *Cambridge History of China* (hereafter *CHOC*) 10:1 (1979), p. 152.

5. Huang Aiping (黃愛平), 'Jia Dao Zhongshuai' (嘉道中衰), in *Yuan Ming Qing Shi* (元明清史), edited by Guo Chengkang (郭成康) and others (2002), pp. 499–532.

6. Harold L. Kahn, 'A Matter of Taste: The Monumental and the Exotic in the Qianlong Reign', in *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor 1735–1795*, edited by Ju-hsi Chou and Claudia Brown (1985), p. 288.

villa. Foreign missionaries continued to serve the court, and, as in the case of Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), worked as architects, astronomers, engravers, musicians, and painters.[7] A multitude of scholars gathered in Beijing to compile the *Emperor's Four Treasuries* (*Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書), which embodied the quintessence of intellectual attainments of Confucian scholarship. Further, his six southern tours made him visible to the populace. His ten military campaigns brought him glory and adoration, and these successes were commemorated on copper plates especially finished in France.[8] Earlier tax reform measures of the Kangxi and Yongzhen reigns had filled the treasuries. If towards the end of the Qianlong reign the storehouses were overburdened, causes other than the emperor's ventures were found to shoulder the blame.

The population grew to 400 million at the end of the century, with widely diversified lifestyles. On the top of the ladder were the salt merchants of Yangzhou. Here Huang Aiping also found the corrupt officials, who were 'scattering gold as if it were dirt' (*huijin rutu* 揮金如土). Like the salt merchants, these officials vied with each other showing off their lifestyle of extreme luxury, expending 'tens of thousands of taels on celebrations and commemorations of birthdays, weddings, funerals, and burials'.[9] When Jiaqing confiscated the properties of Heshen's circle, Fuchan'an (福長安, d. 1799), was found to have owned a villa in Beijing that comprised 474 rooms, with 282 seraglios in the gardens, and more than 6,000 items of luxury in his palace in Chengde.[10] On the lower end, the classic economist Adam Smith found contemporary Chinese society to be a mass of hungry peasants in rags, 'eager to fish up the nastiest garbage, …'.[11] His contemporary, Thomas Malthus, who must have read comparable sources, saw the same people as being 'glad to get any putrid offal that European labourers would rather starve than eat'.[12]

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7. See Cecil and Michele Beaurdeley, *Giuseppe Castiglione: A Jesuit Painter at the Court of the Chinese Emperor*, translated into English by Michael Bullock (1971); Macau Museum of Art exhibition catalogue, *The Golden Exile*, a survey of the Western missionaries' painting school of the Qing dynasty court (2001); and Fu Dongguang (傅東光), 'Western Missionary Painters and Paintings of Palace Buildings', *Review of Culture* No. 1 (2002), pp. 187–90.

8. See Joanna Waley-Cohen, 'Commemorating War in Eighteenth Century China', *Modern Asian Studies* 30: 4 (1996), pp. 869–99; Lang Shining (朗世寧), *Qingdai Yuzhi Tongban Hua* (清代御製銅版畫) (1999).

9. Huang, p. 512.

10. Huang, p. 512.

11. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), cited in R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed* (1977), p. 24.

12. Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on Principle of Population* (1798), cited in R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed* (1977), p. 24.

The historian F. W. Mote, meanwhile, without the Marxist perspective of Mainland observers and less self-righteous than eighteenth-century worldly philosophers who found the Chinese conditions useful to prove the validity of their theories, noted that underlying discontent[13] was already discernable although the general situation was more than satisfactory.

> … the shear mass of Chinese society constitutes a defining element in its history. The impressive achievement of that society is that utilizing the full array of its traditional public and private institutions it was able to feed, clothe, house, and care for so large a body of people throughout so vast a territory. Westerners who become familiar with conditions in China in Qing times often compared China favourably with Europe, remarking that the masses of ordinary people were well ordered, cheerful, and mannerly, mostly well fed and well housed, and with great capacities for energetic pursuit of their personal and family interests. The general well-being of society can be inferred from the increasing participation of people at sub-elite and commoner levels in a growing range of organizational contexts, from commerce to philanthropy to religious and civic organizations.[14]

China in the Context of British Expansion Scheme

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the effects of the industrial revolution were already felt in Europe and beyond. The Age of Mercantilism was about to end. Capitalist and industrial interests were pressuring governments to support their ventures in Asia. Commodore Perry did not succeed in opening Japan to American trade until 1854, but as early as 1756, the East India Company was already demanding that Shanghai be opened as a port for British trade in China.[15] Meanwhile, since 1760, all Western trade had been confined to a single port of Canton on the South China coast, with severe limitations to articles of trade and for movement of the traders. Chinese trade with Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands, on the other hand, belonged to a different category altogether. Their traders, in the guise of tributary missions, enjoyed access to more important cities in the Chinese Empire. Russia, meanwhile, had a bilateral arrangement with the Qing Empire. The Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) had allowed the presence of a Russian Mission in the imperial capital of Beijing.

In 1793, King George III sent Lord Macartney, an extremely prestigious nobleman with impeccable credentials, to the Qing court. Qianlong received the mission graciously at the summer retreat in Chengde, but the Chinese determination not to negotiate any matter remained steadfast, other than allowing the

13. F. W. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (1999), p. 941.
14. Mote, *Imperial China* (1999), p. 941.
15. Betty Wei, *Shanghai: Crucible of Modern Chin*a (1987), pp. 17–8.

mission to present birthday greetings to the emperor in person without demanding the *kowtow*. In the meantime, Europe, including Britain, was embroiled in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. It was not until after the Congress of Vienna (1815) that another emissary, Lord Amherst, journeyed to Beijing to make a further attempt to expand British trade beyond Canton.

After the Monroe Doctrine closed Latin America to European interests (although arguably not the British) in 1823, British efforts in China intensified further. It was during this period the British tried to redress the unfavourable balance of trade by bringing from India opium to China in exchange for silver, which eventually led to armed conflict between the two empires. Ruan Yuan was then in Canton as Governor-General.

Conditions of Early Nineteenth-Century China

The commencement of Ruan Yuan's career in the provinces coincided with the beginning of the Jiaqing rule. The widespread though not universal excesses and corruption throughout the civil and military bureaucracy during the last two decades of the Qianlong reign left the country in a state of economic and political disorientation. As unrest expanded, the government was confronted with the increasingly pressing problems in maintaining security and control throughout the empire.

Weakened Banner organization and Qianlong's military campaigns had necessitated further enlargement of the armed forces, resulting in higher military expenditure, to 12 million taels annually. The cost of the suppression of the White Lotus Rebellion during the first nine years of the Jiaqing reign was 200 million. Revenue, which was estimated to between 43 and 48 million taels when Qianlong ascended the throne in 1736, was still 70 million when he died in 1799, despite vast economic growth during his long reign, indicating that the amount should have been much higher.[16]

Further, there was a serious shortfall in the treasury's deposit of tax receipts. In 1800, when an audit was conducted, the shortfall in the Central Treasury was 9,250,000 taels. Despite efforts at reform, the shortfall increased further to nineteen million taels in 1812. Only four provinces delivered the amount they were supposed to be collecting. The cause for the shortage was recognized as 'pilfering' by officials, who supplied themselves as well as other officials all up and down the line.[17] By 1820, the shortage problem had become 'the obsessive

16. Immanuel Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (1970), p. 169.

17. Jones and Kuhn, p. 128.

preoccupation of the bureaucracy.'[18] It was difficult, albeit impossible, for the Qing treasury to recover. To improve the balance between expenditure and revenue, pressure was exerted to collect more taxes, with the brunt of the burden of payment falling on the peasants, who, at that time, were paying as much as 250 percent of the amount assessed.[19]

The population at the start of the nineteenth century was about 400 million. Despite the introduction of new crops, food production had not increased to such an extent as to eliminate hunger and starvation. During the century the prices of grain rose by about 300 percent.[20] In theory, it meant that the peasants could now better discharge their tax obligations as they were producers of grains, but the hardship of the urban populace increased. In times of natural disaster, emergency relief measures had to be undertaken.

As people moved to the more fertile regions, overcrowding and unemployment resulted. These demographic pressures, together with tax exactions and food shortages, led to anti-government activities, during this period in the form of popular uprisings through organized secret societies with religious and political (anti-Qing) overtones. These rebellions were not yet widely spread, nor were they confined to Chinese subjects who followed a particular heterodox sect, as in the case of the White Lotus or the Eight Trigrams revolts. Minority ethnic groups, such as the Miao tribes in Hunan and Guizhou, were also restive. Local dissidents joined Chinese and foreign pirates in plaguing the coast, as well as coastal and maritime shipping.

Jiaqing made serious efforts to adopt centrally directed programmes to bring the country back on an even keel. His reforms, albeit with varying degrees of success, started with the Grand Council. By ridding Heshen and his corruptive practices, Jiaqing took further measures to streamline the operations of the government machinery. Through a series of edicts, he regularized the appointment and work of the Council clerks, for example, and improved the efficiency of communication by memorials. He did not reduce the power of the Grand Council,[21] but increased their effectiveness by appointing men he and his councillors knew to provincial posts. Jones and Kuhn noted that more of the new officials were Chinese 'who had won degrees and held offices after the Ho-shen era — drawn

18. As cited in Jones and Kuhn, p. 128.

19. Hsü, p. 167.

20. Jones and Kuhn, p. 128; Huang, p. 511.

21. The emperor did not reduce the power or the effectiveness of the Grand Council. Both the council and the councillors 'clearly continued to enjoy their former powers and privileges, stoutly backed by the emperor's confidence in them', Beatrice S. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Minister: The Grand Council in Mid-Ching China 1723–1820* (1991), p. 254.

increasingly from the ranks of the predominantly Han Chinese censorate and the Hanlin Academy'.[22] Ruan Yuan was one of these officials.

Ruan Yuan's official work became a part of the history of the Jiaqing and Daoguang efforts at governing the country. As a Confucian scholar of the era he promoted the gleaning of useful knowledge out of basic understanding of the classics. In particular, because of his assignment in Canton the decade before the controversy over trade, opium and relevant issues turned into a war which changed the course of history irretrievably, his on-the-spot decisions were of important consequence. The fact that he managed to keep his scholarly output at an impressive rate while he focused his time and energy as a civil servant only added to his uniqueness.

As a private person, he was an individual with an aura that came from his official attainments, but, from all accounts, he was not an arrogant man. His concerns for women, mostly due to his enlightened upbringing by his mother, were also remarkable for his time. In this attempt at recapturing his life and time, with less than perfect coverage but nevertheless adding to information heretofore not published, I hope to offer the scholarly world the portrait of a man of significance of pre-Opium War China.

Structure of the Book

The book begins with an introduction, followed by the main body divided into five parts, and closes with a conclusion. There are appendices and bibliographies. In addition, although the Chinese characters are already in the text, there is a glossary as a part of the index for the convenience of readers.

Part One

The part comprises three chapters in chronological order. Chapter 1 gives the background and ambience of historical Yangzhou, especially the eighteenth century, into which Ruan Yuan was born and from which he emerged onto the national scene. His childhood, in the tradition of the time, was spent studying the classics, in preparation for the various levels of the civil service examination. Chapter 2 shows Ruan Yuan as an examination candidate and a Hanlin Bachelor in Beijing, broadening his intellectual horizons and political spheres of influence. It also calls attention to the importance of personal connections as well as being in the right place at the right time for a man to launch and keep a government

22. Jones and Kuhn, p. 118.

career during the era. Integrity and judgement mattered. Chapter 3 offers Ruan Yuan as Director of Studies, first in Shandong and then in Zhejiang, as the first out of the capital assignment for promising young officials. Here, in the provinces with rich heritage, classical scholarship, as well in intellectual endeavour, Ruan Yuan began to develop a lifelong interest in literary creativity and patronage of scholarship.

Part Two

Still keeping to the chronological order, this part consists of five chapters, each focusing on Ruan Yuan's work in a province as CEO. For this part, the extant Qing archives provided a unique source of information some of which is not available in published records.

Ruan Yuan's long tenure in several exposed strategic provinces south of the Yangzi and on the coast, as well as Yunnan and Guizhou bordering Southeast Asia, where responses to immediate and potential problems had to be formulated and tested, it is possible to delineate a significant issue of the day — security and control — for close scrutiny. The problems Ruan Yuan confronted as a provincial official, including coastal piracy (Chapter 4), secret societies (Chapter 5), jurisdiction over foreign nationals and foreign naval presence in Chinese waters (Chapter 6), and border disputes involving tributary states and ethnic minorities in Yunnan and Guizhou (Chapter 7), and even in the area of orphan and indigent care and disaster relief (Chapter 8), are illustrative of those the Qing government of the early nineteenth century had to deal with in establishing its policies on preservation of law and order in the provinces.

The varied lengths of the chapters, unfortunately, depended on the amount of material available to this research.

Part Three

A discourse was started when I was challenged for the use of the term 'leisure' to describe Ruan Yuan's scholarly deeds. Western minds which take for granted serious musicians 'playing' the piano, the cello, or ice hockey as professional endeavours, nevertheless find it difficult not to identify the Chinese use of the term 'leisure' with frivolous activities. So perhaps a few words here are appropriate to explain why I have placed these activities under the category of 'leisure' to distinguish them from his official acts. For scholars who did not hold government positions and who expended time and efforts on scholarship and writing, they would have to take their work seriously, because they were not doing anything

else. For them, then, playing chess or listening to music would be leisurely activities, while writing poetry and practising calligraphy could be considered serious scholarly pursuits.

For Ruan Yuan, 'work' was as a government official, for the exercise of which he received payment. All other pursuits, although involving intellectual efforts, were 'leisure', meaning that these pursuits were outside the realm prescribed by his government job descriptions and were not attended to while he was sitting in his official chair. In this respect, I have the support of the Jiaqing Emperor who had made it extremely clear by using explicit words (in his own hand with a vermilion brush on a memorial)[23] that scholarly activities were 'play' (*wan* 玩) and government responsibilities were serious undertakings.

Since Ruan Yuan's writings and his patronage of scholars were closely linked, I have placed both topics together in Chapter 9. Comments by scholars across the seas, from his time to ours, are presented in this chapter. I also made some observations on the 'Yangzhou School of Learning'.

Part Four

Here the private Ruan Yuan, as a son and man of the Confucian persuasion, is depicted. In Chapter 10 I show how his ancestors and communities benefited from his status, in the Confucian tradition. I also show how his sons received the benefits of a successful father. In Chapter 11, I examine the women in his life: his mother, second wife, concubines, a daughter and a granddaughter. The sources include poems written by his wife, often as correspondence with Ruan Yuan. I have also given a picture of the women in the context of educated gentry women during the mid-Qing.

Part Five

This study continues with Ruan Yuan as a senior statesman. He was recalled to Beijing as Grand Secretary when he was seventy-two, whereby ending a career of almost two score years of government service in the provinces. Until 1838 when he retired to Yangzhou he remained in the capital, enjoying the life of a first-rank

23. *Gongzhong Dang* (hereafter, GZD) JQ019639 (JQ20/8/22 [1815/9/24]). The emperor's words were: 'Ruan Yuan pays no attention to my concerns on capturing the bandits. His memorials are full of excuses. Don't tell me that he is wasting time playing at compiling books and establishing academies.'

senior official. He held the title Grand Secretary, concurrently Senior President of the Board of War, Acting President of the Censorate, Reader of the Palace Examination, and Senior Professor of the Hanlin Academy. He attended to other administrative and ceremonial matters as well, all of which wielded very little power, but they gave him a great deal of pleasure and prestige, nevertheless.

Very little has been written about capital officials, especially senior officials. It is interesting to note that they actually participated in undertakings that can be classified as the personal life of the emperor. For instance, Ruan Yuan was a part of the birthday celebration of the dowager empress, and he deputized for the emperor at sacrifices in the imperial tombs. The senior officials also were invited to Spring Festival festivities in the Forbidden City, including partaking of meat from the sacrificed animals. Ruan Yuan first came to serve the dynasty at the time of his grandfather, Daoguang treated him with respect, as a loyal retainer which he was.

In this chapter, mostly due to chronological orderliness, I discuss the issue whether Ruan Yuan was a supporter, or even instigator, of the legalization of opium trade movement in 1838.

His retirement of eleven years was spent in Yangzhou (Chapter 13), respected by neighbours and sought by younger scholars. The emperor did not forget him, sending at Chinese New Year's meat from the imperial sacrifices, and a boatload of presents for his eightieth birthday. This chapter has been enriched by the discovery of letters (actually memoranda to various members of his household) written during this period.

Despite verbal testaments to Ruan Yuan's integrity, notably from such diverse sources as the Daoguang Emperor and William Jardine, no financial records are extant to show how Ruan Yuan's money was earned and spent. Based on salaries and other sources of revenue, however, an estimate can be made of his income from official sources, at least. The letters, rather, memos, written to members of his family during his retirement, albeit without individual dating, helped clarify the assertion by general agreement that Ruan Yuan was an honest official.

The Appendices

Appendix I comprises charts for Ruan Yuan's ancestors and descendants; Appendix II the organization of the pirate confederations off the coast of Zhejiang, Ruan Yuan's first major challenge as a provincial governor. In Appendix III are the names of individuals whose relationship with Ruan Yuan was as scholars. I have chosen not to provide details of the scholars. Dates and other information are available when a name appears in the text, however. I have, moreover, provided

a list of publications from which the names are extracted. In Appendix IV Ruan Yuan's publications are listed according to modern library classification schemes. I have also explained the titles in English.

The Liu Fenggao Case in 1809, involving alleged examination irregularities, led to the dismissal of Ruan Yuan as Governor of Zhejiang and a temporary breach with the emperor. The documents on this case are extant in the archives. It is such an interesting case and a good illustration for the points I want to make on the importance of integrity on civil service examinations, but there is no appropriate place, hence I put the case in a separate Appendix V.

Ruan Yuan's relationship with the Jiaqing Emperor is examined further. The men were close in age, and shared the tutelage of Zhu Gui. Their interests were similar, and they worked closely on important issues of the day. However, at no time was there any intimacy. No sense of camaraderie could exist between the emperor and an official. As events unfolded, it was clear that the Ruan Yuan had to tread very, very gently. His fate depended on the good disposition of the emperor.

Appendix IV is a brief account of Ruan Yuan as Director-General of Grain Transport.

Sources

Chronological Biographies

There is a plethora of chronological accounts (*liezhuan* 列傳) of Ruan Yuan's life and work, but these sources comprised mostly lists of his scholarly publications with his curriculum vitae. They are valuable, but details are lacking.

Ruan Yuan's official chronological biography compiled by the Historiography Office, at least the copy presented to the Daoguang Emperor before the yellow tapes covering the phrases or sentences he wished censored were placed, is more detailed and an excellent source. It became clear that the emperor had a hand in what information he did not want to leave to posterity. In Ruan Yuan's case, not only was the entire Liu Fenggao affair crossed out, so was each and every time the emperor censured Ruan Yuan for some minor offence.

Ordinarily, local gazetteers are a good source for biographical studies. Here, however, their usefulness was limited, principally because the compilers of the gazettes cited mostly sources emanating from Ruan Yuan.

Ruan Yuan's Own Compilations

Of Ruan Yuan's published works, two titles are essential to this research. *Leitang Anzhu Diziji* (雷塘庵主弟子記) recorded events as they took place; *Yangjing Shiji* (揅經室集) gave in his own words accounts of family, friends and activities of his lifetime. His poems, scattered throughout his publications, and those by his wife and friends, all served to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the man and his time.

Other Documents and Publications

Attached are three bibliographies. Since the archival documents have been a rich node of information, I have put this resource in a separate bibliography. Since the research on Ruan Yuan covered a multitude of topics, I have consulted a large number of published works. The Chinese-language sources have been placed in Bibliography II with a couple of essays in Japanese, and the Western-language sources, principally English, in Bibliography III.

Conversations

A unique source, one that gave me the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, was the conversations I enjoyed with the current generation of Ruan Yuan's descendants and neighbours. The men and women reinforced what I had learned from printed sources, imparting information and flavour, and provided me with a personal link to Ruan Yuan. What turned out to be the most surprising discovery, in the collection of the late Dr Wang Shih-chieh, were letters written by Ruan Yuan as a young examination candidate and Hanlin Bachelor, that provided insight into his life before he embarked on his career in the provinces.

Concluding Comments

Ruan Yuan was an able and extraordinary individual by any yardstick, but his phenomenal successes were also due to his ability to manage within the prevailing system and from being in the right place at the right time. Here, his long life (eighty-six years) and his extended career (thirty-eight years in the provinces, and forty-nine years altogether), serve to show how the institutions which had been firmly established by the High Qing emperors were still in place and in the large part working. Dynastic decline as defined by Jones and Kuhn, therefore, did not begin until after the Opium War. Whereas the officials could still overcome

domestic problems — pirates and secret societies, but the Western incursions were totally outside their experience. So they could not even get to the roots of the problems, not to say finding solutions for them.

This study, therefore, should fit into what the late Professor Arthur F. Wright had exhorted.

Conclusions

This book, which has taken me more than a score of years to complete, has been worthwhile. Ruan Yuan's accomplishments were legion, and some of his work has remained relevant today, two hundred years after his time. At any rate, scholars and students in many areas of endeavour are still benefiting from knowledge enhanced by Ruan Yuan. In addition to philosophy and literature, his research topics embraced bronze inscriptions and stone steles, historical geography, Sino-British relations, minority cultures, construction of seaworthy junks, shrines and temples, dredging of waterways, measurement of grain storage in warehouses and on ships, location of planets, mathematicians, astronomers, and even species of mushrooms and fish. For me, research has been intense and extensive, and writing challenging. I am happy that I made the decision to undertake this biographical study. I am also happy that the task has not become stale despite its long duration.

I have regrets, however. Certain important information is missing, especially financial records. I have managed to estimate Ruan Yuan's earnings from official sources, and these figures are fairly accurate, I believe. I know the origins of some of his income from non-official sources, such as the sale of reeds for fuel, but not the amount. He also operated a 'publishing house', the Wenxuan Lou Printers, but I have no knowledge as to whether it was a profitable concern, or depended on his subsidy. There is no record of expenditure. If indeed any of his accounts is extant at all, I have not been able to find even a single clue of its whereabouts. Therefore, except for the fact that he had accumulated property and maintained a more than comfortable style of living, not withstanding supporting a household of more than one hundred persons, he was never totally free from financial worries.

Otherwise, I have found plenty of information on Ruan Yuan. He kept copies of his official memorials, especially during the earlier years of his government career. We know he had not altered these records, because where both the published and the archival versions are extant, they were identical. Although it has

been satisfying to use the archival documents to check against published sources, it is still disappointing not to have a journal of his day-to-day thoughts and activities. The chronological account of his life and work recorded by his sons and pupils, *Diziji*, contains a wealth of information, but it is no substitute for a diary. Somehow the colour of daily life is missing.[1] Nor is there any writing of his true feelings on certain significant issues. On opium, for instance, the only non-official record available comprised remarks made to Liang Zhangju in a casual conversation.

Portraits

I still do not know anything about Ruan Yuan's physical appearance. There are two often reprinted black and white informal portraits executed during different stages of his life, in middle age (fifty-six *sui*) and in old age (eighty), but they do not tell anything about his height or weight.[2] The portraits do not give the impression of a tall man, although judging by the size of his male descendants I have met, and his North China origin, more likely than not he was at least of medium height. Yet, in one instance, he wrote about himself at thirty. 'I was small in stature and was very, very thin.'[3] From the portraits he appeared to have gained some weight during his middle years, and he did become gaunt in old age, but he

1. This may not be fair, but I feel the lack of a diary especially keenly since I read the Pepys diary in the autumn of 2003 when I visited a special exhibition on Samuel Pepys and his contemporaries at the National Portrait Gallery in London.

2. As I was looking for illustrations in June 2005, Dr Patrick Connor of the Martyn Gregory, a London gallery specializing in China Trade paintings, sent me a coloured portrait of Ruan Yuan, a grand portrait in ceremonial dress of a second rank official, with summer hat and one feather on his collar. As shown by a colophon on the unsigned painting, his traditional Chinese portrait was executed when Ruan Yuan was Governor-General of Guangdong and Guangxi. In English, the subject is identified as 'Yuen, Viceroy of Canton'. As wonderful as this portrait is, its existence presents certain questions. The provenance of this portrait is impeccable. It was brought back to England by James Brabazon Urmston (1781–1849), 'President of the Honourable East India Company's affairs in China' during Ruan Yuan's tenure in Canton. Legend connected to the painting indicates that it was a parting gift from Ruan Yuan, with whom Urmston had an excruciating meeting on the *Topaz Affair* in 1822 (see Chapter 6). 'I had the better of him!' remarked Urmston. He seemed to have ignored the fact that Ruan Yuan had stopped British trade, and as a result, in 1823 the British issued an Order in Council for all naval vessels to stay out of Chinese waters. Questions arose: Qing regulations prohibited officials to meet foreigners except through the *hong* merchants, a stance supported by contemporary English-language accounts. Whether Ruan Yuan and Urmston actually met in person needs further investigation.

3. *YJSJ*, Additional Supplement 3:14a–b. See also Chapter 13.

was never bent. His facial features were regular, with an angular nose and large, drooping eyes. He wore his hair in the requisite Qing fashion, shaved crown with a long braid, and a moustache with a whiskered beard. He did not wear his finger nails long in the affected fashion of the time, but, then, the only visible hand in all the portraits was his right. If he held a writing brush every day as he had claimed, how could he manage with long nails?

Findings

At the start of this work, I offered a quotation from *Confucian Personalities* (1962) by the late Professor Arthur F. Wright, which had inspired this biographical study of Ruan Yuan. Professor Wright had exhorted that 'a single biographical study may bring into focus the critical problems and the atmosphere of an age'.[4] In this study on Ruan Yuan, 'the age' meant the final years of the eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth century before opium became the dominant issue.

Politically, Qing rule had been firmly established by the Jiaqing reign but the dynasty was not trouble-free. The critical problems involved security and control in the provinces. There were periodic uprisings because the public had been resentful on certain issues. Financing projects including military campaigns and defence fortifications, which regular tax revenue could no longer cover, all became a part of Ruan Yuan's experience. Problems like coastal piracy and famine relief were traditional responsibilities of the Chinese state and officialdom. What was new to the era, and for central policy makers as well as provincial officials like Ruan Yuan, were issues caused by actions taken by Western traders, and their governments also, as a part of the effort to expand into East Asia, a not-too-friendly encounter of two empires.

In general, the atmosphere had remained congenial for the gentry and the scholars. The best days for scholars were already past, as imperially sponsored compilations of major collections were over, although privately funded projects continued, they were on a much smaller scale. The breakthrough in abandoning classical study of the Song to Ming era of the eighteenth century had become generally accepted by the early nineteenth, scholarly discourses were not really commonplace. Ruan Yuan, as a high official with desire, funding and opportunities, was very much a part of the intellectual movement and ferment of the era.

What are my findings, then?

4. See Introduction, p. 1, note 1.

Personality

Ruan Yuan's personality was congenial. He was even tempered. Nutured and trained by his mother, he had total control of his emotions. I do not see him ranting and raving when his wishes were thwarted. On the other hand, considering his position, people did not often go against his wishes. He was said to have been awed[5] by Wang Zhong, who was older by almost twenty years, and that was on account of Wang's brash mannerism. Handicapped by a speech problem as a young child, Ruan Yuan probably did not want to see Wang and stutter should he be asked a difficult question. So, instead of confrontation, Ruan Yuan chose to avoid Wang.[6] Otherwise the only person to whom Ruan Yuan was recorded to have an aversion was Cao Zhenyong (曹振鏞 1755–1835).[7] Apparently, this mutual antipathy, based ostensibly on disagreement over metropolitan examination assessment criteria, was generally known, even to the Daoguang Emperor, who did not recall Ruan Yuan to be physically present in the capital until after Cao's death, even though he had been appointed Grand Secretary several years previously.

Ruan Yuan was fortunate in that he lived a long and useful life. There was no compulsory retirement during the mid-Qing. As long as his health lasted, he was able to continue working into his mid-seventies. Even as his health deteriorated, the pain and disability were manageable. He had difficulties in walking, lost some hearing and had trouble with instant recall as well as what appeared to be a cataract, but he managed to enjoy full mental faculty, and read and wrote until the end. Judging by samples of calligraphy executed during his old age, his hand stayed steady until the very end of his life.

Like men, and women too, of his time, Ruan Yuan was superstitious. An example: when he was Director-General of Grain Transport, he reported to the emperor that 'the most responsive temples along the Grand Canal were those of the River God and the Wind God at Guazhou (瓜州). These gods have protected men and boats so well that there has been no mishap in two years. Therefore Your Majesty is requested to favour the temples with a plaque.'[8] He remained

5. The Chinese term is 'afraid of' (*pa* 怕).

6. See biography of Wang Zhong by Ling Tingkan, in *Guochao Qixian Leizheng Chubian* (國朝耆獻類徵初編) [Biographies of notables of the Qing dynasty] edited by Li Xun (李桓 1884) *juan* 420. Ruan Yuan did print Wang's works years later.

7. See *Qingshi Gao* (清史稿), *Dachen zhuan* ((大臣傳) 151:26; also *Qingchao Yeshi Daguan* ((清朝野史大觀), vol. 7, p. 50; *Qingshi* (清史) 6:4516.

8. *Diziji* 4.

superstitious until the end, pasting good-luck sayings all over the house. Perhaps seeing the character for 'happiness' on a strip of red paper as he awoke each morning did make him more joyful.

As a Private Person

Ruan Yuan was a filial son, and a loving husband, judging by the poems he exchanged with his wife — despite the fact that he followed the contemporary custom of keeping concubines. A man of a strong sense of right and wrong, he appeared to have been a stern father with inflexible standards for his sons. None of his four sons attained to any success in his own right. Their offices were secured by their father, two through inheritance and two through purchase. To be fair, his only son by his wife, Ruan Konghou, was in the middle of taking the provincial examination when his father died and he had to leave the examination hall. Only one of the fifteen grandsons whose births were recorded in the *Diziji* passed the provincial level examination and held an office, but, then, the local gazetteer of Yangzhou did not manage to record all the achievements of notable people due to disturbances during the Taiping Rebellion. Perhaps it is harsh to charge a strong parent in stifling his son's growth and development; very few men in history could match Ruan Yuan's achievements. Whether Ruan Yuan's offspring tried to make it on their own, I did not manage to discover.[9] He seemed to have allowed more open affection with the daughters, and the one grand-daughter mentioned in Chapter 11.

Ruan Yuan disliked large gatherings, certainly not with him as the centre of attention. Until his eightieth *sui* birthday, he had not allowed celebrations, always 'escaping his birthday' by going somewhere in retreat to escape well-wishers.

He had remained uncomplicated in what he liked. He found satisfaction in his official and scholarly attainments, but he also rejoiced in the smallest pleasures. His happiest moments were spent with scholarly friends discussing intellectual discoveries, or composing poems, on any topic that struck their fancy. He wrote a poem when he first tasted fresh lichee (荔枝), an exotic fruit he discovered in Canton:

9. I do know, however, that one of the fourth-generation descendants lived and worked in Shanghai. According to a descendant, he was a member of the Green Gang and controlled a gang of rickshaws. Perhaps Ruan Yuan's descendants began to work on the Grand Canal, which was controlled by the Green Gang, providing an example of the downward mobility of the later Qing and early Republican era.

The First Time I Tasted Lichee (1818)

Canton in late spring is warm and clear.
I venture into the orchard to pick the new crop of lichee.
Light green leaves are linking the jade green branches of the trees.
The red fruit look just like bunches of coral.[10]

Another poem acknowledged glass window panes, a Western invention recently adopted in places such as Canton. Chinese windows, where privacy was not an issue, were covered by shutters in the winter, or oiled paper, and in warmer weather a thin layer of fabric. Otherwise they were left open.

Ode to the Glass Window (1818)

The horizon outside the glass windows appear to have no boundary,
I know I am living in the greater world. [11]

He was also impressed by the alarm clock and the telescope, and wrote whimsical poems celebrating these marvels.

As Scholar and Patron of Learning

As a scholar, without any doubt, Ruan Yuan's interests were all embracing. His contributions lay more in putting scholars together, leading to blossoming of ideas and publications, than in original intellectual postulating. We are told over and again how he paid personal attention to all the publications with his name as author, editor, or compiler, from conceptualization to the final proofreading. However, with other scholars handling the actual research and writing, how can anybody be sure how much of the work was Ruan Yuan's? It does not mean that I am denigrating Ruan Yuan's scholarship, or indeed charging him with taking credit due to other people, but there is room for further investigations. Even if I accepted that all the proposals had originated from him unless otherwise indicated, and the major planning of the work as well, questions still remain on his judgement at times. Ruan Yuan viewed the ideas and information from a Confucian perspective, but this does not mean that he was always right. Perhaps I am not being fair but, for a scholar who insisted on evidence, he rejected at least one new idea and information on the basis that it did not fit into the Confucian classics. Almost three centuries after Copernicus (1473–1543) discovered that the earth rotated on its axis once every day and circled the sun

10. *YJSJ* 4:11.
11. *YJSJ* 4:11.

once every year, Ruan Yuan found such a notion, that the earth moved (*dong* 動) while the sun stood still (*jing* 靜), unacceptable because it was against the classical principle of order (*xun* 訓). He criticized Xu Guangqi (徐光啟 1562–1633), the Ming dynasty scholar official among whose achievements was the translation of Euclid's *Geometry* into Chinese, for accepting such Western theories so readily. Therefore, here are signs of Ruan Yuan's less-than-open-mind approach to new knowledge. Yet, he was able to acknowledge attainment of Western sciences and mathematics, especially because he found their information on astronomy and calendrical calculations introduced to China since the time of Matteo Ricci useful.[12]

Meanwhile, within the classical studies, Ruan Yuan was ready to test all points of view and therefore was able to come to a synthesis not only for his own conviction but also to influence the thinking of others. His efforts were of great value to the development of classical studies, a transition from Han Learning of the eighteenth century to Han-Song synthesis of the nineteenth. In addition, by insisting on practical and useful knowledge, and by writing on technological and scientific topics, and through his personal relationship with Gong Zizhen (龔自珍 1792–1841) and Wei Yuan, he could be said to be a precursor to the statecraft writers of the later decades of the century.[13]

As an Official

Ruan Yuan's career expanded more than fifty years. Further, because of his long service in several exposed strategic provinces, where responses to immediate and potential problems had to be formulated and tested, it is possible to delineate a significant issue of the day — security and control — for closer scrutiny. The problems he confronted as a governor or governor-general — including suppression of coastal piracy and secret societies, regardless of their criminal or seditious nature; jurisdiction over foreign nationals; foreign naval presence in Chinese waters and border disputes involving tributary states and ethnic minorities in the Southwest — were illustrative of those the Qing government had to deal with in establishing its policies on preservation of law and order.

Working with the emperor, Ruan Yuan attempted to find solutions to these problems by adopting measures within the framework of existing Chinese

12. *YJSJ*, Additional Supplement 2:1–4.

13. Ruan Yuan was close to Weng. In 1823, Weng had started to write the prologue to Ruan Yuan's *nianpu*. In 1839, Weng went to visit Ruan Yuan in Yangzhou. At that time, so the story went, Ruan Yuan was hard of hearing, but he would recover instantly whenever Weng appeared on the scene.

institutions and traditions, but was pragmatic to introduce modifications and innovations where he found them useful. There were successes. A clear and present danger threatening the empire, the pirates off the Zhejiang and Fujian coasts, traditional antagonists for Chinese officials, were eradicated in 1809 as a result of the diligent and competent conceptualization and administration of the defence measures. Unfortunately, the conditions that caused these problems were not removed. There was no time to alter basic institutions and practices, even if any reform were contemplated seriously as feasible measures.

Although he had succeeded in keeping opium out of the port of Canton, and the British navy away from the Chinese coast since 1823, he failed to check the flow of opium through the island of Lintin. Nor did he envisage the power that British commercial interests were able to marshal, resulting in their government deploying naval and military forces in support of their ventures in China. It was Ruan Yuan who assured the Qing court that, although the British possessed a superior navy, they would be powerless on land. Therefore, in dealing with antagonists whose institutions and methods of operation were wholly outside the Chinese experience, Ruan Yuan's failures were of great consequence. It must be kept in mind at this time, however, that Ruan Yuan was trained in the Confucian tradition, and, even if he had commanded a thorough understanding of the underlying economic, political, and social forces at play in China and internationally at that time, he was bound by the inflexible institutions and bureaucratic encumbrances of the empire. It is difficult to imagine that any such scholar-official of his time could have taken any action substantially different from the course Ruan Yuan did pursue. We do not perceive that kind of response from such officials until after the Opium War, and even then, only hesitant and partial ones.

Did Ruan Yuan Consider Himself More as an Official or a Scholar?

The two roles did not need to be in conflict. However, in his heart, I suspect, Ruan Yuan considered himself a scholar first, although he had to give top priority of his time and energy to official work. When Ruan Yuan was not involved in government or related work, in his own words, his time was expended on scholarly activities.

> I have no time-consuming avocation. Nor am I blessed with a capacity to enjoy wine. Therefore, I tend to spend all my spare time with a brush in my hand, in the company of books and scholars.[14]

14. *Dingxiangting Bitan* (定香亭筆談) 4:1b–2.

So, he put his best efforts at official duties, and they were his job. His heart remained with scholarship. Qing calendar did not schedule weekends, nor were there days-off. If we go by the *Veritable Records*, we do not see anybody, not even the emperor, spending even the first day of Spring Festival 'taking it easy'.

In two instances, Ruan Yuan's government responsibilities interfered with his scholarly compilations. *Jingfu* (經郛), the thesaurus on terms from the *Thirteen Classics*, was never printed because he simply did not find the time to put it all together. The *Thirteen Classics with Commentary Essays* printed in Nanchang in 1817 (when he was shuttling to Changsha, to Wuchang, and to Canton, as the emperor moved him from one post to another), contained many errors because Ruan Yuan did not have time to supervise the final proofreading, or to proofread the text himself.

For Ruan Yuan, there was no choice between official work and scholarship. His achievements in both areas were extraordinary. His successes in scholarship were due to his myriad talents, but his government offices provided opportunities.

Relationship with the Emperors

Ruan Yuan's relationships with the emperors were worth studying as well. His career covered three reigns.

Under Qianlong, he was a graduate student and a very, very junior official whose academic attainments had happened to attract imperial attention. He became a favourite and was able to give Qianlong moments of pleasure, a discourse on a classical topic, or a comment on a painting. A few complimentary words and a couple of silk purses from the emperor were recorded with great excitement for posterity.

Ruan Yuan enjoyed a long and close relationship with Jiaqing. They worked hard in formulating and implementing policies on conducting the affairs of state. There were praises as well as admonitions from the emperor, but never any sense of intimacy. Although Ruan Yuan took his just desserts when he stepped out of line, personally the emperor gave him a great deal of 'face'. This goodwill between them made it possible for Ruan Yuan to handle the significant issues without undue hindrance from other officials.

To Daoguang, Ruan Yuan was a senior official suffering signs of ageing, who had served his father and grandfather, and whose experience he valued. The much younger emperor also respected his integrity. As a rule, Daoguang was considerate and deferential towards Ruan Yuan, and showed his appreciation by offering compliments and rewards whenever appropriate occasions arose.

The Era and the Issue of Dynastic Decline

What about the issue of 'dynastic decline'? Susan Mann Jones and Philip Kuhn wrote:

> Dynastic decline has been understood as an ebbing of centralized power and its accretion in the hands of regional satraps, a disruption of the balanced tension between state and society.[15]

In this sense, what this study has found is that, during the era Ruan Yuan was serving in strategic provinces handling pressing issues, the final arbiter of policies was the emperor. Although bureaucratic wheels ground in a most cumbersome way, when the emperor wished, red tape could be cut short or eliminated altogether when certain conditions were met. The official in the provinces implementing the particular policy would have to enjoy complete confidence of the emperor, and, this official would have to find financing for the programmes from local resource outside the regular tax revenue. Ruan Yuan was able to fulfil all these requirements in the provinces. The difficulties the rulers of this era, Jiaqing from the time of his father's death in 1799 until his own death in 1820, and Daoguang from 1821 through the Opium War, had to handle were not totally of their own making. A number of problems had come as a result of policies and actions of the previous reigns.

Professor F. W. Mote, although admittedly not an ardent admirer of the Qianlong Emperor one hundred percent of the time, gave this comment:

> For the Manchu Qing imperial dynasty and the Chinese Empire, this (the Qianlong) reign can be seen both as the culmination of dynastic greatness and as the forerunner of an era of deep trouble.[16]

What Mote meant, in today's parlance, is that Qianlong was a hard act to follow. He had inherited wealth and power, and had extraordinary ability as well as an incomparable personality, and a long reign, to carry through all the ambitious programmes he had devised. His sons and grandson did not enjoy the same blessings. However, when the emperor and officials were conscientious, and when they were not disturbed by elements outside the Chinese experience, the Chinese system of provincial administration worked satisfactorily.

As the nineteenth century progressed into its fourth decade, it became evident that the Chinese Empire stood in the way of Western ambitions for

15. Jones and Kuhn, *CHOC* 10:1, p. 107.

16. Mote, *Imperial China* (1999), p. 912.

expansion into East Asia and the ensuing problems were more than the Daoguang Emperor could handle. Still even with the formidable challenges from the West, as Professor Bartlett had observed, the Grand Council, the major organ of the central government, continued to function until long after the Opium War.

> After the Opium War (1839–42), the experienced council was in place to deal with the dynasty's final half-century of emergencies, wrought of great rebellions, infant emperors, regencies, and the intensified western intrusions.[17]

So, looking at this era as a transition, not necessarily in the downward direction, I like to close this study with a quotation from F. W. Mote:

> The 18th century, and consequent endeavours continuing through the 19th and into the early 20th centuries, accomplished a vast reworking of classical texts, their commentaries, and related scholarship. That spilled over into critical examination of historical writings and, further, into the editing and annotating of many other kinds of writings, especially the belles letters of all earlier periods. Bibliography and specialized lexicography also flourished. So much of Chinese high culture's written heritage was painstakingly examined and systematically edited for publication that today one studying any phase of pre-modern China usually takes the corpus of Qing period scholarship as the logical starting place.[18]

17. Bartlett, *Monarchs and Ministers* (1991), p. 234.

18. Mote, *Imperial China* (1999), p. 930.

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