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The Absence of Public Libraries in Imperial China: A Consequence of Chinese Writing

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The Absence of Public Libraries in Imperial China: A Consequence of Chinese Writing

ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to explore Chinese writing and its connection with libraries in Imperial China. From the perspective of analyzing Chinese writing and its cultural, social and political impact, this article attempts to deliver a tentative and speculative exploration concerning why public libraries did not automatically emerge from Chinese civilization. This article discusses how Chinese writing, characterized by the art form Calligraphy, was intimately associated with Chinese classical texts, knowledge classification, bibliographers and imperial libraries, and eventually with an elite culture empowered by the socio-political repertoire of scholar-officials. It particularly focuses on the discussion of how “public” is viewed differently in Chinese culture from the West and how Chinese society, including libraries, was transformed by redefining the meaning of “public” at the beginning of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS public library, Chinese writing, calligraphy, Confucianism, scholar official, Chinese knowledge classification

Introduction

During the transitional period from the end of 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the door of China was forced open by Western powers. While the Chinese people suffered from disastrous defeats, a door of freedom, equity, and respect was opened by a young lady, Mary Elizabeth Wood (1861-1931). She was an American librarian and missionary for the Protestant Episcopal Church, who built China's first public library in 1910, offering open stacks and free access to everyone.¹ Libraries in Imperial China (221 BCE-1912 CE)² simply functioned as repositories of historical and classic documents for the purpose of collection and preservation with access limited to royal families or educated ruling classes. It was missionaries from the West and forward-thinking Chinese intellectuals with their minds open to Western modernity who introduced the definition of public libraries into China at the dawn of the 20th century.³ In this article, I attempt to explore the question of why libraries for the public, or public libraries, did not automatically emerge out of Chinese civilization but were brought about from outside. I shall limit my argument to a focus on Chinese writing and its connection with libraries in Imperial China. The reason is twofold. First, I agree that, as one of the greatest inventions in the history of mankind and an instrument that documents human thought and stores information, writing transforms the mind of human beings and leads us into greater civilization.⁴ Nothing can provide better insights into a civilization and society than its writing system. Second, Logan in his book *Alphabet Effect* considers the alphabetic writing system as the root of Western civilization and implies that this system has gone beyond being a tool of transcribing spoken languages. Alphabetization was first employed by Alexandrian Library in creating libraries' catalogs.⁵ Then the thriving of printing business and dedicated involvement by Western scholars brought alphabetization up to a standard procedure in organizing printed materials through "organization, alphabetization, systemization and standardization."⁶ The rise of modern library science in the West is deeply rooted in the tradition of Western scholarly practices, such as determination of authorship, choice of access points, and principles of creating bibliographical descriptions, index and abstract. If the alphabetic writing system is the foundation of Western civilization, and if this system is associated with the advances of library science in the West, theoretically by the same token, the Chinese writing system might be a lens through which to understand Chinese civilization and its various aspects, including libraries. When Goody and

Watt discussed the effect of writing systems in particular social settings, they implied that non-alphabetic writing systems, including Chinese writing, tended to develop a collective consciousness and belief among the literate which was also associated with the formation and maintenance of social order and structure in ancient times.⁷ Given the organization and transmission of its texts, one notes therefore a possible connection between Chinese writing and the literate who contributed so significantly to the socio-political culture of Imperial China.

My argument in this article about Chinese writing and libraries in imperial time is inspired by Logan's insight and further encouraged by Goody's stance. However, I do not intend to adopt a totally technological determinism approach, nor do I exaggerate the function of Chinese writing, nor overlook the complexity and sophistication of Chinese culture and society. My intent is to look at the absence of public libraries in an interrelated historical, social and political context within Chinese culture rather than treat their emerging as a momentary and isolated event simply caused by the side effect of outside forces' interference—the invasion of Western powers. I assume that writing might not only create a significant impact on the mode of thinking of individuals, but also historically enable human beings to achieve different forms of governmental administration, cultural enterprise, and social organization in terms of genre, range and complexity. Libraries are houses of texts; texts are composed of writings and managed by people who know them well. Therefore, in this article, I assume that the idea of public libraries not voluntarily emerging in Imperial China, might have to be understood in the context of a linkage between Chinese writing and imperial Chinese culture, of which the libraries were a significant part. The absence of public libraries in Imperial China might be associated with the impact that Chinese writing manifested in imperial social and political life after the empire came into being. Readers must be aware that my discussion of Chinese writing, libraries and librarians, and the related imperial Chinese sociopolitical issues might tend to be illustrative or even superficial in the view of historians and sinologists, and my argument runs the risk of generating an idealized speculation. Readers should judge for themselves whether insights from this exploratory essay are worth considering. With all the assumptions and risks put forward, I shall begin my article with the exploration of the unique phenomenon by which Chinese writing developed into a cultural, social and political trinity: an art form that speaks to the depths of Chinese people's emotions as a vehicle for a specific artistic expression, as an information carrier that conveys

Chinese philosophy and pedagogy, and as a political consideration preferred by imperial rulers intent upon strengthening their hegemonies.

Chinese Writing and Confucian Scholar-Officials

Chinese writing is one of the oldest writing systems but the only ancient one still in use today. After a significant period of evolution and variation, Chinese writing script accelerated into the regularized and normalized Standard Script (Figure 1) during the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), which is the foundation of Chinese writing and has been used for more than 2000 years since then. As the materials for writing evolved from bones and bronzes to paper and when the script changed from one style to another, the nature of Chinese writing as craftsmanship remained as the central axis, despite material diversities and script variations. Once the brush was lifted and the first stroke was generated, artistic endeavors were perceived in the brush trace, and aesthetic judgments from viewers were aroused. As the young students in Imperial China picked up the brush and engineered the first character, they had already embarked on a journey of becoming calligraphers.

Enabling the soft animal hair infused with forces on paper ranging from elegance to substance required assiduous practice and restless scholarly study of prominent and canonical inscriptions left by distinguished calligraphers. They were renowned in Chinese history not only through their brilliant calligraphic craftsmanship that brought revolution to the development of Chinese writing, but also as Confucian scholars with a display of admirable knowledge of Chinese classic texts, noble characters, and *Wen hua*. *Wen* in general means “words, writing, or text.” *Hua* basically means “change, transfer, or absorb.” Therefore, *Wen hua* literarily means “transformation through writing”. Yen defines *Wen hua* as a slow “civilizing process”⁸ that can only be acquired through the access to two passages: “one is the extensive collection of writing in forms of literature, history and ritual texts. The other is written characters per se.”⁹ The engagement in literary activities and command of Chinese writing enabled an individual to display an aura of cultural competence and confidence. *Wen ren* means people who possess the characteristics of *Wen hua*. In Imperial China, *Wen ren* especially depicted a Confucian intellectual elite, usually writers, poets, and artists. They wrote beautiful Chinese characters and were also politically active as civil servants in the imperial court.

Writing good Chinese characters began with imitating the past masters' canonical work, making one's own handwriting resemble exactly the techniques of masters or as much as one could. Practitioners had to acquire calligraphic composition and body techniques from a master's work. The goal was to build a personal and intimate relationship with the masters by studying their works and life stories, thereby becoming more attuned to acquire their virtues, cultures, and philosophies. This process was "a somatic and spiritual or moral transformation that brings one close to past masters, who are often paragons of moral virtue."¹⁰ Apart from being an apprentice to past masters, the educated Chinese scholarly elite developed an informal tradition known as Elegant Gathering. They took advantage of the events of "a birthday, a marriage, a funeral, a farewell, a celebration and a reunion,"¹¹ and assembled in an enclosed community, sharing techniques and knowledge and nurturing collective values and beliefs. The regular interactions among calligraphy intellectuals nourished their commonly shared cultural tastes and political interests, thereby developing and reinforcing a group identity that promoted social solidarity and a collective engagement which distinguished themselves from outsiders.

While bringing the past into the present and making the present come together for a common purpose, Chinese calligraphy became a social institution that strengthened the interpersonal relationships and reinforced cohesiveness among the educated elite in Imperial China.¹² During and after the Tang dynasty (618-907), mastery of the calligraphic style—Standard Script was enforced in the imperial civil service examinations as one of the compulsory requirements that every test taker should meet. This social institution was gradually transformed into a bureaucratic vehicle for assisting intellectuals to achieve social honor and political mobility. Compared with other calligraphic styles that either required complicated compositions or involved constant linkages and abbreviations, Standard Script was characterized by carefulness, correctness, and distinctiveness. More importantly, Standard Script stressed the designated position and conventional sequence that each stroke should follow, which perfectly embodied Confucian fundamental principles: social obligation and order. As a result it became the required script for writing examination papers.

The core of Confucianism addresses the hierarchical values of heavenly kingdom, social order, ethics and knowledge. The application of these values requires that an individual acknowledge his own position in the social hierarchies and fulfill the corresponding obligations through

executing the five Confucian virtues: Humaneness, Righteousness, Rite, Knowledge, and Integrity. In the perception of Confucian principles and calligraphy, which was defined as “Confucian graphology,”¹³ one’s handwriting was the extension of one’s body and mind, manifesting one’s character through “the characters.” With a demand for spatial configuration and sequence, Standard Script required that individuals know how to position and move their body properly so that beautiful Chinese characters with distinct and separate strokes would be generated in the right and exact position. This was not only achieved “by lifting the brush at the end of each stroke and placing it carefully at the beginning of the next,”¹⁴ but also by the qualities that a Confucian gentleman should possess: patience, self-control and discipline, concrete understanding of principles and rationale, respect for the singleness and uniformity of heaven, and loyalty to the court. Standard Script advocated hidden-tip technique, which enabled the brush tip to stay in the central path of the stroke. Considered as an emblem of “depth, roundedness, fullness, composure, control and power,”¹⁵ hidden-tip echoes Confucius’ major philosophy The Doctrine of the Mean, an approach of being that avoids extremes and excessiveness and maintains harmony with oneself, others, society, and the universe.

As Yen summarizes, “the acquisition of desirable calligraphic techniques is simultaneously the acquisition of a set of related social values.”¹⁶ When calligraphy was integrated with the imperial civil service examinations, the physical brush was transformed into a political instrument that displayed ideological functions and moral values that the ruling class designed and expected. This examination system was constructed for the “political, social and cultural reproduction”¹⁷ of well-trained, loyal, and intelligent Confucian scholar-officials who were capable of crafting Chinese characters and the state simultaneously through wielding a brush and reciting Confucius classical texts. Among those culturally, socially and politically cohesive scholar officials, there was a special group of intellectuals who devoted themselves to constructing Chinese bibliographical work and designing Chinese knowledge classification. In Imperial China, it was a tradition that people who played the role of librarians were also “historians”¹⁸ and “men of great learning.”¹⁹

Confucian Scholar-Officials and Chinese Knowledge Classification

After Confucianism was officially recognized and integrated into the national ideology in the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), contributing to the unification of the empire, the responsibility of constructing national bibliographical work was almost exclusively undertaken by Confucian scholars. Because of their extraordinary learning and knowledge, these distinguished scholars, philosophers, and historians developed a holistic and cosmologic view of human thought and experience based on Confucian doctrine. Devotion to compiling and organizing the intellectual outputs of Chinese sages and literati became the natural extension of their minds. Some of them were granted the title “The Official Historians” in charge of the imperial libraries. They became responsible for keeping a record of government events and the emperor’s speeches and activities. But they also made significant contributions by creating and modifying the Chinese knowledge classification schemes for the purpose of organizing imperial collections and constructing national bibliographies, and ensuring their sophistication as well as authenticity. The Chinese official bibliographic classifications and descriptions were mostly documented and preserved in Chinese official historical books of each individual dynasty. These books were known as Standard Histories.

The origin of Chinese knowledge classification can be traced back to the books that Confucius (551-479 BCE) collected. They were compiled into six categories, namely The Book of Changes, The Book of Documents, The Book of Poetry, The Book of Rites, The Book of Music, and The Spring and Autumn Annals, which approximately corresponded to the modern knowledge domain of Philosophy, Government, Literature, Sociology, Art, and History respectively.

In the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) when Confucianism won over other schools of philosophies and was canonized into the national ideology, Confucius’ six books became the main component of a separate category as Classics in China’s first bibliographic classification system, known as Seven Epitomes. Seven Epitomes was designed by a great Confucian scholar-official *Liu Xin* (50 BCE-23 CE) to organize the books housed in the imperial library of the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE). In addition to a General Summary, Seven Epitomes includes the following categories: Classics, Philosophy, Poetry, Military Science, Occultism and Divination, and Medicine. Three more books, namely *Analects of Confucius*, *The Book of Filial Piety*, and *Classical Philology*, were added to the six original books that made up the Confucius Classics.

Confucius Classics were respected as the core curriculum in the Imperial Academy, from which academically accomplished graduates would be selected and appointed to government posts in the imperial court. In Imperial China, those who wanted to become a government official had to be superbly familiar with Confucius Classics. Otherwise, working in a government post would become almost impossible. The bibliographers themselves, as great Confucian scholars, responded to the call of political needs and purposefully gave Confucius Classics the prominent position in the whole classification system that governed the rest of the knowledge disciplines. This became especially conspicuous when the official Chinese knowledge classification evolved into the next significant stage: Four Divisions Classification, namely Classics, History, Philosophy, and Collections of Literary Works.

In Four Divisions Classification, the significant change was that History was separated from the rest of Chinese knowledge and became an independent category. Imperial China produced enormous historical records, especially historiographical treaties and gazetteers of provinces, districts and local townships. As one scholar had pointed out, “No other country in the world has anything to compare with this branch of Chinese literature, either in extent or historical value.”²⁰ History was positioned beneath Classics but above the other two: Philosophy and Collections of Literary Works. Confucius Classics still occupied the principal position in the classification system. Confucius classic texts “were regarded as rich repositories of those highly practical truths which the Chinese believed they perceived in history, study of them was a moral as well as an intellectual imperative.”²¹ Therefore, it became a convention in Imperial China that each dynasty on its founding invested huge resources to write the book of history of its predecessor to justify and legitimize its own “Mandate of Heaven”. This could be the reason why History was placed underneath Classics but above the rest of Chinese knowledge domains. That History was subordinated by Confucius Classics with the moral value given by Confucian scholar-officials was a significant phenomenon of Chinese culture.

From Seven Epitomes to Four Divisions Classification is not simply a reduction of numbers or a rearrangement of the sequence within Chinese knowledge categories by imperial bibliographers. In Imperial China, as Jiang implied, the most important thing in classifying Chinese knowledge is not only to organize what libraries collected, but also to ascertain the purpose for which the knowledge should be classified and arranged.²² The imperial rulers took

advantage of Confucian theory to legitimize and mystify the rationale of their authority and power: the Mandate of Heaven; Confucian scholar-officials used the power of imperial rulers to make Confucianism the orthodox philosophy of the empire. The imperial rulers and scholar-officials created a strong and solid alliance with each other despite successive changes of dynasties. Therefore, rather than developing an approach to organize Chinese knowledge, bibliographers in Imperial China subconsciously assisted the ruling class in infusing their cultural perceptions and values into learners through education of classical texts and into the general public through governance.

As Jiang articulates, “The development of the Chinese classification system corresponded to the changing social, political, intellectual, and cultural aspects of Chinese society.”²³ When Confucius Classics were made an independent class superior to all other subjects of knowledge, neither Seven Epitomes nor Four Divisions Classification could be considered as a classification scheme in the sense of modern library science. The materials within classes and subclasses were not arranged by their subject matters but by “their functions in the context of Chinese culture and society.”²⁴ Classification was oriented toward and advanced by cultural and political objectives in order to deliver Confucian concepts and shape the direction of Chinese history and civilization; therefore, its scientific value for organizing information became significantly compromised. Confucius Classics, the Chinese theological texts without a focus on the belief in God, were considered an effective instrument for providing Chinese scholar-officials with a fundamental attitude toward life in the pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection. These individuals were pillars of the imperial court, not to mention administrators of imperial government, academic and also private libraries.

Libraries in Imperial China

In Imperial China, generally speaking, there existed four kinds of libraries: government, academic, private, and monastery libraries. Monastery libraries collected textual materials mainly related to religious beliefs, as well as documents on history, astronomy, medicine, and literature. In the history of China, it is true that certain religions were favored by the emperors in particular periods, and monastery libraries became prosperous during those times. But, comparatively speaking, monastery libraries were relatively detached from Chinese political and social systems. It was the same with book outlets, such as book peddlers, lending libraries,

bookstalls and bookstores, which gradually emerged with the flourishing of commercial publishing business in southern China during the Ming-Qing dynasty (1368-1912). They were most likely the outcomes of profit based family or individual endeavors.²⁵ Therefore, the following discussion will only focus on government, academic and private libraries.

In general, government libraries were operated under restrictive rules in terms of reading and borrowing books. They were accessible only by scholars, scholar-officials and aspiring students in local government schools. The most restrictive government libraries were intended to be imperial libraries in the capital cities holding the wealth of Chinese knowledge and the treasures of Chinese culture which the imperial rulers aspired to collect and deposit. The emperor of each dynasty placed a great effort on collecting books, even borrowing books from private collectors to make a copy for governmental deposit. Imperial libraries primarily functioned as a reference center providing access to royal families, high ranking officials and distinguished scholars. In a few exceptional instances, access was open to those Confucian students when the emperors attempted to display their enormous imperial collections and demonstrate their kindness and encouragement to those students. Under such circumstance, a complete set of systematically collected Chinese knowledge was what the imperial rulers sought to achieve in imperial libraries. When the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) launched the movement to recover ancient works that survived the Qin book burning, royal historiographer *Liu Xin* cataloged more than 13,000 volumes.²⁶ The enormous encyclopedia *Yong le da dian* compiled by 2,169 scholars in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE), ended up with a total number of 11,000 volumes, 917,480 pages, and 366,000,000 words, which easily made the famous *Encyclopedia Britannica* “shrink to a rill.”²⁷ To ensure that every copy in the imperial collection was genuine and maintained authority, prestigious scholar-officials were appointed by the emperors to select, verify, and authenticate different versions and editions of the same work, especially in the category of Confucius Classics and History. Therefore, undisputed and orthodox Chinese knowledge could be preserved and referenced by royal families, government officials and scholars who would make suggestions regarding court and national affairs in support of the emperor’s governing.

Serving as an outstanding reference center with an enormous collection, imperial libraries extended their significant functions into Chinese political and social life for the purpose of educating and reproducing scholar-officials. From the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE),

Confucius Classics was gradually integrated into the educational system. The seventh emperor of the Han dynasty *Han wu di* (157-87 BCE) established the Imperial Academy in the capital city *Chang'an* as the official institute to educate young scholars through teaching Confucius Classics. Initially, there were approximately 50 students receiving education in the Imperial Academy; the number reached 30,000 during the period of *Han shun di* (125-144).²⁸ In the Tang dynasty (618-907), the Imperial Academy was renamed as *Guo zi jian*. It not only recruited domestic students, but also accepted international students from the neighboring states, such as Goryeo and Silla.²⁹ These students in the Imperial Academy were the major users of the national libraries and the incomparable richness of Confucius Classics. The comprehensiveness of the imperial collection gave them a privilege that other students did not have. Those who passed the civil service examination would earn the certificate to enter the officialdom of the empire. For those who did not, being educated with Confucius Classics in the Imperial Academy and becoming classically literate were already regarded as emblems of distinguished academic achievement and social honor.

The education of Confucius Classics not only occurred in government libraries, but also in libraries which were an essential component of The Academies of Classical Learning. Libraries within the Academies of Classical Learning could be regarded as the early form of academic libraries in China. The Academies of Classical Learning were private educational institutes established and operated by prominent Confucian scholars. Some were sponsored by government or wealthy families. The Academies of Classical Learning started during the Tang dynasty (618-907) and reached their peak in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) with 1239 institutes.³⁰ In the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), the Academies of Classical Learning were gradually brought under government control and became part of the official educational system.

The Academies of Classical Learning were mostly located in cities, towns, or villages of individual provinces and they usually built their own libraries to serve the needs of local educators, students, and guest lecturers in support of their academic and research endeavors. Books in these academic libraries were collected and purchased by educators, or donated by the emperors, government officials, rich gentry families, and private book collectors. When the printing business began to thrive in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), some Academies of Classical Learning started to establish printing houses and print books for students. Since the imperial

Chinese government advocated the importance of civil service examinations in the education system, to a large extent, the Academies of Classical Learning inclined to meet this expectation and became a preparatory institute for the examinations.³¹ These academic libraries had collections focusing on Confucius Classics and their commentaries, as well as local historical and textual materials, providing the high-quality educational resources needed by students for attainment of intellectual growth and achievement on the imperial civil service examinations. Only those academies managed by independent scholars who insisted on the exploration of intellectual freedom through lecturing philosophies or teaching traditional Chinese literature tended not to follow this trend. Therefore, academic libraries were also part of imperial political and social assemblies, undertaking the similar function that national libraries had in educating and reproducing Confucian scholar-officials.

During the Song and Yuan dynasty (960-1368), the paper manufacturing profession reached maturity. In the mid-Ming dynasty (1436-1566), innovations in block printing replaced advanced movable type printing and reduced the cost of book publishing.³² The profitable printing business stimulated the growth of private book collecting. In the beginning, it was the well-known scholars or scholar-officials who tended to collect books and build private libraries appropriate to their social and economic status. Later an increasing number of successful merchants in the commercialized and urbanized Lower Yangzi Delta area and the east coastal area gradually became involved in the private book printing business and in book collecting. The renowned private library *Ji gu ge* owned by *Mao Jin* (1599-1659), who was a successful publisher and bibliographer, had a collection of 84,000 volumes with the best quality classics, history, and Chinese literature. *Tian yi ge*, well-preserved and still standing today, had a holding that exceeded 70,000 volumes in its prime.³³ To reduce the possible loss of materials and minimize the activities that could potentially bring damage to the collection, access to private libraries was limited to certain groups of users, such as family members, kinship ties, close friends, and distinguished scholars. On special occasions, access was given to the poor, young and industrious intellectuals who were recommended by well-established scholars to help them prepare for civil services examinations. They also shared their resources with selected students and scholars, playing a significant role in assisting their research, study, and intellectual growth. In general, however, private libraries focused on book collecting and preservation, functioning primarily as cultural repositories and granting access to their collections based on “personalities

and personal ties.”³⁴ Some private libraries strictly and ridiculously followed the rules announced by ancestral builders without allowing any exception. For example, the rules of *Tian yi ge* stated that “the library’s door could only be unlocked when all branches of the family members were present,” and “family members would not be allowed to attend the ancestor worship ceremonies for a year if they brought an outsider to the library.”³⁵

Chen researches the historical development of libraries in Imperial China, and the function of Chinese libraries before 1905 is briefly summarized as “Libraries for book storage.”³⁶ It is true that Chinese libraries in imperial time emphasized collecting books and preserving Chinese knowledge. However, viewing Chinese libraries in the imperial period only as centers for archiving or depositing textual materials underestimates or overlooked their political and social functions. Either from the perspective of collection development or users’ groups, the function of libraries was augmented by the imperial ideology embedded in the civil service examinations, which emphasized the importance of test-takers’ understanding of Confucius Classics and the capability of executing Confucian graphology. Consequently, government, academic and private libraries were woven into the imperial political system to help create an educated elite class (Confucian scholars and scholar-officials) and to establish support for the emperors’ ideological control, as well as the court’s bureaucratic operation through collection management and services.

To fulfill the political purpose, libraries restricted their services to a limited number of users, and a library with free and open access to the general public did not emerge out of its own soil in late Imperial China. While Chinese people’s mindset was framed within the imperial ideology that served the benefit of the elite ruling class, it seemed that the West, in contrast, had been well-prepared for the implementation of a philosophy that stressed personal freedom and a new social system that gave the general public equal participation in both local and state affairs.

When Europe experienced the Dark Ages (500-1100), characterized by with intellectual decline and economic regression, China was in its “greatest age”³⁷—the Song dynasty (960-1279). The economic prosperity, intellectual creativity and dynamic urban life of the Song dynasty (960-1279) placed China at the forefront of the world in “technological invention, material production, political philosophy, government, and elite culture.”³⁸ The interregional Grand Canal crossing half of China gave a great impetus to the mobility of materials through convenient


transportation; and the popular usage of inexpensive paper and convenient printing techniques made the cost of books “less prohibitive.”³⁹ Based on a reasonable guess, “the literate population during the Song dynasty (960-1279) must have surpassed that of any previous age.”⁴⁰ During the Yuan-Ming-Qing dynasties (1271-1912), the trend of Chinese literary genres went through a profound transformation from *Fu*, *Shi* and *Ci* that put much emphasis on creating parallel prose or filling in predetermined structure by using classical Chinese language, to drama *Xi qu*, and to the novel as a genre *Xiao shuo*, all of which were written in the colloquial speech of ordinary people.

Responding to the growth and development of these literary genres, the thriving commercial printing houses did not limit their business to the reproduction of Confucius Classics and commentaries; they expanded their subject matters to include emerging literary forms which catered to the taste of local unscholarly readers. Lending libraries increased and provided materials of popular culture, such as “reading primers, moralistic stories, fictional tales, historical romances in simple verse and prose.”⁴¹ The development of new literary genres also gradually changed the emphasis of Chinese writing from the interests of the elite class to those of common civilians. Meanwhile, China’s economic center shifted from the northern plains to the southern and coastal areas. Developing industries, especially in textile and porcelain making, employed skilled labors in specific technical categories. The rapid population growth guaranteed the supply of laborers; the prosperous and vigorous city life and accumulated household wealth ensured the strength of the domestic market; ocean fleets carried out international trade and cultural exchange; and eventually a market economy sprouted in the coastal commercialized area.

The experience in the West showed that commerce usually prompted growth in “science, technology, industry, transport, communications, social change and the like.”⁴² The phenomenon in the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) seemed to suggest that China was slowly moving towards the dawn of industrial development. In the prosperous southern coastal area and Lower Yangzi Delta area, China seemed to reflect technological and social conditions similar to those in Europe and America: a thriving printing business and a significant increase in literacy, which were inextricably tied to the birth of public libraries. It is natural to assume that under these circumstances China could have developed a kind of social institution functionally equivalent to public libraries. Then too, with the exercise of caution and recognition of cultural differences, it

is also fairly logical to ask why China did not. If the West and China had not clashed at the end of the 19th century, and if the modern idea of equity, democracy and participation had not been introduced into China by Western missionaries and forward-thinking Chinese intellectuals, would late Imperial China have embarked on its journey toward modernization, or would it be still living with its door tightly shut and indulging itself in imperial glory and the fantasy that its heavenly kingdom was the most prosperous and **the best** enlightened country in the world?

Definition of “Public” in Imperial China

The closest counterpart of “public” in the Chinese language is 公 *Gong*. In Oracle Bone Script, *Gong* is written as . Li suggests that the lower part 厶 might depict the temple of the palace where the grand ceremony was held⁴³ and the upper part 八 might be “a pictographic representation of a protective screen.”⁴⁴ It might also be possible that the whole graph resembles the mouth of a vessel engulfed by the shape of open arms, conjoining a sense of protection, guidance or possession of an object. Vessels were commonly used by the elite class for storage, cooking and ritual offering to their ancestors in the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BCE). The most important ritual bronze vessel *Ding* was characterized by massive volume, sophisticated design, intricate reliefs and patterns, and rich inscriptions. As Chang suggested, “possession of bronzes of this kind was a forceful symbol of power.”⁴⁵ During the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE), *Gong* became a noble title frequently positioned at the end of the names of the kings, dukes, and high officials to indicate their legitimate possession of political authority and social status. Even nowadays, it is fairly common in Chinese culture that *Gong* is used as a suffix after the family name of an elder or a prominent social and political figure to express a caller’s courtesy and respect. Therefore, in its origin, it seems that the logographic *Gong* was taken as an appellation of sovereignty, aristocracy, and seniority, intimately associated with status and power of the elite ruling classes.

In Imperial China, *Gong* developed a bewildering range of meanings operating at the linguistic, political, social, and philosophical level. Chen traces the history of *Gong* and concludes that *Gong* is an emblem of political domain that exercised strong influence on Chinese culture and also shaped Chinese people’s mindset for thousands of years.⁴⁶ The remark of Confucian scholar *Zhen Xuan* (127-200), “*Gong, you guan ye*,” translated as “*Gong* is just like

government or administration,” can be treated as the best historical connotation to justify Chen’s conclusion. Under such circumstance, *Gong* implied a congenital absence of “the citizens.” It rejected the interest and participation of the essential elements of the empire--“the people,” but proclaimed the authority and superiority of government territories and administrative affairs and strongly advocated administrative manipulation and control. Imperial China has had a centralized bureaucratic system since 221 BCE when the first unification was completed. The emperors of each dynasty considered themselves as the Sons of Heaven and acted accordingly. Emperors managed the whole state through appointing and removing provincial administrators based on the evaluation of their merit on the positions. But even though Imperial China created the longest and most successful autocracy in the world, the monarchy and ruling class had a very thin connection with its people.⁴⁷ As Quigley stresses, “The remoteness of the central government led to complete indifference, on the part of the mass citizens, to its actions.”⁴⁸

The English word “public” originated from Latin “poplicus” or “populus”, which in general means “the people.” The concept of public has suggested a mass population of individuals in its original meaning. In the nineteenth century, the European social landscape experienced a significant change due to commercialization and industrialization, which led to the revolution of democracy and its growth. A movement later defined as the public sphere, implying interaction between the individual and government authorities, emerged during the Renaissance and began to take shape with the growth of capitalism. On its surface, communication of social and political values and interest was shared by a learned community in coffee houses and salons, theaters, and literary societies.⁴⁹ In essence, public authority and public budgets gradually separated from the control of European aristocracy and rulers and became part of the bourgeois bureaucratic system for purpose of developing and maintaining projects devoted to the welfare of a broader population. European royal libraries were nationalized as public assets, and social institutions such as mass media and public libraries, supported as they were by private contributions or public taxation, emerged in the nineteenth century. The Guildhall Library of London, built in fifteenth century England, was the first library offering free access to the general public.⁵⁰ The Public Libraries Act of 1850 in the United Kingdom authorized the local government to build free public libraries with the support of taxation. A variety of libraries that emerged at this period of time in Europe provided their holdings with open access to a broader group of users, including women.⁵¹ In the United States, the first public library as a local or municipal institution was built

in 1833 in Peterborough, New Hampshire,⁵² and the number of free public libraries across the whole country reached 484 before 1876.⁵³

It was during this period that the forward-thinking Chinese intellectuals, officials, and revolutionaries visited, studied, or worked in Western countries. With their mindsets opened to a fresh and vigorous social system and philosophy, they began to raise great concern about the future of China. After witnessing the triumph of democracy and freedom and the advance of modern knowledge and technology in Western countries, they were stimulated to reevaluate the meaning of “public” in China’s cultural, social and political system. They introduced the technology of modern mass media learned from the West and Japan, through which they encouraged statewide discussion of the vocabulary “*Gong*” with particular emphasis on the inclusion of “citizens” or “the people” in the Chinese definition of *Gong*. *Gong* was first nationally publicized by the Reformers who called for collective political participation in national affairs and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Based on his own perception of Western democracy, *Kang Youwei* (1858-1927) in his book *Da tong shu* redefined the Confucius idealistic social concept *Ta tong she hui*, and argued that maintaining a great, unified, and worldly society should not be limited by the boundaries of politics, class, and race. Although utopian, he incorporated modern democratic principles and practices as part of his delineation argument recognizing the importance of a national infrastructure for public welfare: schools, hospitals, and nurseries. To conduct national mobilization and provide direction to the revolution that aimed to overthrow the tyranny of the Qing government, the founding father of The Republic of China, *Sun Yat-sen* (1866-1925), took over the public discourse and encapsulated *Gong* in his political speech as Three Principles of the People *San ming zhu yi*, namely Nationalism, Democracy, and People’s Livelihood. His speech specified the abstract and idealistic Confucian concept of *Tian xia wei gong*.⁵⁴ However, what was advocated in his speech could only be achieved and concretized in a modern government that put great emphasis on the development and enhancement of public interest and welfare. In summary, negotiating and redefining the meaning of the Chinese character *Gong* from late 19th century to the early 20th century in a transnational context was a political battle that Chinese people launched to incorporate public participation in the operation of imperial government and eventually to terminate imperial authoritarianism.

Seeking and redefining the meaning of *Gong* also led China to experience a great social transformation in its quest for the achievement of a civil society. The New Learning Movement liberated young Chinese students' minds from "the mummified thinking of the old Confucian family system and patriarchal tyranny"⁵⁵ and exposed them to modern science and technology. The New Culture Movement promoted Mr. D (Democracy) and Mr. S (Science), as they were called by Chinese intellectuals, and substituted classic Chinese with vernacular Chinese as a vehicle "for scholarship and all purposes of communication."⁵⁶ This paved the way for the Mass Education Movements and Rural Reconstruction in the 1920s with the purpose of eradicating illiteracy and poverty in the countryside. The New Park Movement transformed imperial temples and gardens for the general public. Formerly these temples had been reserved for royal families and elite ruling classes to use, or for ritual activities or royal entertainments. The transformed parks offered urban residents not only a public area for recreational and intellectual activities, but also an arena for social rallies, protests and campaigns that "heightened city people's demand for a political voice in national policy making and demonstrated their strong commitment to the idea of democracy in a sovereign republic."⁵⁷ The New Library Movement complemented Mary Elizabeth Wood's course of building public libraries in China and aimed to "critique the feudal library traditions, promote American librarianship throughout China, introduce American library science and technology into China, and raise the social standing of the Chinese librarian."⁵⁸ Due to its inadequacy with the development of modern knowledge, Four Division, the imperial Chinese knowledge classification used for thousands of years, was replaced by the Dewey Decimal Classification and later the Library of Congress Classification. Public, academic and special libraries were administered by librarians educated in America according to the standards of modern library science. And by the middle of the 1920s, the number of public libraries in China had soared to 259.⁵⁹

During this transformational period, Chinese writing and its relationship with classical texts and Confucianism were criticized as the source of backwardness of late Imperial China. The modus operandi offered by anxious Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries was to cut off ties with the past and eradicate tradition. Chinese writing was severely attacked and blamed by desperate and frustrated Chinese intellectuals, reformers, and communists. Some radical ones even attempted to abolish Chinese writing and replace it with alphabetical writing system. However, they did not succeed in doing so. That Chinese writing in its course of history strongly

confirms and articulates the Chinese people's cultural, social, and political identity, weaving together different individuals with a variety of dialects, geographies, and beliefs into a shared understanding of who they are and where they come, could be one of the reasons why those attempts failed.

Chinese Writing, Library, and Identity

To sum up, in addition to keeping the state records, Chinese writing in the imperial period had a strong connection to power and authority in the context of building a bureaucratic hierarchy. It served as a theological expression or a ritual practice towards ancestors or heaven in the Shang and Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE). But it was in essence a political proclamation underpinning hegemony in the Qin Empire, and reinforcing a remarkable scribal privilege possessed by a small and aristocratic group of Confucian scholar-officials who wielded the brushes and exercised political power from the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) onwards. When Chinese writing was viewed as an artistic, social and political representation that was characterized by beauty, privilege and authority, it demonstrated an inherent and intrinsic power that distinguished itself from other Western alphabetic writings. The power of writing lay not only in the expression and actualization of a writer's creativity and imagination, but also "the power of magic over illiterate, the power of ideological control over the Chinese state, and the power of cultural tradition over the individual."⁶⁰

As Chan noted, "In most of the world, political, social and economic forces have often influenced library sciences; in turn, libraries have reflected the political tenor and sociological fabric of societies in which they exist."⁶¹ This is especially true in the case of China. The writing system created a linkage between libraries and society and complemented the forces that generated political, social and economic change. These developments occurred in nearly the same era as China's first unification, the first centralized bureaucratic system, the first national ideology, the first national bibliographic control and the first Chinese knowledge classification scheme. Jiang observed that "as Confucianism came to dominate all other schools of teaching, the texts traditionally attributed to Confucian authorship and editorship became the important texts for teaching and learning."⁶² Collecting and preserving classical texts in libraries meant accepting and promoting Confucian moral and sociopolitical values and concepts through the

application of knowledge classification, collection development, and library administration for political and ideological control. I would argue that the fundamental characteristic of libraries in Imperial China was that they, to a large extent, became an integral part of the bureaucratic apparatus which canonized Confucian ideology and made acceptance of its imperative for individual Chinese who desired social mobility. Canonized Confucianism increased the sacredness of the texts and the power of Chinese writing. Chinese writing as high cultural antiquity carried and enforced conceptual and cognitive functions in the process of creating, storing and disseminating imperial ideology. One of the major components of that ideology is reflected in the Chinese character *Gong*, which advocated imperial governmental superiority, legitimacy, and authoritarianism, at the expense of social participation and civil equity.

I am not attempting to blame Confucianism by saying, as those radical Chinese intellectuals did in the May Fourth Movement in 1919, that it suppressed curiosity and critical thinking. Nor am I implying that Chinese culture did not give birth to public libraries simply because China lacked an alphabetic writing or that as a result Chinese people could not engage in abstract or deductive thinking. Instead, I would argue that a particular kind of writing produces a particular kind of culture; and conversely this culture preserves and strengthens the status of that writing by which it is generated. Writing and culture correlate with, support, and shape each other. Chinese writing, from its earliest stage, was recognized as “coded art”⁶³ and “an esoteric system of symbols.”⁶⁴ It created an elite culture familiar with and benefiting from its difficulties and complexities. To maintain its privilege and respect, the elite culture reinforced this writing through mastering and increasing these challenges.⁶⁵ The difficulties and complexities were further strengthened, amplified and even pushed to an extreme when this writing was politically consolidated with Confucianism and integrated with the bureaucratic machine—imperial civil services examinations. Such a writing system matched ideological needs remarkably and perfectly well as manifested in imperial civil service examinations, which became a prerequisite for cultural and social participation in ceremonial rituals and a passport to the imperial bureaucracies engaged in the management of court affairs down through successive dynasties. Those elite members of the ruling classes (small in number) who elegantly wielded brushes with power and maintained a hierarchy at the top of the social pyramid distinguished themselves from a mass who couldn’t write beautifully or could not write at all. I would say that this social divide is a prominent feature of Chinese civilization in the imperial period.

It is Chinese writing that reinforced Chinese cultural and political traditions in the achievement of continuity and cohesiveness over thousands of years. Chinese writing, as it evolved over millennia, was an artistic cultural antiquity, a symbolic system representing imperial ideology, as well as a political vehicle rewarding the elite class with power and status. It helped to maintain an elite culture consistently and statically until the balance was broken by political revolution and cultural innovation at the beginning of the 20th century. Over thousands of years, the elite class took pleasure and pride in the use of Chinese writing as a high cultural heritage, leaving behind those who could not write well with admiration and intimidation. Therefore, libraries tied to the foundation of the elite culture were seen not only as houses of knowledge and resources, but also articulations of cultural antiquity, privilege and authority, as well as hallmarks of social status, honor and power for anyone who was entitled to walk in and understand what was collected. Anyone entering libraries had the capability of executing calligraphy, decoding the classical texts, and probably educating younger generations with these classical texts.

When libraries became as an effective apparatus for stabilizing social order and defending elite domination and hierarchy, their thresholds were raised even higher, shutting out completely those who were not eligible to use the collections. Perhaps it would have been surprising if such libraries, constituting books that were dominated and guided by classical texts, canonically selected and preserved for elite posterity, had given equal access to those who were deprived of the right of comprehending texts due to the difficulties and complexities of writing. Perhaps it would have been surprising, given the fact that Chinese society was manipulated and administered by the elite culture for thousands of years, if libraries with an extensive holding of classical texts supporting imperial ideology had opened their doors to the general public and offered their services to those at the bottom of the social pyramid. Perhaps it would also have been surprising that such an elite culture, mostly concerned with its own interest and privileges, could have agreed with the necessity of building any social institutions which would open the facilities and resources to the whole general public to improve their intellectual wellbeing on the foundation of equity, participation and respect. However, it is not surprising that “one ought to share the fine books of the world with readers of the world”⁶⁶ remained only as an individual Chinese scholar’s utterance and aspiration and that “allowed ordinary readers to borrow books from a collection”⁶⁷ was only a personal and temporary library practice in Imperial China. It is

also not surprising that the doors of libraries in imperial China remained closed as tightly as that of the Forbidden City to common Chinese people, who could look at or touch, but seldom enter it, until it was opened by outside forces. I may say that it has the historical reason why Imperial China, particularly the decline period of Qing dynasty (1839-1912), could not provide seeds and nourishment to facilitate the birth of public libraries. Perhaps, deep in its roots is that imperial Chinese culture had the natural deficiency in generating a public sphere in a very real sense for its people. This incapability or failure became particularly evident when the definition of public libraries as social institutions that promoted the liberty and freedom of the individual and advocated the welfare of a mass population were brought in by Western missionaries and forward-thinking Chinese intellectuals in late Imperial China.

Chinese writing, with a continuous history of three thousand years, played an indispensable and irreplaceable role in shaping the direction of Chinese culture and building a national identity. When the continuity of Chinese writing was demonstrated in the avatar-like 2008 Beijing Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, global viewers indeed had their eyes opened wide by the national pride reflected in these technological spectaculars and artistic and representations of Chinese writing. If they had had a chance to visit China and watch members of all generations practicing calligraphy on the roadside or in a park with a broom brush and a bucket of water (Figure 2), very likely they would have understood what makes the Chinese Chinese. As Coulmas remarked, Chinese writing is “the longest uninterrupted writing of all languages.”⁶⁸ This writing is ancient, but not self-closed. It is an open, creative, dynamic and evolving writing system. Contemporary Chinese writing has adopted the Western alphabet as part of its phonetic system through the implementation of *Han yu pin yin* as a standardized way of marking the pronunciation of each Chinese character to facilitate the language acquisition of both domestic and foreign beginners. This phonetic system is also adopted as a scientific means of organizing information in terms of indexing, coding and computer language input. Chinese writing absorbs the Western alphabet and simultaneously disseminates Chinese culture via Confucius Institute in countries that are dominated by Western languages, concepts and ideologies. Confucius said “*Jun zi he er bu tong*,” which means “The gentleman is harmonious but not conformist.”⁶⁹ I would, therefore, compare contemporary Chinese writing to a Confucian gentleman that seeks harmony with differences and transformation but does not sacrifice his own characteristics.

Contemporary public libraries in China, together with Chinese writing, have gone through unprecedented social transformations and technological challenges since China adopted the reform and open-door policy and integrated itself with the pace of globalization. Public libraries, in their many manifestations, are interwoven into the fabric of modern Chinese society by promoting literary competence and strengthening national identity. Imagine one day walking into a public library in China, and you see a librarian teaching a group of Chinese preschoolers with a card that on one side has the Chinese character and on the other side has the Western alphabet. You will be amazed at how perfectly writing, library, identity, and change are simultaneously represented in that simple card. When walking out, perhaps you will pause at the door and appreciate Mary Elizabeth Wood and forward-thinking Chinese intellectuals of her time for their courage, vision, and devotion.

繇自昨踪還示知憂虞復深遂積
疾苦何迺爾耶蓋張樂於洞庭之野
鳥直而高翔魚聞而深潛豈絲磬之
響雲英之奏非耶此所愛有殊所樂
迺異若能審已而怒物則常無所結

Figure 1.

Standard Script Curved in Stones. Chinese Calligraphy. Philadelphia: The Philadelphia Museum of Art and Boston Book & Art, 1971, plate 8.



Figure 2. Older Chinese Practicing Calligrapher in a Park. Photo courtesy by the photographer Dennis Labeau.

Notes

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