

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

Li Yu, Emory University

Introduction¹

On the morning of the tenth day of the third lunar month in the year 1766, dozens of delegates on a Korean solstitial embassy entered a Temple of Chaste Woman located in a village within Yongping Prefecture in Northern China (in today's Hebei Province). They found a school next to the inner gate of the temple and half a dozen children sitting there studying. What amazed all of them was that, in spite of the noise the delegation had made, these children were not in the least distracted and concentrated on their studies as if nothing had happened. A few moments later when Hong Taeyong (1731-1783), the nephew of the secretary of the embassy, arrived at the gate, an interpreter excitedly reported this marvelous scene to him. Suspicious of the veracity of the story, Hong went inside to investigate. What he discovered and later recorded in his memoir turns out to be a rare piece of evidence showing us a scene of children learning to read in early modern China.

Despite the fact that reading was greatly emphasized by educators and policy-makers in early modern China, very little was written on how children were actually taught to read. Previous studies on Chinese elementary education mainly focus on the issue of literacy, the content of education, educational institutions, and educators' theories on teaching.² Although primers and

¹ The article has benefited from comments by Galal Walker, Mark Bender, Cynthia Brokaw, Patricia Sieber, Victor Mair, J. Marshall Unger, and Roberto Padilla II. I would like to thank the organizers and reviewers for the MCAA 2003 Percy Buchanan Graduate Prize for their comments and suggestions.

² See for example, Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo keju shidai zhijiaoyu* [Chinese education during the examination period] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934); John Dardess, "Childhood in Premodern China," in *Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective: an International Handbook and Research Guide*, ed. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Hiner (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Guo Qijia, *Zhongguo gudai xuexiao* [Schools in ancient China] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1998); Thomas H.C. Lee, "Life in the Schools of Sung China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 37.1 (1977): 45-60; Angela Ki Che Leung, "Elementary Education in the Lower Yangtze Region in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 381-416; Evelyn S. Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979); Alexander Woodside, "Some Mid-Qing Theories of Popular Schools: Their Innovations, Inhibitions, and Attitudes toward the Poor," *Modern China* 9.1 (1983): 3-35; Pei-yi Wu, "Education of Children in the Sung," in *Neo-Confucian Education: the Formative Stage*, ed. Wm Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Wu Ni and Hu Yan, *Zhongguo gudai sixue yujindai sili xuexiao yanjiu* [Studies on China's ancient private schooling and modern private schools] (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997); Xiong Chengdi, *Zhongguo gudai xuexiao jiaocai yanjiu* [A study on Chinese ancient school textbooks] (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996); Yuan Zheng, *Songdai jiaoyu: Zhongguo gudai jiaoyu de lishixing zhuanzhe* [Education of the Song dynasty: a pivotal turn in traditional Chinese education] (Guangdong: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991); and Zhang Zhigong, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu jiaocai lun* [A study on the teaching materials used in traditional philological education] (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1992).

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

textbooks for children began to flourish in the Song period,³ today's researchers have found little evidence related to how the reading materials were used in daily school life. In this paper, I will explore the descriptive and prescriptive discourses from a variety of sources, in order to discern the actual pedagogical procedures related to reading in the late imperial period. By "late imperial China," I refer to the time period roughly from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries.

In the history of reading in late imperial China, the loud chanting of texts and the constant anxiety of reciting were two of the most prominent themes that ran through both the descriptive and prescriptive discourses. I will explore how and why, during the very early days when children were led into the world of written words, the four interrelated tasks of reciting, chanting, together with punctuating and oral explication were introduced as basic reading skills.

Primary materials concerned with children's acquisition of reading skills are widely scattered in various sources. Previous studies rely on educators' theories about how reading "should be taught." For my research, I draw on the following eight types of source materials to explore not just the theories but also the actual pedagogical practices: 1) Neo-Confucian scholars' texts on how to teach reading, 2) family instructions on reading and studying, 3) dynastic histories, 4) literati autobiographic writings on learning to read, 5) literati miscellaneous and anecdotal notes, 6) descriptions in vernacular fiction, 7) delineation in pictographic materials, and 8) contemporary observations as well as foreigners' travel diaries. While data from the first two types of texts provide information on "what was supposed to be done" and the rationale behind it, data collected from the other six types of materials shed light on "how it was actually done." This is not to assume that the second type of materials present an absolute picture of a social reality. In fact, historians' and novelists' construction of reality is subject to similar social constraints.⁴ Therefore, I especially favor those sources that have some ethnographic flavor, such as Hong Taeyong's travel record, since their meticulous descriptions of Chinese society seem to be less removed from reality.

Hong Taeyong was a talented Korean scholar well-versed in the Chinese classics. His uncle Hong Ok (1722-1809) served as the secretary of the Korean solstitial embassy of 1765-1766. As a relative, Hong Taeyong joined the embassy nominally as his uncle's military aide. In fact, he was a tourist, curious about everything from Chinese musical instruments to the educational system. Hong kept a diary as he traveled and compiled a consolidated memoir after he returned to Korea.⁵ It is in this memoir that Hong wrote his account of the Chinese temple school, which leads us back to the story that opens this paper.

After Hong lifted the curtain and entered the school, he was convinced that the interpreter was telling him the truth. He noted the way these children swayed their bodies while reading in

³ Thomas H.C. Lee, "The Discovery of Childhood: Children Education in Sung China (960-1279)," in "*Kultur*": Begriff und Wort in China und Japan [Culture": concept and word in China and Japan], ed. Sigrid Paul (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1984).

⁴ W. L. Idema, "Cannon, Clocks and Clever Monkeys: Europeana, Europeans and Europe in Some Early Ch'ing Novels," in *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. E.B. Vermeer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), 461.

⁵ Gari Ledyard, "Hong Taeyong and his Peking Memoir," *Korean Studies* 6 (1982): 63-103. For Hong's travel record written in Classical Chinese, see Hong Taeyong (1731-1783), *Yongji* [Peking memoir], in his *Tamhonso* [The works of Hong Taeyong] (Soul: Minjok Munhwa Chujinhoe, 1974-1975, 1986 printing). Translations of his records in this paper are all mine.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

fast rhythm was similar to what he saw in Korea.⁶ He examined the books the children were reading, including the *Four Books*, the *Book of Odes*, *A Thousand Characters Text* (*Qian zi wen*), *Three Character Classic* (*San zi jing*), *A Hundred Surnames* (*Bai jia xing*).

Before Hong's delegate left, they witnessed another activity that was essential to learning to read in a Chinese elementary school—text reciting. Hong wrote:

The teacher had just sat down in a chair under the north wall. There was a desk in front of him. The children took their turns to recite texts....The person who was going to recite presented the book in both hands to the teacher, put it on the desk, stepped back and made a solemn bow, turned his back to the teacher, and recited quickly. After reciting, he turned back and bowed solemnly. The teacher then stuck a red label on the chapter he had just recited, and wrote the date on it. The child then stepped back and stood there. The ones following him all did it in the same manner. Those who had stepped back all looked down while standing straight. There was not one person who dared to look around or disturbed the order.⁷

Hong was deeply impressed by what he saw and did not conceal his admiration for the teacher and the well-behaved children. He could not help but exclaim: “He [the teacher] was just a barely literate person in a remote area, and the children were innocent farm children. Even their discipline is as strict as this, the manner of teaching and learning in the Qi Lu area (today’s Shandong Province) can well be imagined then!”⁸



Figure 1. “Backing books”

Source: Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1894). 251.

⁶ Hong, *Yongi*, juan 7, 49b-50a.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 50a.

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

The pedagogical procedures Hong wrote about seemed to have lasted very long in China. One hundred and fifty years after his visit to the temple school, a photo was taken in a northern Chinese village school that captured a moment of school life exactly as Hong had described. In this black-and-white photo, probably taken during the late Qing period (1644-1911), a group of children are anxiously waiting their turn to recite texts to their teacher (Fig. 1). Using this photo as an illustration in his classic book on Chinese cultural characteristics, Arthur H. Smith (1845-1932), a missionary who had stayed in China for years, observes that all students in Chinese schools “spend their time in shouting out their lessons at the top of their voice, to the great injury of their vocal organs.”⁹ Smith also finds the students’ practice of turning their backs toward their teachers during recitation “singular,” and describes it with a tone of disbelief.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that the character for “bei” 背 (reciting) is also a noun meaning “the back.” Etymologically speaking, “reciting” is a relatively new meaning for this character. Another character that is commonly seen in earlier texts denoting the meaning of “recitation” is a homophone倍 which means “multiplying.” This character implies the connotation of “going over a text again and again.” In written Classical Chinese, a more commonly used term for recitation is the character “song.” It is noteworthy that *song* also carries the meaning of “reading aloud.” The term itself seems to suggest that the activities of vocalizing a text, memorizing it, and reciting it from memorization are just different aspects of one central action: reading.

Although almost two centuries apart, the photo and Smith’s observations corroborated Hong Taeyong’s record showing how similar the pedagogical procedures of reading were over a span of two hundred years in China. To be sure, there would be local and temporal variations. However, the continuity of certain procedures in this tradition is striking. Hong’s account offers us a rare ethnographic peek into how these procedures were carried out in a village school in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Memory and Memorization

An erudite reader in the Chinese classics, Hong was probably not surprised to see the stress Chinese people put on memory and memorization. In biographies and anecdotal notes, literary figures were often praised for their good memory at a young age. The prominent Neo-Confucian scholar Cheng Hao (1032-1085) was said to be able to recite the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents* at the age of ten *sui*.¹¹ Hu Yin (?-1151, j.s. 1119), the confidential advisor of Emperor Gaozong of the Southern Song, managed to memorize several thousand volumes of books when he was an unruly teenager.¹² Cheng Duanli (1271-1345), a Yuan Neo-Confucian scholar, was said

⁹ Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1894), 251.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cheng Yi (1033-1107), “Mingdao xiānshèng xìngzhuāng” [Life and deeds of Master Cheng Hao], in his *Er Cheng Wenji*, Congshu jicheng ed. (Taibei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1965-1968), 147; Pei-yi Wu, “Childhood Remembered: Parents and Children in China, 800-1700,” in *Chinese Views of Childhood*, ed. Anne Behnke Kinney (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 129-130. The Chinese way of reckoning age is adopted in this paper. A baby is one-year-old (one *sui*) at the time of its birth, and another *sui* is added when the Chinese lunar New Year is passed.

¹² Zhou Mi (1232-1308), *Qidong yeyu* [Wild talks of Eastern Qi], Siku quanshu, ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan* 6, 12b.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

to be able to memorize and recite the six classics when he was fifteen.¹³ Gui Youguang (1506-1571), a Ming statesman and well-known essayist, would be urged and supervised by his mother to recite the *Classic of Filial Piety* at midnight until he could recite without any mistakes when he was about seven.¹⁴ Even emperors were lauded when they showed signs of precocity in their early experiences of memorization. Zhu Houcong (1507-1566, r. 1522-1566), the Ming Jiajing emperor, was reported to be able to recite poems that his father read to him at the age of five.¹⁵

The emphasis on excellent memory was not surprising given the fact that the recognition of written characters and the future comprehension of written words would start from the memorized *sound* of texts. A good memory was not merely necessary, but indispensable to the process of learning to read. When Mao Qiling (1623-1716) was five years old, he expressed a wish to begin reading books. His mother became his first teacher. Instead of going right to the books, what she did was ask her son to repeat after her when she recited the *Great Learning*. Only after he had memorized the whole text did she bring a book to him and ask him to read the text by himself. Using his memorized version as a guide, he managed to recognize all the characters in the book after only two readings.¹⁶ Mao was not alone in his experience. Yu Ji (1272-1348), at the age of three, escaped Changsha with his parents during the turmoil of war. Without any books, his mother, Miss Yang, taught him orally to recite the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, *Zuo's Commentary*, and prose written by Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi. By the time they returned home and hired a tutor for him, Yu Ji had already "read" through all the classics and understood their meanings.¹⁷

These examples show that from the very beginning, reading was based on recognizing characters whose sounds the learner was already familiar with through repeated listening and recitation. While the alphabet was usually the first thing to study in learning to read in the West,¹⁸ Chinese children learned first to commit the sound of written words to their memory. The fact that antithetical verses were preferred in classic primers such as *Three Character Classic*, *A Hundred Surnames*, and *A Thousand Characters Text* also testified to this practice. Even in *zazhi*, a specialized character primer aimed at certain groups of readers, characters were more often than not organized in an antithetical manner with two, three, four, or six characters per phrase.¹⁹ Lü

¹³ Song Lian (1310-1381), *Yuan shi* [Dynastic history of Yuan] (Taipei: Dingwen shuju, 1997), *juan* 190, 4343.

¹⁴ Gui Youguan (1506-1571), "Xianbi shilüe" [A biographic account of my mother], in *Mingdai sanwen* [Essays of the Ming dynasty], ed. Lei Qunming (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2000), 153.

¹⁵ *Mingshizong shilu* [The veritable records of Emperor Shizhong of the Ming dynasty] (Taipei: Zhongyang janjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1964), *juan* 1, 1.

¹⁶ Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 180.

¹⁷ Song, *Yuan shi*, *juan* 181,4174.

¹⁸ Guglielmo Cavallo, "Between Volumen and Codex: Reading in the Roman World," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 72; Robert Darnton, "History of Reading," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 154.

¹⁹ Zhang, *Chuantong yuwen jiaoyu jiaocai lun*.

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

Desheng (fl. 16th century), in the preface to his *Xiao'er yu* (Words for boys), stated that he put important ethical admonitions into colloquial antithetical verses so that little children could easily chant and remember them.²⁰

This method of acquiring characters has another important implication. Long before Western scholars and missionaries in the sixteenth century began to fantasize and circulate the myth of Chinese characters as "ideograms," or symbols that represent ideas,²¹ Chinese children were taught, somewhat in an unconscious way, to perceive characters as representations of sound rather than meaning as they embarked on the road to literacy. This perception was even more apparent given the fact that in many cases children would memorize texts without even knowing the sense of the words they had memorized. In his memoir, Hong Taeyong noted that many children he encountered in China could recite texts but did not understand the meaning of them.²² This practice of mechanical memorization without access to meaning has been dubbed as *siji yingbei* (rote memory) in contemporary China and is often cited as a major piece of evidence by modern educators to criticize the failure of traditional education. However, the longevity of this method seems to be partly due to its suitability in traditional education.

The very nature of the written Classical Chinese (*wenyan wen*) might have contributed to the necessity and usefulness of the memorization method. In his exploration of the rise of the written vernacular (*baihua*) in East Asia, Victor Mair observed that the written Classical Chinese (what he calls Literary Sinitic, or LS) was a special, shortened cipher or code of the spoken Chinese (referred to as Vernacular Sinitic, or VS) with its own unique grammatical and expressive conventions. LS and VS were so different that the nature of their differences far exceeded the contrast between written Latin and any modern Romance language.²³ If the LS and the VS were indeed two linguistic systems as claimed by Mair, then for children of today's and early modern China alike, learning to read the written Classical Chinese was to enter an "empire of text" that was totally independent of the spoken world. In other words, it was like learning a foreign language, where its conventions of orthographical, lexical, and grammatical usage all needed to be memorized. Touching upon the topic of learning to read in his study of writing pedagogy in Qing times, Charles Ridley argues that the unconscious learning of the structural patterns of Classical Chinese through memorization might be "the simplest and wisest approach to language teaching."²⁴

²⁰ Lü Desheng (fl. 16th century), *Xiao'er yu* [Words for boys], in *Zhongguo chuantong xunhui quanjie jiyao : mengxue* [A collection of Chinese traditional instructions and admonitions: primary education], ed. Wang Xuemei (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1996), 93.

²¹ John DeFrancis, *Fact and Fantasy of Chinese Characters* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 133-148; J. Marshall Unger, "The Very Idea: The Notion of Ideogram in China and Japan," *Monumenta Nipponica* 45.4 (1990):391-411; Chad Hansen, "Chinese Ideographs and Western Ideas," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52.2 (1993): 373-399.

²² Hong, *Yongi, juan* 8, 4a-5a;10b.

²³ Victor H. Mair, "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (1994): 707-751.

²⁴ Charles Price Ridley, *Educational Theory and Practice in Late Imperial China: the Teaching of Writing as a Specific Case* (Doctorate dissertation, Stanford University, 1973), 351.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

When early modern Chinese educators reiterated the importance of memorization while reading (*shu xu cheng song*), they were not equipped with any linguistic theory or cognitive model of learning and memory. What they had was their experiential intuition and philosophical beliefs about how reading should be done. Zhang Zai (1020-1077) suggested that all classics be memorized, because "as long as they were memorized (*ji de*), they could be stated (*shuo de*); as long as they could be stated, they could be practiced (*xing de*)."²⁵ Memorization, for him, was a vital bridge between written words and behavioral practice. For many other Neo-Confucian literati, led by the voice of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), to emphasize memorization was to restore the authority of the classics and the way they were read in pre-print times.²⁶ They were reacting anxiously to an emerging print culture that was starting to see speed (hence careless or sloppy) reading and irreverence toward books.

For Zhu Xi, memorization was not merely a method for children learning to read, but for all serious readers who wanted to study the classics. However, memorization for adults would not come as easily as for children. Whereas in the West it was believed that memory capacity could be enhanced through various memory techniques,²⁷ Chinese literati had long regarded good memory in an adult as a rare sign of heavenly endowment. Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) once exclaimed how different human nature (*renxing*) was when it came to the capacity for memorization.²⁸ Zhou Mi (1232-1308) was amazed at people's supernormal abilities to memorize medical and musical texts.²⁹ People who could memorize texts after just one reading were respected no less than a god.³⁰

For Zhu Xi, however, the capacity for memorization was not determined by predestined human nature, but was rather a purely methodological problem that could be solved by reading in the proper mode. In his "Methods of Reading" (*Dushu fa*), Zhu recommended that for adults to memorize texts easily, they should learn from children's experience by reading slowly with their minds focused on each and every word.³¹ He explained his solution by defining reading as a slow and assiduous journey into texts:

²⁵ Wang Yue et al., *Zhongguo gudai jiaoyu shi* [A history of Chinese traditional education] (Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1988), 208; Zhang Lunhua and Zeng Zhongshan, *Zhongguo gudai yuwen jiaoyu shi* [A history of philological education in ancient China] (Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), 382.

²⁶ Susan Cherniack, "Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54.1 (1994): 5-125.

²⁷ Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁸ Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), *Guitian lu* [A record after retirement], Siku quanshu, ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan shang*, 17b.

²⁹ Zhou Mi (1232-1308), *Guixin zazhi* [Miscellaneous notes in the year of Guixin], Siku quanshu 四库全书 ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *houji*, 35a-b.

³⁰ See for example Zhou, *Guixin zazhi*, *xuji, juan xia*, 31b. See also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984), 9 and 273 (note 21).

³¹ Zhu Xi (1130-1200), *Zhuzi yulei* [Selections from the conversations of Master Zhu], in *Zhongguo chuantong xunhui quanjie jiyao: mengxue* [A collection of Chinese traditional instructions and admonitions:

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

Reading is simply comprehending paragraph by paragraph and little by little. The reason why a child can remember what he has read is that he does not recognize the following character and just concentrates on reading the characters one by one. When people today read, they just read hastily. Even when they have managed to read ten times, they still do not understand the meaning of the text.³²

Reading less, as well as reading more slowly and more carefully, was thus prescribed by Zhu Xi as a sure way for children and adults alike to achieve memorization. On another occasion, he cited the example of Chen Lie to demonstrate that as long as one's mind is retrieved and settled (*shou fang xin*), one would be able to memorize anything he read.³³ This prescription of a reading mode was to influence the way Chinese read for many centuries to come. However, his assumption that children and adults shared the same memory capacity was not as widely accepted. Scholars of later days developed their own theories on memory. Lu Shiyi (1611- 1672), a Neo-Confucian from the Jiangnan area, wrote that children up to the age of fifteen had a strong capacity for memorization, which tended to fade when they grew older.³⁴ Therefore, Lu maintained that educators should exploit this golden age to make students memorize as many texts as possible for future pondering and comprehension, even at the cost of them not understanding what they had memorized. Popular beliefs such as this were probably responsible for what Hong Taeyong had seen, and what many children had experienced first-hand in their elementary education.

Vocalized Reading and Chanting

Hong Teayong was not surprised when he saw the school children swaying their bodies while reading texts aloud in fast rhythm. In their homes and schools, children were constantly reading texts aloud when they studied them. In some school regulations, it was stated that the first thing students should do in the morning was to read their books aloud.³⁵ A place full of "the sound of reading" (*xian song zhi sheng*) would be mentioned approvingly by historians. Not uncommonly, historians often recorded favorably how the sound of reading helped unsuspecting visitors to spot schools in remote villages. The Zhangzong emperor (1168-1208, r. 1189-1208) of

primary education], ed. Wang Xuemei (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1996), 111-112; Daniel K. Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, arranged topically* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 132, no. 4.22.

³² Zhu, *Zhuzi yulei*, 112; translation is mine.

³³ Zhu, *Zhuzi yulei* , 121; translation from Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage* , 145, no. 5.8.

³⁴ Dardess, "Childhood in Premodern China," 81.

³⁵ See for example Ron Guey Chu, "Scool Code of Masters Cheng and Dong," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: from Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Liu Boji, *Guangdong shuyuan zhidu* [The academy system in Guangdong] (Taibei: Zhonghua congshu weiyuanhui, 1958), 421.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) was enjoying a spring outing, when he accidentally overheard the sound of reading and discovered a small school taught by a famous recluse.³⁶

Reading aloud, or vocalized reading and chanting, was referred to in different contexts as *dushu*, *songshu*, *nianshu*, and occasionally *fengshu*, as opposed to *kanshu*, reading by looking or silent reading. In fiction and anecdotal notes, there were many stories in which children who read texts aloud would bring satisfaction to their parents or elders. In one poem, a proud father described four pleasures of life, one of which was having the son reading books (*dushu*).³⁷ Niu Pulang, a figure in the eighteenth-century novel *Rulin waishi* (*The Scholars*), attracted a monk's attention when he brought a book to read (*nian*) in a temple every day.³⁸ In contrast, Baoyu, the protagonist of *Honglou meng*, was criticized by his father for browsing silently and carelessly (*kanshu*) and failing to read properly (*dushu* or *nianshu*).³⁹ Some other parents, supervised their sons' studies by listening to them reading aloud. Ouyang Xiu would ask his son to read a history book to him on a daily basis.⁴⁰ Su Shi (1037-1101) would lie down, relax, and occasionally give his insights while listening to his son reading a history book.⁴¹ Yuan Xie's (1144-1224) mother would correct her sons' pronunciation when they read texts aloud.⁴²

The revolutionary transition between oral reading and silent reading touted in the history of reading in the West did not seem to have occurred in China. Many factors in the larger cultural context might have contributed to this persistence on orality. First, oral performative realization of different genres of poetry (e.g. *shi*, *ci* and *fu*) which had existed for centuries still prevailed even after new literary genres such as fiction had appeared. During banquets, poems would be read aloud as a form of entertainment.⁴³ Second, in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist rituals, the practices of text reciting and sutra chanting occurred frequently in people's daily life. The voice of reading in these religious settings was considered to carry a tremendous power. Third, literary theories held that sound was an important criterion to judge the quality of an essay. Literary critics compared essays (*wenzhang*) to various acoustic patterns found in an army on the march,

³⁶ Pan Yongyin (Qing dynasty), *Song bai lei chao* [Anecdotes and classified stories from the Song dynasty], Siku quanshu; ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan* 6, 18a.

³⁷ Zhou Mi, *Haoranzhai yatai* [Elegant talks of the grand studio], Siku quanshu ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan zhong*, 27b.

³⁸ Wu Jingzi (1701-1754) *Rulin waishi* [*The Scholars*], Woxiancao tang, ed. (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1960), 205-206.

³⁹ Lucien Miller, "Children of the Dream: The Adolescent World in Cao Xueqin's *Honglou meng*," in Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood*, 230.

⁴⁰ Zhu Bian (fl. 12th century), *Quwei jiuwen* [Old stories from Quwei], Siku quanshu, ed. (Taibei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan* 3, 6a-b.

⁴¹ Zhu, *Quwei jiuwen*, *juan* 5, 8b.

⁴² Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Inner Chambers: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 185; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 158.

⁴³ See for example, Zhu, *Quwei jiuwen*, *juan* 5, 6b-7a.

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

the rhythm of the rain, the boom of thunder, and the pounding of hail.⁴⁴ Su Shi once made a jocular statement that the success of a poem depended seventy percent on its oral presentation and thirty percent on its verse.⁴⁵ Wang Mian (Song dynasty), who was good at oral reading, was asked by the emperor to read test papers written by examination candidates. Those that were read by him would always end up being selected with a high ranking.⁴⁶ Fourth, a sense of "reverence" was associated with reading aloud while silent reading tended to be thought of as "careless." For example, during the reign of Yingzong (r.1436-1450) of the Ming dynasty, a chief examiner, Sun Ding, would dress himself formally and burn incense when he read examinees' papers out loud and decided who should be selected.⁴⁷ Zhang Mao (1436-1521), follower of the Cheng Zhu school, would read a friend's letter aloud solemnly as if he were listening to his admonishment face to face.⁴⁸ On the contrary, reading silently and quickly sometimes led to trouble. Wang Xingzhi (Song dynasty) could read very fast. Hardly had others read three or four lines when he could have finished a page. When reading a long gift list by a young guest, he read it so fast (and silently) that the guest was offended and thought him frivolous.⁴⁹

As for the constant emphasis on vocalized reading in pedagogy, Zhu Xi and his followers may have again played an important role in the history of reading in China. They believed that oral recitation could be useful in three ways: 1) to help memorization; 2) to aid comprehension; and 3) to assist composition.

Zhu Xi, in his "Methods of Reading", implied that oral reading could facilitate both the memorization and comprehension of texts. He maintained:

The value of a book is in the recitation (*du*)⁵⁰ of it. *By reciting it often, we naturally come to understand it.* Now, even if we ponder over what's written on the paper, it's useless, for in the end it isn't really ours. *There's value only in recitation, though I don't know how (buzhi ruhe) the mind so naturally becomes harmonious with the psychophysical stuff (xin yu qi he) , feels uplifted and energized, and remembers securely what it reads.* Even supposing we were to read through a text thoroughly, pondering it over and over in our minds, it wouldn't be as good as reciting it. *If we recite it again and again, in no time the*

⁴⁴ See for example Zhou, *Qidong yeyu*, *juan* 10, 3b-4b.

⁴⁵ Zhou, *Qidong yeyu*, *juan* 20, 5b.

⁴⁶ Ding Chuanjing (1870-1930), *Songren yishi huibian* [A collection of anecdotes of Song personalities] (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1966), *juan* 4, no. 8, 149; also in Zhou, *Qidong yeyu*, *juan* 20, 5b.

⁴⁷ Lu Rong (1436-1494), *Shuyuan zaji* [Miscellaneous notes in the bean garden], Siku quanshu (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan* 3, 9a-9b.

⁴⁸ Zhang Mao (1436-1521), "Fu he Huang Menke gong shu" [A letter to Huang Menke], in *Mingdai jiaoyu lunzhuxuan* [A selection of essays on education in the Ming Dynasty], ed. Gao Shiliang (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990), 183-184.

⁴⁹ Lu You (1125-1210), *Laoxue'an biji* [Miscellaneous notes by the old man in the studio], Siku quanshu . (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1968), *juan* 2, 6a-7a.

⁵⁰ Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage* , 137, note 13.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

incomprehensible becomes comprehensible and the already comprehensible becomes even more meaningful. At the moment I'm not even speaking about the recitation of commentaries; let's simply recite the classical texts to the point of intimate familiarity....It has occurred to me that recitation is learning (*xue*)....Learning is reciting. If we recite it then think it over, think it over then recite it, naturally it'll become meaningful to us. If we recite it but don't think it over, we still won't appreciate its meaning. *If we think it over but don't recite it, even though we might understand it, our understanding will be precarious*⁵¹.

Puzzled at how memory really worked, Zhu referred to the memorization process as the harmonization between the mind (*xin*) and the "psychophysical stuff", or the unspeakable and untranslatable *qi*. "Qi" here seemed to refer to the inner flowing force of the text, or *wen qi* as commonly used in early Chinese literary criticism. For Zhu Xi, the goal of book learning was to understand the moral principle (*yili*) that was already innate yet evasive to common people due to their lack of personal experience.⁵² In order to understand the moral principle, one needed to internalize the words of the sages and worthies and reflect upon one's self. Oral reading, and repeated oral reading, until the words were as if "coming out of one's own mouths"⁵³ would help facilitate this internalization process because "if our mouths recite it, our minds will feel calm, and its meaning will naturally become apparent."⁵⁴

In another instance, he mentioned the importance of applying three organs in reading: "You must frequently take the words of the sages and worthies and pass them before your eyes (*yantou guo*), roll them around and around in your mouth (*koutou zhuan*), and turn them over and over in your mind (*xintou yun*)."⁵⁵ This maxim was later acronymized by his disciples as "the three presences" (*san dao*), that is, the presence of the eyes, mouth, and mind (*yan dao, kou dao, xin dao*). A slightly different version of this "san dao" theory was proposed by Mei Zengliang (1786-1856), a late Qing scholar. He maintained that by reading aloud, the essay was realized through the voice and it flowed with the vital force (*qi*). Qi, according to him, was the essence of one's body. When one's own essence met with ancient people's essence, they could come together seamlessly. For him, people good at writing essays all benefited from this method.⁵⁶ Even in contemporary China, this method is still being introduced to youngsters as an essential method of reading.

⁵¹ Zhu, *Zhuzi yulei*, 115-116; translation from Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*, 138-139, no. 4.41. Italics added.

⁵² Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Chu Hsi's Aims as an Educator," in *Neo-Confucian Education: the Formative Stage*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Daniel K. Gardner, "Transmitting the Way: Chu Hsi and His Programs of Learning," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49.1(1989): 141-172.

⁵³ Zhu, *Zhuzi yulei*, 114; translation from Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*, 135, no. 4.33.

⁵⁴ Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*, 147, no. 5.16.

⁵⁵ Zhu, *Zhuzi yulei*, 109; translation from Gardner, *Learning to Be a Sage*, 129, no. 4.7.

⁵⁶ Zhou Zhenfu, *Zenyang xuexi guwen* [How to study classical Chinese] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 32.

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

The idea that repetitive oral reading and recitation could lead to comprehension was summarized in the popular saying “*dushu baibian , qi yi zi xian*” (the meaning of a text will come out automatically after hundreds of times of reading.) The Buddhist practice of chanting a sutra for thousands of times seemed to have fueled this popular belief. In one entry called “Method of Reading” (*dushu fa*) included in a Ming miscellaneous note (*biji*), the author quoted from both the Buddhist and Confucian texts to illustrate that the secret of reading was directly related to repeated oral reading.⁵⁷

The idea that oral recitation helped students compose was only implied by Zhu Xi. The idea was not fully developed and articulated until the early Qing when the Tongcheng School proposed the theory of "following the sound to pursue the force" (*yin sheng qiu qi*) in their poetics of "archaic prose" (*guwen*). Part of the theory proclaimed that only by reading aloud could one grasp the essence of the archaic prose and master the writing skills of this genre. Yao Nai (1732-1815), one of the leading scholars in this group, prescribed that one needed to read essays aloud both quickly and slowly. According to him, a quick oral reading (*ji du*) revealed the form of an essay while a slow one (*huan du*) helped one savor its meaning. If one just read silently, then he would always be a layman in prose.⁵⁸

When the aforementioned Niu Pulang explained to the monk the reason why he wanted to read books, he said "When I passed the school, I overheard the sound of reading (*nianshu de shengyin*) which was very attractive (*haoting*). So I stole some money from my store and bought this book to read."⁵⁹ The word *haoting* was commonly used to describe a sound or voice that was melodic and hence pleasant to the ear. Was Niu telling us that the sound of reading was like music, not just metaphorically, but also literally?

Zhang Zhupo (1670-1698), in his commentary on *Jin Ping Mei* (Golden lotus), gave his readers suggestions about how to read this novel properly, based on lessons he learned from reading when he was a young child. As he started to learn to read, he overheard his teacher admonishing a fellow classmate that texts should be studied word by word instead of being swallowed as a whole. The young Zhang took these words to heart and started to read in a particular manner:

Thereafter, when reading a text (*nian wen*) I would linger over each character as though it were a syllable from an aria in a Kunqu opera (*yi zi yi zi zuo kunqu qiang*), drawing out its pronunciation and repeating it over and over again. I would not stop until I had made each word my own.⁶⁰

Zhang stressed the efficacy of this method with a success story: Three days after he applied the approach to a phrase in the Confucian Analects, he completed an essay about it with unexpected

⁵⁷ Hu Shi (fl. 1548), “Zhen zhu chuan” [Real pearl boat], in *Ming Qing biji shiliao* [Collected materials on miscellaneous notes of Ming and Qing], vol. 31 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 2000), *juan* 3, 5a, 39.

⁵⁸ Zhou, *Zenyan xuexi guwen* , 30.

⁵⁹ Wu, *Rulin waishi* , 206.

⁶⁰ Zhang Zhupo (1670-1698), "Piping diyi qishu Jin Ping Mei dufa." [How to read *Jing Ping Mei*], in *Jing Ping Mei Ziliao Huibian* [Collected materials on the *Golden Lotus*], ed. Huang Lin (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 82; translation from David L. Rolsen, *How to Read the Chinese Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 234-235.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

ease. The teacher was greatly surprised to see Zhang's rapid progress and suspecting him of cheating, so he closely observed Zhang when he studied. He soon found that Zhang was sitting with his "head bent over the table, following the text with one hand as [he] read it out loud, one character at a time."⁶¹ Deeply satisfied with Zhang's way of reading, the teacher asked all the other students to follow suit.

While Zhang's story provides us with some clues about how the "voice of reading" really sounded, it raises more questions: Why did he use the Kunqu tunes to read the text aloud? Was it just his impromptu invention, or was he following the example of his teacher or other adults? Did vocalized reading follow some standard patterns? It is highly possible that the chanting patterns were subject to regional and individual preferences. We may never find out exactly how texts were read aloud in the early modern period. Suffice it to say that certain tune patterns (*qiangdiao*) were applied in oral reading. As texts were passed down orally from tutors to learners, the tune patterns were transmitted as well.

Marking and Punctuating

Although China had a long history of systematic punctuation, its symbols were not standardized, nor was it meant to serve as a writing device as it now does in most modern writing systems.⁶² Both in the West and China, punctuating started out as a readers' task when readers tried to separate words and mark pauses in the process of reading. In China, most books were circulated without punctuation or paragraphing. Starting from the middle of the Song period, some books were printed with punctuation (*judou*) and commentary markers (*quandian*) inserted into texts.⁶³ Since the Yuan dynasty, punctuating and marking was widely extended to the genres of classics and histories.⁶⁴ During Ming times, fiction, and many dramas as well as reading primers used circling and pointing.⁶⁵ However, the practice was haphazard throughout the late

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶³ David Rolston translates the term *quandian* as "emphatic punctuation." See his *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). While his translation correctly describes the function of *quandian* (that it was mostly used to emphasize certain parts of a text), I think there is a need to distinguish *judou* and *zhangju* from *quandian* in the English translation. *Judou* and *zhangju* usually aimed at marking pauses and paragraphs in an unpunctuated text to clarify the syntactic structure and aid comprehension. *Quandian*, however, aimed at emphasizing certain subtle meanings or pointing out textual mistakes that would otherwise have been overlooked by potential readers. Therefore, I translate *judou* and *zhangju* as "punctuating" and *quandian* as "marking". Since they were used as nouns in Classical Chinese, I translate their corresponding nouns in English as "punctuation" and "commentary markers."

⁶⁴ Ye Dehui (1847-1927), *Shulin qinghua* [A plain talk on books] (Taibei: Shijie shuju, 1961), *juan* 2, 4a-4b.

⁶⁵ Zhang Dihua, "Preface," in *Biaodian fuhao cidian* [A dictionary of punctuation and marks], ed. Yuan Hui (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshen, 1991), 6. I follow M.B. Parkes in applying the term "point" which refers to the act of punctuating and marking out texts. I prefer to use this English term because it is an accurate translation of its equivalent in the Classical Chinese: *dian*. See M.B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

imperial period.⁶⁶ Therefore, one thing was clear for all inexperienced readers: they needed to learn the art of punctuating and marking soon after they had acquired enough characters and memorized some basic texts.

Since most books were unpunctuated, students learned the correct punctuation from their teachers. In the Imperial School of the Yuan dynasty, teachers and their assistants first taught the correct punctuation and pronunciation before explaining the texts.⁶⁷ If a child could read and understand a text without instruction from a teacher or an adult, this prodigious achievement was considered so meritorious it would be entered into his biography: Wang Kekuan (Ming dynasty) at the age of ten was said to be able to punctuate the *Four Books* himself;⁶⁸ Chen Jitai (1573-1640), when barely ten years old, could read an unpunctuated version of the *Book of Documents* and comprehend it.⁶⁹

In early modern China, punctuation as a reading instrument can be divided into three categories based on function. First, it was used as a pedagogical tool. These were marks added by teachers and printers in texts to facilitate reading, or those added by readers to aid comprehension. Second, punctuation was used as a commentary tool. These were the marks that commentators or readers made in texts to express their opinions and exclamations. Third, punctuation functioned as a collation tool. These were marks used by correctors when they collated texts.⁷⁰

Among the three types of marks, only the first can be considered as punctuation in its modern sense, though the boundaries between these three categories in traditional China were not clear-cut. A reflection of this conflated status was the complication in terminology. Generally speaking, for the act of punctuating that created pauses in texts for better comprehension, there were two old Chinese terms: *judou* (literally "stops and pauses") and *zhangju* (literally "section and sentence"). For markings that either conveyed the readers/commentators' appreciation or collators' corrections, the term was *quandian*, literally "circling and pointing." However, these terms often appear side by side in philologists' and collators' writings and are sometimes used interchangeably. For instance, reading a book was sometimes simply referred to as "*dian shu*" (marking up a book). This mix-up was not surprising, given the fact that a reader of that time would sometimes play the roles of teacher, collator, and commentator at the same time. When acquiring the skills of reading, students learned to use all three categories of marks as an integrated system.

Cheng Duanli, in his *Daily Schedule of Study in the Cheng Family School* , devoted several sections to how students should incorporate the act of punctuating and marking while reading. According to him, before memorizing texts, students should first follow guidelines to punctuate them (*dianding judou*) and mark out the pronunciation of phonetic loan characters

⁶⁶ Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction* ,18.

⁶⁷ Song et al., *Yuan shi* ,juan 81, 2029.

⁶⁸ Zhang Tingyu (1672-1755) et al., *Ming shi* [Dynastic history of Ming] (Taibei: Dingwen shuju, 1997), *juan* 282, 7225.

⁶⁹ Zhang et al., *Ming shi* ,juan 288, 7403.

⁷⁰ Zhang, "Preface," 2-6.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

(*quan fa jiajie zi yin*).⁷¹ Cheng listed several models for punctuation and marking under the section "Guidelines for Commentating and Marking Classics" (*Pidian jingshu fanli*).⁷² The models were drawn from the methods used by him, Huang Gan (1152-1221, Zhu Xi's student and son-in-law), He Ji (1188-1268, Huang Gan's student) and some other Neo-Confucian scholars. In Cheng's system (see Fig. 2 for a sample), to mark a sentence (*ju*), a dot was made beside a character (*cedian*); while for a pause (*dou*), a dot was made in between two characters (*zhongdian*). For people and place names, names for objects, as well as short phrases within a long sentence, a "dot in between" (*zhongdian*) was used. In Huang Gan's system, in addition to markers used for *ju* and *dou*, five other types of markers were used for other purposes: a "red daub in between" (*hongzhongmo*) for guidelines (*gang*) and guiding examples (*fanli*); a "red daub beside" (*hongpangmo*) for maxims (*jingyu*) and important phrases (*yaoyu*); a "red dot" (*hongdian*) for character meanings (*ziyi*) and diction (*ziyan*); a "black daub" (*heimo*) for textual examination (*kaoding*) and institution (*zhidu*); a "black dot" (*heidian*) to complement texts (*bu buzu*).⁷³ Since what made up a sentence and what made up a pause were complicated decisions to make, detailed examples and explanations were given to illustrate their distinctions and usages.

The way to punctuate and mark out prose required different strategies in that the goal of reading classics (*jing*) was different from that of reading prose (*wen*) in the Neo-Confucian curriculum. In the section "Guidelines for Commentating and Marking Han Style Prose" (*Pidian Hanwen fanli*),⁷⁴ a more complicated system was introduced. In addition to the usual *ju* and *dou*, four colors (red, black, yellow and blue), seven styles (dash, half-dash, daub, circle, dot, large circle, large dot), and three locations (in between, beside, center) were combined to produce eighteen different types of markers to serve nineteen pointing functions. Some were used to mark out the textual structure. Some were for emphasis. Others were for marking out the rhetorical strategies. Still others were used for phonetic marking. It was not clear if, in reality, students and even the teachers strictly followed these burdensome guidelines in marking out prose. From the limited number of extant marked out texts, it is fair to say that although the system was not fully adopted, it was followed to various degrees. Red was a common color to use when collators corrected texts. Markers such as the dot, the circle, and the daub can be commonly seen in commentated and marked-out texts.

The skills of pointing and punctuating thus learned proved to be enduring. It was said that He Ji would punctuate each and every book that he read.⁷⁵ Xu Qian (1199-1266) applied four colors to punctuate and commentate the *Nine Classics*, and the three commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.⁷⁶ The late Qing scholar Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) would use a red brush to

⁷¹ Cheng Duanli (1271-1345), *Chengshi jiashu dushufennian richeng* [Daily schedule of study in the Cheng family school, graded according to age], Sibu congkan xubian (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934), *juan* 1, 3b-4a.

⁷² Ibid., *juan* 2, 20b-26b.

⁷³ Ibid., 21a-21b.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 27a-30a.

⁷⁵ Togtor (Tuotuo, 1313-1355) et al., *Song shi* [Dynastic history of Song] (Taibei: Dingwen shuju, 1997), Biographies *juan* 197, *ce* 16, 12979.

⁷⁶ Song et al., *Yuan shi*, *juan* 189, p. 4319.

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

punctuate history books when he read. One of the recommendations that he gave to his younger brothers on learning to write examination essays was to punctuate and point them before more deepened reading.⁷⁷

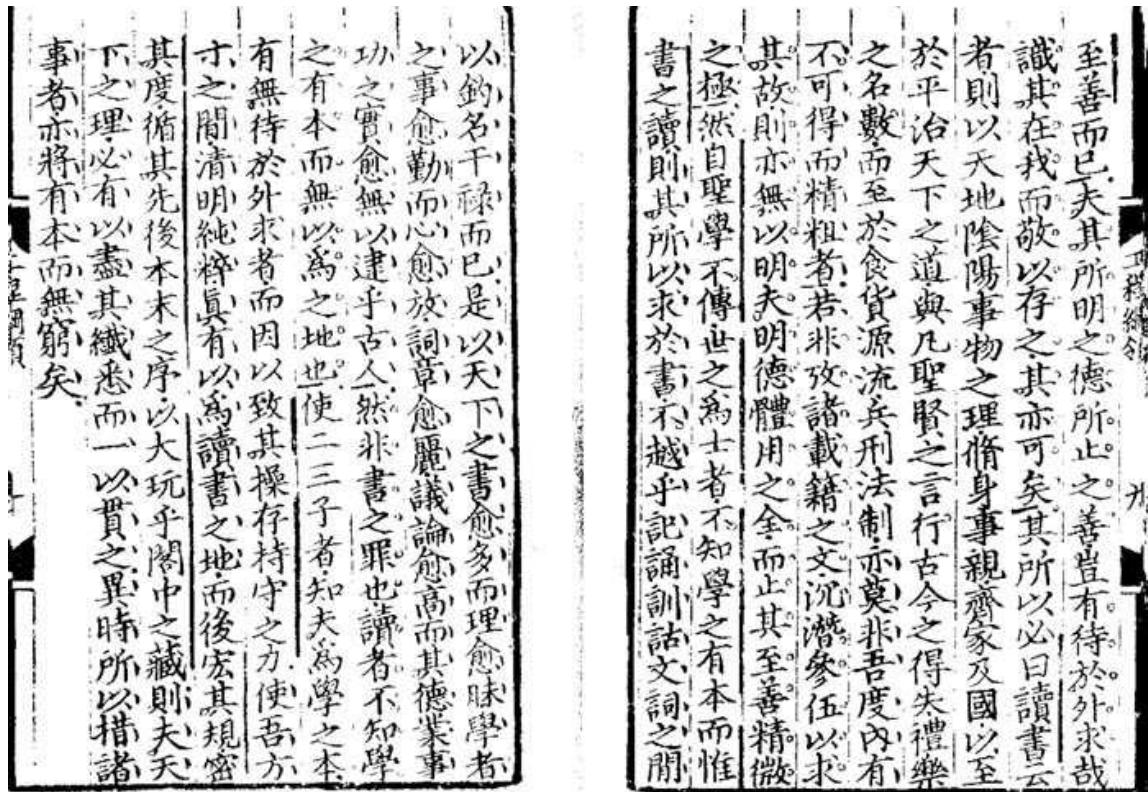


Figure 2: An example of a punctuated text
Source: Cheng Duanli, *Chengshi jiashu dushu fennian richeng*, sibu congkan edition.

Explicating the Text

Following memorization, vocalization, and punctuation of texts came comprehension. As Robert Darnton points out, reading is “a way of making meaning” that varies from culture to culture.⁷⁸ Our curious Korean visitor Hong Taeyong was faced with such a phenomenon when he visited schools in China. He asked several teenage learners he encountered to read texts aloud, and then explain the meanings of the texts and some phrases. On two occasions, upon his request, the students replied “the text has not been explained yet (*wei jiangshu ye.*)”⁷⁹ Befuddled by the

⁷⁷ Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), "Zeng Guofan jiashu" [Family letters by Zeng Guofan] (Changsha: Hunan daxue chubanshe, 1989).

⁷⁸ Darnton, “History of Reading,” 152.

⁷⁹ Hong, *Yongi*, juan 8, 3b-4a, 5a, 28-29.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

difference between the term "jiangshu" versus "nianshu", Hong raised the question to a Teacher Zhou in a Shenyang elementary school. Zhou replied: "Nianshu is to read (aloud) the text, and jiangshu is to explicate its meaning. Without knowing the sectioning and punctuation of the paragraphs and sentences, how can one understand their meaning? That's why *jiang* is preceded by *nian*."⁸⁰

While it was true that many students only memorized texts without really understanding the meanings and some even passed the civil service examinations by doing so, the comprehension of texts was indeed emphasized as a pedagogical task. *Jiangshu*, or explicating the text, was a procedure that reflected this emphasis. As a teaching method, teachers would explain texts to students after they became familiar with the texts by repeated reading and memorization. As a testing method, teachers would ask students to explain texts back to them in order to check their comprehension.

In the Song Imperial School, there were several officials called *jiangshu guan* (literally, text-explicating officials) whose responsibilities were to explain the meanings of texts to students.⁸¹ In elementary schools, tutors would assume this role. In private academies, famous masters were invited to explicate certain paragraphs of a text in public lectures.⁸² The *jiangshu* procedure was very similar to the practice of sutra lectures, where Buddhist monks explained line by line texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* to a public audience.⁸³

Periodically, students were called upon to explain texts by their teachers to gauge their progress. According to Cheng Duanli's *Daily Schedule*, this should not be done too often. When it was done, it should be carried out stage by stage. He wrote:

First (let the students) explain the elementary books, then the *Great Learning*, then the *Analects*. If elementary books are explained, ask them to clarify Master Zhu's annotations and Mr Xiong's explanatory notes and his section titles first. When this is done successfully, ask them to explain according to the accompanying notes on characters and sentences. For characters, look for their pronunciation. If it is not in the annotations, let them inspect rhyme books to find it. Fabrication (of character pronunciation) should not be allowed to mislead people. A rough explanation according to the common understanding, however, is rather fine. When this is done successfully, ask them to explain the meanings of each sentence. When this is done, explain the meanings of every paragraph. Ask them to repeat, explaining the texts to themselves. When they pass the interview test, they may stop (doing that). After a while, they will realize they have roughly grasped the sense of texts and will be able to explain texts on their

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2b, 27.

⁸¹ Other names for this position included *shuoshu* and *zhijiang*, see Togtor, *Song shi, juan* 165, 3909. In the Ming period, it was called *jiangdu guan*.

⁸² Linda A. Walton, *Academies and Society in Southern Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 15.

⁸³ Neil Schmid, "Tun-huang Literature," in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 985; Victor H. Mair, "Oral and Written Aspects of Chinese Sutra Lectures(*chiang-ching-wen*)," *Hanxue yanjiu* [Sinological Studies] 4.2 (1986); and his *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, 1989).

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

own (without any instructions). Then let them read annotations themselves and ponder on them. Ask them to come and try explaining the text. Challenge them with questions so that they can understand thoroughly. If the *Great Learning* and the *Analects* are explained, ask them to explain clearly the annotations before they go on to the text itself with the help of the accompanying notes.⁸⁴

If these guidelines were carefully followed, students would be able to totally comprehend the texts after repeated explanations of both the annotation and the text, in addition to repeated readings of them. They would not be able to hide behind others' annotations to pretend they had understood the texts. They would have to explain the annotations in their own words to show their total comprehension. They would ponder upon the meanings of the texts after repeated oral reading and explication. One of the key elements in Zhu Xi's "Methods of Reading" was to ask students to contemplate and savor the meanings of texts on their own, usually in the evenings when it was dark and not economical to waste lamp oil or candles on looking at texts.

Cheng Duanli's teachings were strictly followed by many fathers. In his family instructions, He Lun, a well-known Ming paragon of filial piety, explained the interaction between teacher and student through *jiangshu* and the significance of doing this. According to him, the achievement of learning "lies completely in thorough explanation." After listening to teacher's explanation, a student should "look carefully, study intently, ponder quietly." If there is still any doubt about the text, he should raise questions immediately.⁸⁵

The text-explaining procedure was described in a chapter of *Honglou meng*, when the protagonist Baoyu was queried by his tutor about the meanings of several chapters in two Confucian texts. He was asked to first explain a chapter summary and then the text itself. Throughout the process, his tutor interrupted him to seek further clarification and admonish him from time to time on what lessons he should learn from the texts.⁸⁶ He Lun's instructions and this episode show that Cheng and his followers' teachings were carefully heeded in real life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, learning to read in early modern China centered around memorization and vocalization. Although the rise of a print culture and book culture since the tenth century made memorization seemingly less important and many literati complained about people's careless reading, the pedagogical emphasis on memorization never lessened. In fact, it continued to be emphasized with the widely accepted views of the Neo-Confucians, especially Zhu Xi's "Methods of Reading." The adoption of Zhu Xi's commentaries of the *Four Books* as the national standard, together with the way the civil service examinations were conducted, and the nature of

⁸⁴ Cheng, *Chengshi jiashu fennian richeng*, juan 1, pp. 5a-6a.

⁸⁵ He Lun (Ming dynasty), *Heshi jiagui* [Family instructions of the He household], in *Zhongguo chuantong xunhui quanjie jiyao: jiaxun* [A collection of Chinese traditional instructions and admonitions: family instructions] (Beijing: Zhongyang minzu daxue chubanshe, 1996), 204.

⁸⁶ Cao Xueqin (?-1763), *Honglou meng* [Dream of the Red Mansion] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1997), 737-739.

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

the written classical language seem to have contributed to the perennial stress on the memorization of texts.

The vocalization of texts, on the other hand, is another cultural parameter that persisted in early modern Chinese society. Learning to read started with the sound of a text and ended with the comprehension of it through repeated recitation and oral explanation. To facilitate oral reading and memorization, students learned to mark texts with special punctuation and commentary markers. To demonstrate comprehension of a text, students orally presented its meaning to their teachers. However odd this persistence on orality may seem in a society where a written tradition had existed for over three millennia and the state administration heavily depended on written communications, it shows that the drastic transition between oral reading and silent reading that occurred in the West in the Middle Ages (13th-15th centuries)⁸⁷ did not happen in China. The cultural and historical factors that contributed to this phenomenon need to be further investigated.

Reading comprised an essential component in the Neo-Confucian program of learning. The goal of reading was to attain the ultimate moral principle (*yili*). According to Zhu Xi and his followers, the acquisition of reading skills was a painstakingly slow and meticulous process. Everybody possessed the potential of acquiring these skills if they followed the systematic guidelines. The pedagogical procedures discussed in this paper were set within a larger cultural background, a culture of reading. The pedagogy of reading, in this sense, bore the burden of not simply passing down these specific reading skills, but more importantly, of ensuring the continuity of this reading culture.

⁸⁷ Paul Saenger, *Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

GLOSSARY

baihua	白话
<i>Bai jia xing</i>	百家姓
bei	背 / 倍
biji	笔记
bu buzu	补不足
buzhi ruhe	不知如何
cedian	侧点
Chen Jitai	陈际泰
Chen Lie	陈烈
Cheng Duanli	程端礼
Cheng Hao	程颢
ci	词
dian shu	点书
dianding judou	点定句读
dou	读
dushu baibian, qi yi zi xian	读书百遍，其义自见
<i>Dushu fa</i>	读书法
dushu	读书
fanli	凡例
fengshu	讽书
fu	赋
gang	纲
Gui Youguang	归有光
guwen	古文
haoting	好听
He Ji	何基
He Lun	何伦
heidian	黑点
heimo	黑抹
hongdian	红点
<i>Honglou meng</i>	红楼梦
hongpangmo	红旁抹
hongzhongmo	红中抹
Hu Yin	胡寅
huan du	缓读
Huang Gan	黄干
ji de	记得
ji du	急读 / 疾读
jiangdu guan	讲读官
jiangshu	讲书
<i>Jin Ping Mei</i>	金瓶梅
jing	经
jingyu	警语

Studies on Asia, series II, vol. 1, num. 1

ju	句
judou	句读
kanshu	看书
kaoding	考订
koutou zhuan	口头转
Lü Desheng	吕得胜
Lu Shiyi	陆世仪
Mao Qiling	毛奇龄
Mei Zengliang	梅曾亮
mo	抹
nian wen	念文
nian	念
nianshu de shengyin	念书的声音
nianshu	念书
Niu Pulang	牛浦郎
Ouyang Xiu	欧阳修
Pidian Hanwen fanli	批点韩文凡例
Pidian jingshu fanli	批点经书凡例
qi	气
Qian zi wen	千字文
qiangdiao	腔调
quan fa jiajie zi yin	圈发假借字音
quandian	圈点
renxing	人性
Rulin waishi	儒林外史
San zi jing	三字经
sandao	三到
shi	诗
shou fang xin	收放心
shu xu cheng song	书须成诵
shuo de	说得
shuoshu	说书
siji yingbei	死记硬背
song	诵
songshu	诵书
Su Shi	苏轼
Sun Ding	孙鼎
Wang Kekuan	汪克宽
Wang Mian	王沔
Wang Xingzhi	王性之
wei jiangshu ye	未讲也
wen qi	文气
wen	文
wenyan wen	文言文
wenzhang	文章
xian song zhi sheng	弦诵之声

LEARNING TO READ IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

xin yu qi he	心与气合
xing de	行得
xintou yun	心头运
Xu Qian	许谦
xue	学
yan dao, kou dao, xin dao	眼到，口到，心到
yantou guo	眼头过
Yao Nai	姚鼐
yaoyu	要语
yi zi yi zi zuo Kunqu qiang	一字一字作昆曲腔
yili	义理
yin sheng qiu qi	因声求气
Yongping fu	永平府
Yu Ji	虞集
Yuan Xie	袁燮
zazi	杂字
Zeng Guofan	曾国藩
Zhang Mao	章懋
Zhang Zai	张载
Zhang Zhupo	张竹坡
zhangju	章句
zhidu	制度
zhijiang	直讲
zhongdian	中点
Zhou Mi	周密
Zhu Houcong	朱厚骢
Zhu Xi	朱熹
ziyan	字眼
ziyi	字义