

*Competition over Content: Negotiating Standards for the Civil Service Examinations in Imperial China (1127–1279)*. By Hilde De Weerd. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007. Pp. xvi + 495. \$49.50/£31.95.

The idea that wisdom can be taught to anyone is commonly thought to lie at the heart of the Confucian project. While Confucius himself may have had some doubts about the universal scope of this idea,<sup>1</sup> Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 of the Song dynasty famously asserted that sagehood is accessible to anybody through moral self-cultivation.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, education policy became a primary concern among Song Confucians. Later dynasties heavily influenced by Zhou Dunyi's statement integrated this new understanding of moral self-cultivation into the examination system.

Hilde De Weerd's important new book attempts to explain the relationship between the Learning of the Way (*Daoxue* 道學) and the examination system during the Southern Song dynasty. A mere glance at this comprehensive work reveals that the relationship is much more complex than ordinarily assumed. Embracing a pluralistic approach to the problem of writing history, De Weerd successfully intertwines various academic narratives which have become important for American sinologists in recent years: intellectual history (as represented by Hoyt C. Tillman and William Theodore de Bary), the history of education and the examination system (Benjamin Elman, John W. Chaffee), social and local history (Peter Bol), the history of book markets and publishing (Chow Kai-wing 周啟榮), political history (Yu Yingshi 余英時), historiography (Charles Hartman, Daniel A. Levine), and finally the history of literary genres and reading practices (Daniel Gardner). De Weerd's main focus—what she calls the “examination field”—gives her book a very rich argumentative texture. She makes far-reaching claims about the nature of the examination system itself, the Learning of the Way movement, and about the idea and reality of imperial order in Late Imperial China. In the following review of De Weerd's book, I offer a brief overview of the book's main themes before embarking on a more detailed discussion of some of the most interesting questions the book raises.

De Weerd's book, besides an extensive methodological introduction and brief conclusion, is divided into three main parts, each analysing one competitor in the “examination field”: the teachers of the Yongjia 永嘉 learning, the Court, and the Learning of the Way movement.

In her introduction and a long “Prolegomena,” De Weerd lays down her understanding of the “examination field” and the culture of examination writing. According

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example *Analects* 6:21, 7:8.

<sup>2</sup> See Wing-tsit Chan (Chen Rongjie) 陳榮捷, ed. and annot., *Jinsi lu xiangzhu jiping* 近思錄詳註集評 (Full annotation and collected commentaries of *A Record for Reflection*) (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng shuju 臺灣學生書局, 1992), pp. 68–69.

to her, the civil service examinations should be understood as “a bounded cultural space in which students, teachers, emperors, examiners, court and local officials, literati intellectuals, editors, and printer/publishers in effect negotiated standards for examination preparation and examination essay writing” (p. 16). As the title of her book already points out, she regards the notion of *competition* as central for her reconstruction of the cultural and intellectual world of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Where earlier sinologists like Elman discovered in the examinations a mechanism for the “reproduction of the status quo,”<sup>3</sup> she sees change and innovation. The “examination field” is seen as one, even *the* primary social medium responsible for the formation and selection of talent, the transmission of cultural knowledge, and the redistribution of political power. It is also seen as breeding the kind of *élite* politicking which ultimately determined the modes of scholarship (exegesis of Classics, philosophical debates, or policy discussions) to be transmitted to later generations. This dynamic and structural understanding of the “examination field” explains why De Weerdts concentrates on the relationships, conventions and historical forces which shape the behaviour of the individual actor and of intellectual communities, not on the ideas circulating in the Southern Song cultural sphere. The same holds true for her analysis of the examination writing culture, where she focuses on the rhetorical layout and the argumentative strategy of texts, not on their contents. In other words, De Weerdts does not write *history of ideas* (à la Arthur O. Lovejoy), but *sociological-political history* (Pierre Bourdieu).

In the second chapter, De Weerdts starts with a thorough analysis of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Song examination preparation. Through the study of two paradigmatic genres of examination writing, expositions (*lun* 論) and policy response writings (*ce* 策), she highlights contemporary examination standards, thus reflecting both standard prose models and the modes of thought favoured by examiners.

The third chapter analyses the reasons for the ascendancy of Yongjia teachers in the “examination field.” Between *c.* 1150 and *c.* 1200, Chen Fuliang 陳傅良, Ye Shi 葉適 and other scholars from the region around Yongjia developed distinct curricula and were responsible for setting examinations. The curricula which they taught in private schools to young students preparing for the state examinations had three components: administrative reasoning, institutional history, and composition. Highly critical of the idea of moral reform advanced by Zhu Xi 朱熹 and others, Yongjia teachers successfully addressed the administrative and military problems of the Song court.

The fourth chapter investigates the curricular programmes that made the Yongjia teachers so successful. By analysing two examination preparation manuals in depth,

<sup>3</sup> Compare Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. xxix.

*The Yongjia Master's "To the Point in All Cases"* 永嘉先生八面鋒 and *Detailed Explanations of Institutions Throughout the Ages* 歷代制度詳說 (almost certainly compiled by Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙, a thinker from the East Zhe 浙東 region, but intellectually close to the Yongjia group), De Weerdt outlines the dominant discourse in examination culture from the 1160s to the 1180s: examination teachers strongly encouraged students to engage in political debate focusing on how to achieve maximum benefit by evaluating primary historical sources, thus avoiding moral philosophy in favour of result-oriented thinking.

In her fifth chapter, the focus turns to the Court as another crucial actor in the "examination field": in reaction to Wang Anshi's 王安石 failed attempt to unify the education system, the Southern Song Court refused to endorse partisan curricula and favoured intellectual openness. However, as the Learning of the Way movement increasingly came to challenge this policy, the Court was forced to sponsor campaigns against its adherents in the 1180s and 1190s which ultimately resulted in the outlawing of the movement. Yet this policy proved to be ineffective and was unable to challenge the influence which the Learning of the Way already exerted on the private market of examination anthologies. Only after the Court recognized Zhu Xi's teachings and interpretation of the Classics as standard examination curricula in 1227/1241 did the Court successfully regain control over the "examination field."

In the following two chapters, De Weerdt tells the same story once more, only now from the perspective of the Learning of the Way movement (in particular Zhu Xi). As is well known, Zhu Xi was highly critical of contemporary examination practices and demanded that examinations cultivate and select "morally superior men" (p. 236). However, besides an attempt at creating examination questions during his stay in Tongan 同安 in the early 1150s, he never designed any new examination curricula according to the teachings of the Learning of the Way (pp. 346–55). Later, however, his student Chen Chun 陳淳 proved that the Learning of the Way teaching was fully compatible with exam preparation. Ultimately, the teachings of the Learning of the Way were successfully adapted to the standards of examination associated with the Yongjia curriculum, thus transforming the Learning of the Way into "a symbol for unity in Song intellectual and political culture" (p. 271). The Cheng brothers' and Zhu Xi's original vision of the "Way" was transformed into a coherent and consistent "ideology" unifying the scholar-officials under the authority of the Court.

Hilde De Weerdt's book is likely to make a lasting contribution not only on the field of Song history and Song intellectual history, but also on the larger field of Imperial China studies. She has written an extremely solid piece of scholarship, which draws on a rich repertoire of primary and secondary sources. I do think, however, that her interpretative framework will not go unchallenged, as it attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of the Daoxue school by focusing merely on its rhetorical-political dimension, thus overlooking its philosophical/intellectual dimension. In the following, I would like to focus on three important issues: (1) De Weerdt's definition of

the Learning of the Way community; (2) the question of the “ideological” character of Learning of the Way discourse; (3) the issue of “political subjectivity.” My reflections do not challenge De Weerdts’s account of the historical facts, but concern her broader interpretation of the historical reality she describes so brilliantly. In particular, I think that some of her quite far-reaching claims about the Learning of the Way tradition and Chinese thought in general deserve further discussion.

(1) In her “Prolegomena,” De Weerdts advances a new interpretative framework for the understanding of the term “Learning of the Way” (*Daoxue*). She distinguishes between three meanings of the term: (a) “generic word for moral cultivation” used, for example, by Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵; (b) denoting a “group of scholars-officials accused of setting up an exclusive party,” being a term used by court officials with strong derogatory overtones; (c) “a tradition of moral philosophy transmitted through a narrowly defined genealogical line of true transmitters and captured in a new set of canonical texts” (pp. 25–41). In her book, De Weerdts mostly refers to the third meaning. Without doubt, with this new analysis of the term *daoxue*, she directly challenges the idea of an “ecumenical fellowship of diverse intellectual traditions” proposed by Hoyt C. Tillman in his seminal *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy* (p. 41):<sup>4</sup> in this book, Tillman presented for the first time his thesis that various thinkers all committed to the teachings of the Cheng brothers were part of an intellectual fellowship which existed between c. 1080 and 1180; only after 1180, Zhu Xi excluded competing versions of the Cheng teachings and constructed a close-knit community centred around the idea of the authentic transmission of the “Way.” Contrary to Tillman, De Weerdts shares Hans van Ess’s doubt “whether a ‘Learning of the Right Way’ Movement really existed as such before Chu Hsi” (p. 40).<sup>5</sup> Also, while she admits that Yongjia scholars at a certain moment during the partisan struggles in the 1190s were supportive of the scholars around Zhu Xi (p. 106), she claims that no true intellectual, rhetorical or other common ground existed between Zhu Xi and scholars like Lu Jiuyuan, Chen Liang 陳亮, Ye Shi, and Lü Zuqian.

From the beginning, De Weerdts implies that the emphasis on the third meaning of the term *daoxue* merely helps her to address “the question of how this radicalized movement of scholars of Cheng Learning positioned themselves in the examination field” (p. 39). In other words, her claim about the nature of the Learning of the Way community is only valid for one specific sphere of Song culture (the examinations). And yet, on the following pages, she seems to have forgotten her initial definition of the term *daoxue* and makes general claims about the nature of Learning of the Way discourse

<sup>4</sup> Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Hans van Ess, “The Compilation of the Works of the Ch’eng Brothers and Its Significance for the Learning of the Right Way of the Southern Sung Period,” *T’oung Pao* 90, no. 4–5 (2004), pp. 264–98.

which go beyond the “examination field”—for example, by frequently claiming that Zhu Xi’s moral philosophy was a mere “ideology” (pp. 44, 230), she directly challenges scholars who take Zhu seriously as a philosophical thinker. At this point, a closer look at her interpretative framework is necessary.

As De Weerdts says in the introduction, her framework is directly inspired by Louis Althusser’s notion of “ideology” (p. 13). Her idea of a “rhetorical community” (p. 46) which takes shape through “performative statements”—that is, through a personal articulation of the Learning of the Way by its members—directly stems from her understanding of this French thinker. While her new framework may indeed serve to highlight the complicated relationship between individual and community, and lead us to a deeper understanding of the social function of Learning of the Way discourse,<sup>6</sup> doubts arise about whether the notion of “rhetorical community” can truly reflect the multi-dimensional historical reality of Learning of the Way. De Weerdts’s initial justification for this choice of framework was that it helps us better to understand “why the tension between inclusiveness and exclusiveness or between combativeness and conciliation was never resolved” in the later history of the Learning of the Way (p. 46). But does this “tension” indeed arise from the *rhetorical* character of this community? Does it not primarily arise from the actual *content* of these teachings and their eventual political implementation? Do we not have to turn back to a more thorough analysis of Zhu Xi’s scholarly and philosophical thought? But as soon as we turn our attention to the scholarly discourse, we have to accept the idea of a scholarly community including Zhu Xi, Yongjia scholars, East Zhe scholars, and many other scholars influenced by the Cheng learnings (as it has been made clear by Hoyt C. Tillman).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as recent research by Yu Yingshi and Shen Songqin 沈松勤 has shown, a common political project connected scholars from the Learning of the Way with scholars like Lü Zuqian, Chen

<sup>6</sup> De Weerdts uses this framework persuasively, for example, to explain why Chen Chun insisted that the Learning of the Way tradition shall never be used as a mere “token” for examination success (pp. 267–68).

<sup>7</sup> At one point, De Weerdts asserts: “In contrast to Zhu Xi, most of his peers (including Lü Zuqian, Lu Jiuyuan, Chen Liang, Chen Fuliang, and Ye Shi) did not articulate an affiliation with ‘the Learning of the Way’ ” (p. 41). This claim seems dubious to me; in the case of Lü Zuqian, this judgement is certainly wrong. Not only does he, in his correspondence with Zhu Xi, frequently refer to “Our Way” (*wu dao* 吾道), thereby obviously referring to a community of peers endorsing the Cheng teachings, but his thought itself, as his lectures on the *Book of Changes* 易經 demonstrate, was deeply influenced by the Cheng learnings. The fact that Lü Zuqian and Zhu Xi cooperated for a long time does in my opinion prove their intellectual closeness as members of the same community. It is true that the idea of exclusive affiliation, which Zhu Xi brought up very early, does not seem to have been meaningful for Lü; and yet, I think, it would be wrong to negate their common intellectual and political ground.

Liang and Ye Shi, who De Weerdts describes as representative for the Yongjia discourse.<sup>8</sup> One key element of this political project was the replacement of more traditional Court officials by morally “superior men” (according to the new standards defined by the Cheng learnings). However, this struggle obviously was not part of the “examination field”; thus, De Weerdts’s narrow definition of the term “Learning of the Way” again leads her to overlook other “practices” than merely rhetorical ones. In sum, it seems there are indeed good reasons to keep a more inclusive definition of the Learning of the Way which reflects both the existential dimension of the political struggle and the broader scholarly and philosophical dimension.

(2) In more traditional scholarship, Zhu Xi has mostly been characterized as a thinker who also reflected on educational issues in a philosophically meaningful way. In particular, the new spirit of “learning for the sake of one’s self” (*wei ji zhi xue* 為己之學) has been praised.<sup>9</sup> Zhu was highly critical of the utilitarian uses of Yongjia scholarship, and always underlined that the sage sought to attain his goals (moral and political goals) indirectly, precisely by *not directly seeking to attain them*.<sup>10</sup> For De Weerdts, however, the notions of “strategy” and “competition” are crucial; she describes meticulously how the new Learning of the Way converged with “elite strategies” (p. 376). In order to make her case, she seems to rely on a hermeneutic model of suspicion (as represented in Western modernity by Nietzsche, Freud and Foucault): the moral language which Zhu Xi and his disciples spoke was merely a thin veil behind which the true interests of the scholar-officials were pursued. This reading, however, risks to overlook the original character of Learning of the Way teachings, in particular its philosophical vision. At this point,

<sup>8</sup> According to Yu Yingshi, the political project associated with Zhu Xi, Zhang Shi 張栻, Lü Zuqian, Lu Jiuyuan, and other scholars aimed at profound institutional change at the Court. See Yu Yingshi, *Zhu Xi de lishi shijie—Songdai shidafu zhengzhi wenhua de yanjiu* 朱熹的歷史世界——宋代士大夫政治文化的研究 (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi 允晨文化事業股份有限公司, 2003), vol. 2, pp. 25–97. De Weerdts is critical of Yu Yingshi, claiming that the notion of comprehensive reform (political, moral and social) was particular to the narrow group around Zhu Xi and thus does not reflect the Yongjia stance (p. 53, n. 47). If we follow Yu Yingshi, however, it is clear that not only were many of the Song Confucian scholars reunited in the demand for political change at the court, but that this commitment certainly transcended the “examination field,” thus undermining De Weerdts’s new interpretation of the Learning of the Way. Cf. Shen Songqin, *Nan Song wenren yu dangzheng* 南宋文人與黨爭 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社, 2005), pp. 94–96.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Tu Wei-ming, “The Sung Confucian Idea of Education: A Background Understanding,” in *Neo-Confucian Education: The Formative Stage*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and John W. Chaffee (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Compare John Makeham, *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the Analects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), p. 249.

I think, it is unfortunate that De Weerdts does not clearly distinguish between “philosophical thought” and “ideology.” Thus, on the one hand, she speaks of “unrestricted philosophical discussion” in Zhu Xi’s recorded conversations (p. 205), while on the other hand, she speaks about Zhu’s “partisan agenda” (p. 243). These contradictory descriptions make us wonder whether her book shouldn’t have included a more substantial analysis of Zhu’s thought. It is surely the historian’s responsibility to reconstruct not merely the actions (the discursive practices), but also the hopes and ideas of a historical period. I would argue that we cannot fully understand these discursive practices unless we focus on the intentions of Zhu Xi, and these intentions are closely related to his ideas. It is clear that much of the scholarly work of the twentieth century, focusing on the purely “theoretical” (metaphysical, ontological, ethical) dimension of Zhu’s thought, has neglected his indisputable involvement in the world of *realpolitik*. However, by overlooking the intentions of historical actors and merely focusing on their “discursive practices,” we risk ending up with a very narrow version of historical reality.

(3) As De Weerdts makes clear in her introduction, she accepts “the Althusserian argument that participation in the examinations identified examination candidates as subjects of the state, and I will argue that it applies to Song as well as Qing times” (p. 13). Generally speaking, according to the Althusserian view, historical subjects never are what they seem to be (i.e. independent and autonomous selves), but have always been deeply shaped by the structural whole (economic, ideological, politico-legal) which they are part of. Thus, any idea of autonomous agency becomes meaningless. Ideologies, not human beings, constitute subjects. I think that this neo-Althusserian take on Song intellectual history, linking historical modes of subjectivity and institutionalized modes of writing, certainly has its merits: for example, De Weerdts, through a fine analysis of actual Song examination papers, demonstrates how the new mode of thought proposed by Zhu Xi deeply transformed the rhetoric of examination papers (pp. 224–26). But again here, she risks falling into an overly deterministic view of the Learning of the Way tradition. In one very telling passage, De Weerdts writes that according to Althusser, “ideologies can call on the individual as a unique and indispensable contributor to their project. In the case of the Learning of the Way, study was by definition ‘learning for oneself’ (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學). Self-awareness and moral self-cultivation were the only means by which sociopolitical order could be achieved. The individual’s understanding of the self (in accordance with Learning of the Way moral philosophy) defined one’s membership in the transmission of the Learning of the Way” (p. 44). I do not think that Althusser’s views on the formation of subjectivity are beyond doubt; unfortunately, however, De Weerdts never engages in a more detailed discussion of him.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See for example Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” In *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 121–76.

The main difficulty with Althusser's views of the individual's place inside the education system seems to be that they are heavily indebted to the Marxist tradition and notions like "historical necessity," "human alienation," and "a correspondence between basis and superstructure." And, frankly speaking, I do not believe that this background is particularly useful for understanding either the Learning of the Way or Late Imperial Confucian culture in general.<sup>12</sup> Although we who are embedded in the liberal Western tradition are not well-equipped to recognize this, there *was* a strong notion of autonomous selfhood in Zhu Xi's new interpretation of the Confucian tradition.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, political order was ultimately to be realized through self-cultivation, but the link between these two goals was not as close and one-dimensional as De Weerdts suggests.

With the above criticism I certainly do not want to suggest that De Weerdts's historical narrative is at any point inaccurate; indeed, she has very strong evidence for all of her main claims. But I do disagree with her about the broader *meaning* of her research. Nevertheless, it is to De Weerdts's credit that she raises these and a host of other questions in her book. Anyone interested in the Learning of the Way tradition and the fate of Chinese thought in Imperial China will profit from reflecting on *Competition over Content*.

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<sup>12</sup> Most recently, Jiyuan Yu has tried to reconstruct the Confucian view on selfhood and learning by going back to Aristotle, who indeed seems to be a more meaningful interlocutor than Marx. See Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 209–15.

<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, according to many modern Chinese readers, Zhu Xi's writings embody the moral goals of self-realization and spiritual independence. See for example Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, *Xinti yu xingti 心體與性體* (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju 正中書局, 1968–1969). Compare also Daniel K. Gardner's remarks on the importance of the "inner life" in Zhu's thought. See Gardner, *Zhu Xi's Reading of the Analects: Canon, Commentary, and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 117–20.