Teacher Xu: Entering a Classroom in Late Qing China
徐老師: 在一所清末的小學課堂內

Introduction

This is the story of Teacher Xu. We know this story because of a set of teaching materials Teacher Xu left behind that were preserved by his student. Teacher Xu was not a member of China's elite but, rather, a typical schoolteacher living at the end of the Qing dynasty, when the time-honored and traditional approach to pedagogy was still very much in force. He must have been a lively teacher, with a charismatic personality and a touch of humor, which he brought into the classroom. He seems to have been deeply committed to his students and was concerned about their well-being. All these qualities are reflected in the teaching materials, the “text” he used.

Teacher Xu was one of the common people in China. He made his living using his knowledge of writing and his own education to work as a teacher of boys (who were most likely to be students) most likely ages seven to sixteen. He imparted basic reading and writing skills and the intellectual culture they had inherited as Chinese. Some of the boys may have hoped to continue their studies and to take the provincial-level examination that would lead to a government-awarded degree. But when the traditional educational system was abolished in 1905, and when new elementary schools using new-style printed textbooks were adopted, Teacher Xu’s traditional texts and classroom style began to fall out of favor. The old-style education did not disappear in China after 1906, especially in the countryside, though ambitious students and their parents knew that the modern age called for a different set of skills and a less traditional worldview.

The teaching materials we have that allow us to compose a portrait of Teacher Xu consist of 102 pages of handwritten information that Teacher Xu decided one day to have copied and bound together with string. He no doubt had other texts and materials in either handwritten or printed form that he used in the classroom, but these are the materials that came into my possession.

I bought the bound text used by Teacher Xu at the Panjiayuan market in Beijing in September 2005, when I had just begun to collect handwritten texts offered by the used booksellers. The price was not high, because most
people were not interested in these old texts of uncertain date and unknown provenance. I thought about the text and the meanings of the information I found there, and the result is this chapter about Teacher Xu.

Schoolteachers in the Late Qing

I estimate that Teacher Xu lived between 1840 and about 1910. This assumed date of his birth is based information given in his text. My method of calculating the dates given here is outlined at the end of this chapter. These estimates allow me to create a logical chronology for the life of Teacher Xu and his students.

As a teacher in a traditional-style school in the late Qing dynasty, assuming that he taught between about 1865 and 1905, Teacher Xu had likely received some formal education and had likely studied for the lowest formal degree, the shengyuan, offered by the county government. Had he passed the examination, Teacher Xu would have been a xiuccai. In earlier times, he might have wanted to continue his studies in order to take the higher-level government examinations; passing those exams could lead to appointment as a government official. Being a government official brought with it high social status and the opportunity for a financially secure future. By the end of the Qing, however, the number of xiuccai wanting to take the higher-level government exams exceeded available government posts, so even if he passed all the examinations, it is unlikely that Teacher Xu would have been offered a government job. It is also possible that Teacher Xu took the first exam but was unable to pass the next-level examination, even though he had studied hard, had a good knowledge of Chinese history and literature, and could boast of good calligraphy. It was an established custom in China that some scholars spent much of their lives preparing for the examinations and taking them repeatedly until they passed or gave up trying.¹

¹ On the many years that students spent trying to pass the examinations as an established practice in China, see Hilde De Weerdt, *Competition over Content: Negotiating Standards for the Civil Service Examinations in Imperial China (1127–1279)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 11, 376, 379. A useful and thoughtful consideration of the traditional examination system in China is Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations*. Broad coverage of the Qing exam system with interesting details is in Yang et al., *Zhongguo kaoshi tongshi*, 3: 349–375. See also the useful glossary in Marianne Bastid, *Educational Reform in Early Twentieth China*, trans. Paul J. Bailey (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies University of Michigan, 1988), appendix 3.
Figure 4.1

Storyteller. Men such as this made a living by reciting historical stories and romances, usually from sources that had been circulating for generations, in a practice known as pingshu 評書. Because these men could read and write, they often also worked as schoolteachers or in any of the other lines of work requiring some literacy. But unlike highly educated elite scholars, these men were pingmin, who earned money from the crowds of people who stopped to listen to their stories in the public marketplace or at a local temple courtyard. The photo was taken about 1919.

Sidney D. Gamble Photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke Library
Nevertheless, those who had studied for the exam and had actually taken it considered themselves intellectuals, and they were also considered intellectuals by the general public. These men advertised their status as educated people by wearing a scholar’s gown and skullcap in public. People who saw them did not know who had passed the examination and who had not, and the gown and cap elicited general respect from people encountered on the street. In a society where the majority of the people could not read or write well, the person who had received some formal education and could read and write was given general respect.2

However, the practical problem for most graduates of how to earn a living remained. Chinese society at the time had about a 30 percent rate of literacy, meaning that the majority of people could not easily read or write beyond writing their own name and recognizing some basic words.3 As mentioned in previous chapters, educated men turned to professions that took advantage of their knowledge of texts. Some became herbal doctors [langzhong 郎中], fortunetellers, ritual masters, and legal advisors. Some were scribes who could write letters for people and the matching couplets used at weddings and other ceremonies. Many educated men worked as teachers in the local schools and academies that existed in almost all cities and often even in villages.

In the Qing dynasty, there was no nationally approved curriculum supervised by higher-level authorities and no controlled set of teaching materials. Of course, through custom and centuries of use, everyone was aware of the foundational texts used in elementary education [qimeng 敦蒙]. Classics such as the Lunyu 論語 [Analects of Confucius] or the words of Mengzi 孟子 [Mencius], often complemented by the Sanzijing 三字經 [Three-Character Classic] were the standard texts. Elementary-school students memorized the texts, learned to recognize and write characters from them, and learned about

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2 It has been estimated that very few of those who took the higher-level exams were able to pass. Because of this, for the common people, the question of passing or not passing was not important because simply having studied for the exams conferred status. Benjamin Elman researched the likelihood of passing the examinations and concluded that 1–5 percent of the candidates passed the exams. They came in various levels and types, so computing this number from available records is quite a task. For several estimates, see Elman, Civil Examinations and Meritocracy. One can calculate a 5 percent pass rate from John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, China, A New History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 101–107. Education under the “traditional” Qing system is placed in the context of Chinese society at the time in Richard J. Smith, The Qing Dynasty and Traditional Chinese Culture (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

3 Chapter 1 discusses literacy in pre-1950s China. See also Chapter 1, note 36.
Chinese history, literature, and common morality from their teacher’s comments on the texts. A broader set of texts and written materials dealing with philosophy, literature, policy making, and history had become sanctioned as standard texts over centuries of use, overseen and approved by the authorities in the capital at Beijing, and these were the basis of the higher-level examinations. Schools at the local level were rarely supervised by any higher authorities, except for the people who hired and paid them.  

4 Qimeng 启蒙 was used to indicate elementary education. An excellent discussion of the various texts used in the private academies and schools in traditional China is Osawa Akihiro 大沢晃彦, “Keimō to kyogyō no aida: dentō Chūgoku ni okeru chishiki no kaisōsei 啓蒙と挙業のあいだ： 伝統中国における知識の階層性 [Between Elementary Education and Official Office: The Class Basis of Knowledge in Traditional China],” Tōyō bunka kenkyū 東洋文化研究 [Research on Asian Culture], no. 7 (March 2005). I have acquired some works in this category for my own collection. A handwritten manuscript of twenty-four consecutively numbered pages is titled Basic Primer [Gyemongpyon 계몽편 啓蒙篇] because it was a basic Chinese-language classical text with Korean-language hangul 한글 markers added to help Korean students understand the phrases written in Chinese characters. The markers were hangul phrases such as hago 하고 and ira 이라 (a sentence ending), so students could pronounce all of the text in Korean and it would sound more like a Korean-language work. This work is 9½ in (24.13 cm) h × 6–1/8 in (15.74 cm) w, that I bought in Seoul in September 2005. This work is also discussed in Chapter 2. The text appears to be extracted from the Lunheng 论衡 [Discourses Weighed in the Balance], a text from the Eastern Han period (25–220CE) written by Wang Chong 王充. For example, the first phrases (as pronounced in Chinese) are shangyoutian, xiayoudi. tiandizhijian, yourenyan 上有天, 下有地. 天地之間有人焉 [Heaven is above, earth is below. Between heaven and earth is man]. A portion of an early English translation of Wang’s works is available in Alford Forke, trans., Lun-Heng, Part ii, Miscellaneous Essays of Wang Ch’ung; Translated from the Chinese and Annotated (1911, repr. New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962), available online at Open Library.org, https://archive.org/stream/lunheng02wang#page/n5/mode/2up, accessed May 17, 2014. A note on the Lunheng is in Michael Loewe, ed., Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), 309–312. A lithographed text in my collection titled Standard Elementary Education [Zhengyi qimeng 正義啓蒙] (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1916) is two volumes bound as one (vol. 1 is sixteen folio leaves, vol. 2 is fifteen folio leaves) that I bought in Guilin in September 2005. The book discusses classical phrases taken from the Analects of Confucius and how to write baguwen 八股文, the “eight-legged” essays that were once used as part of the official government examinations. By 1916, when this book appeared, the traditional form of education had been abolished, yet clearly many schools were still teaching the curriculum. A further text in this category in my collection is a woodblock book of two parts bound together titled Characters for Elementary Education [Zhengmeng ziyi 正蒙字義]. This title was brushed in, but the title on each woodblock sheet is ziyi 字義. Part 1 [shangpian 上篇] is fifty-one folio leaves, part 2 [xiapian 下篇] is 30+ folio leaves. It is 9½ in (24.13 cm) h × 6 in (15.24 cm) w, and I bought it in Shanghai in January 2013. This is a
Teacher Xu’s Classroom in Manchuria. The classroom is cold, so students wear fur-lined hats and heavy padded robes. They wear long queues [bian 辔], the Manchu hairstyle required during the Qing dynasty. Young students stand with their back to the teacher in order to loudly and clearly recite the passages they have memorized.

Photo from R. van Bergen, The Story of China (New York: American Book Company, 1902, 1922)

could determine their own sequence of introducing materials to students, and they could introduce other materials they found relevant.

Although given general respect by society and their students, teachers at the local level were not paid much. Often their pay consisted of some cash, in addition to food, free lodging, and possibly some free meals. In the chaoben Riches Bestowed [Qianjinfu 千金賦] (see Chapter 1), a schoolteacher during the early Republican era described his modest pay, given to him in both currency and
dictionary that goes well beyond what would have been considered an appropriate level for elementary education. The very pliant quality of the bleached paper and the sharp printing indicate this is a quality volume most likely from the late Qing period.
grain. He recorded using the income to buy some coal, chalk, and a newspaper subscription. At that time, 40 yuan per month (equal to about USD $20) was adequate to meet all basic needs for a single individual or a small nuclear family in Fengtian (present-day Shenyang). Thus with the clues given in his chaoben, we can fairly safely assume that this teacher lived in south Manchuria during that period. His cash income, when combined with the food he was also given, allowed him to meet all his basic expenses for rent and food. By teaching at three schools, our teacher earned more than carpenters or skilled laborers. That income, combined with the “status” given to his profession, must have made him feel that he was an upstanding resident of the city.

Teacher Xu Orders a Set of Teaching Materials to be Prepared

Teacher Xu lived and taught in or near the city of Panshi in Jilin Province. Panshi is south of Jilin city, located on a major route that ran south through Liaoyuan to Fengtian, the largest city in south Manchuria. (The city is 374 miles, or 602 km, northeast of Chaoyang, mentioned above in this chapter.) A city had been located at the site of Panshi for at least a thousand years. It received the name Panshi during the Ming dynasty in 1384, when a government garrison was set up there. In the late Qing, the city was enjoying a renaissance of sorts, with increasing numbers of people moving into the area and with lively and profitable markets. In 1902 it was designated the county seat for Panshi county.

We do not know the dates for the next part of the story, but the story can begin to take shape based on some educated guesses. In about 1883, when he was forty-three years old, Teacher Xu took some materials that he had to

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5 The discussion in the notes to Chapter 1 discuss the probable location of where the teacher worked, Chaoyang, and the currency in which he was paid.

6 For comments on the cost of living in Fengtian in the 1920s, see Ronald Suleski, “A Note on Currencies in Warlord China,” in Civil Government in Warlord China: Tradition, Modernization and Manchuria (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), xiii–xvi. Comments on some of the salaries received by teachers under the traditional system are in Ōsawa, “Keimō to kyogyō no aida,” 33–43.

7 As stated earlier, I assume that this teacher also worked as a yinyang master for extra income.

8 The teacher discussed above who told us about his income lived in Chaoyang, Fengtian. However, Teacher Xu, the subject of this chapter, lived in Panshi, Jilin. Both locations are in Manchuria, Northeast China.
have them copied neatly and bound together in a single volume that would be convenient to use in the classroom. (See Calculating the Dates of this Book at the end of this chapter for a discussion of how the dates were calculated.) He went to the Panshi marketplace to locate a shop or a person to copy the materials for him. He found a shop called the Zhizhoutang [Hall of Great Purpose], which used as its trademark Translucent Jade Disk [Bi jin ming 壁津冥]. The work of the copyist was well done, in a clear and well-spaced script in the standard [zhengkaishu 正楷書] style. Although at this time paper made from bamboo was the type most commonly produced in China, in this case the copyist used handmade paper probably made from rice, which had not been strongly bleached and was a very light brown color. Each leaf was 9¾ inches (24.76 cm) high and 17½ inches (45.08 cm) wide, folded in half, with the open edges being bound with string. The paper was of medium quality, neither the best nor the worst, with a pliant, almost clothlike softness. The final copy was bound in the five-binders style [wuzhenyan dingfa 五針眼訂法] of Korean-style books. Chinese string-bound volumes usually have four holes in the paper along the binding edge, with the binding string inserted through the holes. Korean-bound books, in contrast, use five holes. Many Koreans resided in this area of southern Jilin, and this indicates that the person who bound the book, if not also the copyist, was most likely Korean.9

Information on shops that offered copying services has been difficult to find. Yet in the culture of late Qing and early Republican China, in which a vibrant manuscript culture continued to exist in spite of the provenance of printed matter that was inexpensive and easily available, it would be logical to assume that such services were offered, either by shops or by individuals. I assume these services would be located inside a bookseller’s shop. This service might have been offered by shops that offered seal carving [kezidian 刻字店], because a person able to write calligraphy well with a brush was needed to inscribe the text of the seals before they were carved. We can also assume that scribes were available near government offices in order to make copies of government documents and to help clients with the paperwork that those dealing with government bureaucrats might need. In the Ming dynasty, there was a lane in Beijing called Assistant’s Lane [Chashou hutong 插手胡同], but by the Qing, its name had been changed to Copyist’s Lane [Chaoshou hutong 插手胡同].

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9 The five-hole style is discussed in Traces of Jiki and Korean Movable Metal Types (Cheongju, Korea: Cheongju Early Printing Museum, 2003), 75. Because of the large number of Koreans living in Jilin, it is possible that binding materials using five holes was a common practice even among Chinese in the area.
About 1910, reflecting the desire to institute a republican form of government, a National Assembly [Zhongyiyuan 稱議院] building was built on this land. Obviously, this became an area where government documents and communications could be copied by hand. Most likely, petitions and responses to government communications could also be written for those who were not able to write themselves. After 1928, when the city was named Beiping and the Guomindang had moved its capital to Nanjing, the National Assembly building was used by the University of Legal Administration [Fazheng daxue 法政大學]. In 1938 the building was again used as the National Assembly under the administration set up by the Japanese occupying the city. Later in 1941, it became the Legislative Yuan [Faxueyuan 法學院]. Although the lane still exists in Beijing as Chaoshou hutong, I have not been able to find specific information about any shops in the area currently offering copying services and did not see any when I visited the area.

Not only have I been unable to find references to copyist’s shops in the late Qing, but the Chinese scholars with whom I have discussed this problem are not even sure what terms were used to refer to these shops. It has been suggested that copyists were referred to as “writing servants” [yongshuren 佣書人], and someone who was willing to copy materials would simply put up a sign with his name on it.11

10 In the early Qing, this section of the city was known as the Elephant Stables [Xiang suo 象所], and a small bridge nearby was called the Elephant Bridge [Xiang qiao 象橋]. Elephants had been gifts to the Chinese Emperor in the 1870s from the King of Siam (present-day Thailand), and for a time they were adopted as part of imperial parades. The stables were just to the west of the former Xuanwu Gate [Xuanwumen 玄武門]. Today the gate exists in name only and the former stable land is home to the New China News Agency [Xinhua tongxun 新華通訊].

11 These comments are based on my discussion with Professor Zhang Zhicheng 張志成 of the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication [Beijing yinshua xueyuan 北京印刷學院], in July 2011. The school has a museum of printing in China. We know of the case of Hundred Volumes Zhang [BaiBen Zhang 百本張] in the Qing dynasty (thanks to Wilt Idema for suggesting this topic). Hundred Volumes Zhang would take a list of opera librettos to a nearby temple fair [miaohui 廟會], where customers could select a title from his list. Hundred Volumes Zhang would copy the text and then deliver it to them. See Cui Yunhua 崔蘊華, “BaiBen Zhang ye zidishu shufang 百本張與子弟書書坊 [Hundred Volumes Zhang and His Booklet Shop],” Minzu wenhua yanjiu 民族文化研究 [Research on Ethnic Cultures], 95, no. 4 (December 2004). Mention of small stalls selling low-priced books at the temple fairs at Huoguosi 護國寺 and Longfusi 隆福寺 in Beijing in the mid-Qing, and the availability of handwritten texts for sale in Liulichang 琉璃廠, are mentioned in Li Wenzao 李文藻 (1733–1778), Liulichang shusi ji yijuan; houji 琉璃廠書肆紀一卷; 侯寄.
Advertisement for Copying Services. In this advertisement, Mr. Gong explained the full range of texts he could prepare: birthday congratulations [shouxu 壽序], poems [shici 詩詞], matching phrases [lianhua 聯話], and other items [qita 其他]. The shop offered delivery in three to seven days [san ri zhi qi ri 三日至七日]. The advertisement appeared in Beiping lüxing zhinan 北平旅行指南 [Guide to Visiting Beiping]. Mr. Gong’s advertisement is on page 294.

However, a guidebook to Beiping 北平 from 1935 features an ad for just such a service, listed under the calligrapher’s name. In the advertisement, Mr. Gong 龔 offered to write birthday congratulations, scrolls of poems, or matching phrases. He could be contacted at his home inside the Fucheng Gate, Palace yijuan 琉璃廠書肆記一卷; 後記一卷 [On Liulichang Booksellers in One Volume; A Final Volume] (repr. Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1925), see leaves 2–5. Comments on the kinds of materials that were copied and the people who copied them in the past are in Zheng Rusi 鄭如斯 and Xiao Dongfa 肖東發 Zhongguo shushi 中國書史 [A History of Chinese Books] (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1996), 218–227. The sale of books and pictures are almost always mentioned as items for sale at the temple fairs. One example is Zhong Chunming 仲春明, “Zhongguo de miaohui shichang 中國的廟會市場 [China’s Temple Fair Markets],” Shanghai jingji yanjiu 上海經濟研究 [Shanghai Economic Review], (May 1987).
Gate Entrance, at the Eastern passageway no. 16 [benshi Fuchengnei gongmenkou donglangxia shiliuhao gongzhai 本市阜成內宮門口東廊下十六號龔宅]. Customers could also place orders at the Rongbao Studio [Rongbaozhai daishou 榮寶齋代收] in Liulichang 琉璃廠. This piece of information confirmed my assumption that bookshops served as contacts for the copying business, or that copying was one of the services they could provide.12

Mr. Gong’s advertisement gave the full range of texts he could prepare: birthday congratulations [shouxu 壽序], poems [shici 詩詞], matched phrases [lianhua 聯話], and so on. The shop offered delivery in three to seven days. He could furnish standard poetry in five- or seven-line verses, each poem 4 Chinese dollars, as well as written scrolls of poems, 50 fen (cents) apiece regardless of the size or number of characters. The shop did not have a generic name, such as “copy shop;” rather, Mr. Gong simply described his services.

The copy shop in Panshi to which Teacher Xu brought his materials in 1880 likewise did not clearly state its line of business in its name. It was simply named Zhizhoutang, which was written on the front cover by the company. The company’s stamp, which was embossed on the front cover and on one of the inside pages (p. 9), included Panshi, allowing us to determine the city in which the company was located.13

On the front cover of the book was the title Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xu shi sanzhong 徐氏三種]. The title, which was both impersonal and descriptive, first made me wonder about how the materials had been produced and why, and it proved to be the key to my attempt to reconstruct the story of Teacher Xu. Mr. Xu seemed unlikely to write such a title for materials he had copied himself, whereas it was a natural title for a shop that had prepared and bound the materials for a customer.

12 Beiping lüxing zhinan 北平旅行指南 [Guide to Visiting Beiping], Ma Zhixiang 馬芷庠 ed. (1935). This copy is incomplete, and the book title is written by Wu Peifu 吳佩浮 (b. 1874), a warlord who retired in Beijing in 1932 and died there in 1939. Mr. Gong’s advertisement is on p. 294.

13 It appears the copyist began to copy the Thousand-Character Classic and, after the preface, inserted two extra leaves of paper (four pages). As is still the practice with paid calligraphers, they supply the customer with all copies of their work, or they provide several versions of their work, expecting the customer to select the version they prefer. In the case of this book, one of the items presented to Teacher Xu, although in a hand different from that of the main copyist, is the medical prescription (discussed below) that appears after the preface but before the text of the Thousand-Character Classic.
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種], Cover. The five-ring string binding shown here is a style used by Koreans. The copy shop placed its seal and trademark on the cover.

Photo by Author
The Thousand-Character Classic

The biggest single project Teacher Xu requested was a copy of the Thousand-Character Classic [Qianziwen 千字文], which makes up the bulk of the text, from pages 2–100 (according to my consecutive numbering of the pages). Teacher Xu most likely wanted to have a copy of the Thousand-Character Classic for use as a teaching aid and for his reference. Universally recognized in China, this text was originally prepared in Chinese from an earlier Mongolian version in the early sixth century, during the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–557), by the scholar Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 (d. 521 CE). The text uses four-character phrases that rhyme to introduce ideas about moral precepts, traditional values, natural phenomenon, and the structural and cultural traits of Chinese society.14

Over the centuries, the work became a standard primer for Chinese students. It has been used as one of the basic readers for elementary education since the Qing dynasty.15 It was also one of the texts whose phrases could be used as part of the traditional civil service examinations. The text of this famous work begins with the words:

[At the beginning] The sky was dark and the earth was brown; The universe was formed from a vast wilderness.

Tiandi yuan (xuan)16 huang
Yuzhou honghuang.

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14 Printed editions of the Thousand-Character Classic are ubiquitous in China today. Some are adapted as children's picture books, while others contain examples of the fine calligraphy for use in improving one's own calligraphy. A version containing Chinese and English is Evelyn Lip, 1,000 Character Classic (Singapore: SNP, 1997). The Thousand-Character Classic was one of the most popular texts used in traditional-style elementary education. See Ōsawa, “Keimō to kyōgō no aida,” which mentions this title in many of the examples recorded. Since this publication was so widely available, why didn't Teacher Xu simply purchase a printed version?

15 The Thousand-Character Classic is listed as among the most common texts in the traditional system by many Chinese writers, as recalled in Tanaka Kenji 田中謙二, “Kyū Shina ni okeru kodō no gakujuku seikatsu [School Life for Elementary Students in Old China],” in Tanaka Kenji chosakuji 田中謙二著作集 [Collected Works of Tanaka Kenji] (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 2000), 2: 93, 98.

16 Scholars believe that the correct character is 玄 [xuan, darkness], but the transmitted character has been 元 [yuan, originally]. This phrase was written again on the back cover of Teacher Xu's copy, probably by a student using this copy. Perhaps Teacher Xu had been discussing this point with the student.
天地元 (玄) 黃
宇宙洪荒.

The text includes moral teachings:

Our bodies and hair;
Encompassing the four elements and five constant virtues.

_Gaici shenfa_
_Sida wuchang._  

蓋此身髪
四大五常.

Respect what your parents have nourished.

_Gongwei jüyang._

恭惟鞠養.

Do not impair or injure your body.

_Qigan huishang._

豈敢毀傷.

Women should cherish purity and chastity.

_Nümu zhenjie._

女慕貞潔.

Males should emulate the talented and capable.

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17 According to the classical philosophy of the four elements [sída 四大], the four essential elements are earth, water, fire, and wind. Confucian thinking designated the five constant virtues [wuchang 五常] as benevolence [ren 仁], righteousness [yi 義], propriety [li 裨], wisdom [shi 智], and truthfulness [xin 信].
Teacher Xu’s copy of the *Thousand-Character Classic* contains annotations of each couplet, so it would make a useful reference as a teaching text. The text and its annotations were written in a clean hand by the professional copyist, who was able to produce consistently clear script in a uniform style. This is a fairly long text, consisting of both the text and an extensive commentary on each statement. Teacher Xu must have spent a lot of time as he introduced each statement to the students, explaining the new characters, and maybe having the boys memorize the text as the class proceeded through it. The commentaries were a guide for Teacher Xu’s own explanations to the students. He may have asked them to copy the commentaries as well.

A Recipe for Chinese Medicine

The second item Teacher Xu asked Zhizhoutang to copy was a prescription or a recipe for some Chinese medicine [hanfang 漢方]. This recipe (p. 3) was inserted between the preface and the text of the *Thousand-Character Classic*. Following the recipe, the copyist added three leaves of paper (pp. 4–9), then repeated the Zhizhoutang stamp, and began the text and commentaries of the *Thousand-Character Classic*.

The recipe was a list of natural ingredients, with the required amounts. Among the ingredients listed were: domestic ginseng [lucan 潛參], 5 fen (a fen 分 is the smallest unit of measurement, equaling only a few ounces, or a “pinch.”); bamboo leaves [zhuye 竹葉], 5 fen; anther (a medicine extracted from flowers) [huafen 花粉], 5 fen; brown sugar [chitang 赤糖], 4 or 5 fen; ashes [yanhui 煙灰], 5 fen; Korean ginseng [gaolishen 高麗參], 5 fen; hot wine [shaojiu 燒酒], 1.5 to 2 jin; and chocolate vine [mutong 木通], 5 fen. The resulting mixture must have had an interesting taste, a bit sweet and a bit spicy. The recipe included a few other ingredients (not clear from the text) and instructed:

Cook this repeatedly for x hours over seven days and then take it for three or four days. After three days, the body will xx [illegible]. Then who would be unable to sleep!

*zhu erwang x shi, x qitian, baohaoqian sansitianhao, housantian shen x fa, kong bunengshui jinghu.*
It appears this was medicine for obtaining a good night's sleep. It might have been for Teacher Xu's personal use or perhaps recommended by a friend who learned that Teacher Xu was having trouble sleeping. It might just as easily have been a recipe that Teacher Xu recommended to others when he offered them medical advice. It was not uncommon for educated xiūcāi to earn income on the side as medical consultants or herbal doctors. Because they were able to read medical texts, and people with no formal education considered xiūcāi
knowledgeable in all matters involving writing and books, ordinary people, the *pingmin*, felt comfortable asking educated people for medical advice.\(^\text{18}\)

**Having Fun with a Riddle**

Because he liked to interact with his students, Teacher Xu wanted to use a riddle [*miyu* 謎語] as an instructional tool and as a class activity that would interest the boys and engage them in a group activity. So he asked for a riddle to be copied into his book, and that became the third item for Mr. Xu along with the *Thousand-Character Classic* and the recipe for Chinese medicine.

The riddle he chose was a type known as “find the four words” [*dasizi* 打四字]. It consisted of four lines, each of which gave a clue to forming another word, and the secret word revealed the moral of the sentence. The new word was constructed by combining parts of two of the characters in the sentence. In Teacher Xu’s example, the keyword was “valuables” [*bei* 貝], which occurred in each sentence and was part of each of the newly constructed words. The first line of the riddle read: “This person could not take care of his valuables” [*conglaizhe, bei bukexing* 從來者, 貝不可行], Combining the words “person” [*zhe* 者] and “valuables” [*bei* 貝] yields the new word “gamble” [*du* 賭], meaning the person who is not mindful about his valuables will gamble them away.

The second line reads, “They allowed their valuables to be put in jeopardy” [*zhi yinlingbei, luanfangcun* 只因令貝, 亂方寸], and the newly created word is “greedy” [*tan* 貪], meaning “they became greedy,” formed by combining the words “allowed” [*ling* 令] and “valuables” [*bei* 貝]. The third line reads, “They scattered the valuables they had” [*youkan, yirenbeile* 有看, 一日分貝了], with the new word “poor” [*pin* 貧], meaning “they became poor.” The fourth line reads, “It was as if they were guarding the valuables” [*yiran, shige xubeiren* 依然, 18

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\(^{18}\) I am grateful to Dr. Ming Wong (Huang Ming) 黃明, a doctor of both traditional Chinese and Western medicine in Boston who reviewed this recipe and wrote to me: “This prescription could help the patient to have better energy, a clearer mind, and to sleep better. From this prescription, we could see that the patient must be a male, forty to sixty years old” (e-mail communication, September 17, 2012). My assumption that Teacher Xu was forty-three years old in 1883 when he had these materials copied puts him within the typical age range for this type of prescription according to Dr. Wong. Dr. Wong also expressed observations about emotions and ghosts, mentioned in Chapter 9.
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種]. Page 101, A Favorite Riddle. This shows the riddle [dasizi 打四字] that Teacher Xu used in class with his students. It challenged their ability to recognize and manipulate written characters, while also teaching a moral lesson. The key character to solving the riddle was the word bei 貝 [“valuable” or “precious”]. It would be combined with another character to form a new word.

Photo by author
is a word "steal" [zei 賊], meaning "they turned to thievery in an effort to acquire valuables."19

If we look carefully at this riddle, we can see that the characters to be combined are next to each other, and each line contains the key character 貝 beǐ. To an adult, this might be quickly apparent, but for the ten- or eleven-year-old boys he was teaching, the lines must have been a challenge to untangle, and solving the riddle likely gave them a sense of accomplishment. We can guess that Teacher Xu assigned the unraveling of each line to a different group of boys and had them compete to see which group could uncover the secret word and its meaning the most quickly. He might then have told each group to keep their findings secret and then had each group challenge the other boys to see which individuals from the other groups might be able to uncover the meanings of the other sentences. After the meaning of each sentence and all the new characters were discovered, Teacher Xu might launch into a lecture about the morality involved in the story. This activity could easily have taken up an hour or more of class time, with the chance for a hearty back-and-forth among the students. Teacher Xu must have enjoyed playing this word game with his students, knowing that, along with the new characters they might learn, the game also conveyed a lesson in morality.

Indeed, combining a lesson in conventional morality with whatever other instruction was taking place was a pervasive practice in premodern China. Regardless of the topic at hand, every opportunity was taken to insert words encouraging observance of the tenants of the widely accepted moral norms. Because of a broad assumption in Chinese society that most texts contained a moral instruction for the reader, Teacher Xu’s switch from the fun of solving the riddle to talking about the moral lessons to be drawn was quite acceptable if not expected.

Jottings on the Final Pages

On the final pages, inside and outside the back cover of the bound book he had had produced, Teacher Xu wrote down some notes that reveal more about

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19 Interesting points about riddles in China, both traditional and contemporary, are in Wang Fan 王仿, ed., Zhongguo miyu daquan 中國謎語大全 [Collection of Chinese Riddles] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1983), 1–16, 544–556. Examples of more sophisticated riddles with contemporary subject matter are in Yu Hongnian 于洪年, Zhongguo miyu jicheng (shang) 中國謎語集成, 上 [Collection of Chinese Riddles, vol. i] (Ji’nan: Mingtian chubanshe, 1985).
the man and the role of this text in his life. For example, we know that he was a teacher from the fact that, on the inside cover (p. 102) he wrote the names of six of his students. His favorite must have been Wang Jüfu 王聚福, an eleven-year-old who was originally from Pingding 平丁 County in Shanxi Province. He wrote Wang’s address as Jilin Province, Henan Road, Hexingyin Department Store [Hexingyin baishuoian 和興陻百貨店]. We might infer that the boy lived with his parents above their general store. If this were the case, we can guess that young Wang Jufu did not come from a wealthy family, but that his parents were shopkeepers, and they lived in the same building as the shop. Modern readers might hear the words “department store” and have in mind a large building stocked with ordered shelves of goods. But this was not usually the case in late Qing or Republican China, where modest shops could easily adopt a grand name. Even in the People’s Republic of China, many small shops cluttered with soft drinks, candy, and cigarettes call themselves “supermarkets” [chaoshi 超市], even though in physical size they are more on the order of a large kiosk.

Teacher Xu also wrote down the names of some of his other students and added comments about their personalities or their “fate.” We could take these characterizations as a psychological insight that Teacher Xu had about each boy. But it is more likely that because he was literate, ordinary people likely saw Teacher Xu as someone who was able to analyze people and tell things about the future. In other words, the pingmin often believed that educated people were versed to some degree in fortunetelling. Many xiucui did turn to fortunetelling as a way to earn some income, and they copied and consulted the fortunetelling manuals available. Thus Teacher Xu might have been predicting the future of his students as much as he was characterizing their personalities.

Teacher Xu characterized his student Wang Kemin 王克敏 as optimistic and gifted, writing: “the sun and moon are bright, fortune and blessings” [riyueguang, fuxiang 日月光, 福祥]. He considered Dong Yongfa 董永發 happy-go-lucky and fortunate [hanlaishuwang, lutian 寒來暑往, 禄滇].

Teacher Xu added his own motto to the page: “Seize the day and you will succeed” [Zhiri gaosheng 指日, 高陞]. It is a good motto for the students, but Teacher Xu did not necessarily intend to let the boys see his comments about them, and the motto might reflect more the character of Teacher Xu, who was an active and outgoing person.
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種]. Page 102, Student Names. On this page, Teacher Xu wrote the names of some of his students, along with a comment on their fortune. He also wrote his motto, “Seize the day and you will succeed” [Zhiri gaosheng 指日, 高陞], meant to encourage himself and his students.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Three Items for Mr. Xu and to set it in a plausible context. By making a series of logical assumptions, we can estimate generally when the texts were copied and the role they played in a typical Chinese class at the time. By extrapolating from clues in the materials, we can make other reasonable guesses about Teacher Xu, who commissioned the texts to be compiled, as well as his personality and his approach to teaching and to his students.

My overall assumptions about the book are as follows: the book was copied in about 1880, when Teacher Xu was about forty years old. This I consider was the first generation of the book’s life.

At some point, after using the book in class, perhaps in 1883, when he was forty-three years old, Teacher Xu gave the book to one of his favorite students Wang Bingming 王秉鳴, who proudly practiced writing his name on the back cover. He wrote his name five times, one of which is incomplete because the last character of his name is missing. I assume that in 1883 Wang was about twelve years old, a typical age for studying the Thousand-Character Classic and being able to solve the riddle in the text.

From his writing of the names of several of his students, along with some comments about their personalities and their future, I surmise that Teacher Xu had a caring and attentive relationship with his students. The riddle indicates that he could make the lessons fun for the students. It would not be unusual for a teacher who felt close to his students to make a gift of one of their class texts to one of his favorites. Wang must have treasured the book and his memories of Teacher Xu. He may have read the book many times out of nostalgia. Wang’s possession of the text between 1883 and 1920 was the second generation of the book’s life.

I think that Wang Bingming 王秉鳴 kept the book for more than thirty years, during which time he grew older and became bald. It is possible he did not continue his formal schooling and thus found rereading the text useful and interesting. The book then passed to another young student. Whether Wang gave the book to the student or he died and the book was left behind are both possibilities. We have only one specific date in the book: when the young student wrote the date he received the book on the cover in pencil, June 27, 1920. That was the third generation in the life of the book.

That student wrote another comment on the inside of the front cover that seems to link Wang to the book. He must have seen “old” Mr. Wang lovingly reading the book, so the student wrote: “This is the book that retired bald-headed Wang used to read so earnestly” [Wang yuanwai san, tulaorenjia, ta
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種], Page 103, Favorite Student. The student Wang Bingming 王秉鳴 practiced writing his name five times, but in one of them he did not complete it. I assume Teacher Xu gave this text to young Wang, which is why he wrote his name on the back page.

PHOTO BY AUTHOR
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種], Cover, Showing Date of 1920. I assume that June 27, 1920, was the date that the bald-headed Wang Bingming 王秉鳴 gave this book to a young student, who wrote the date in pencil on the cover.

Photo by author
Three Items for Mr. Xu [Xushi sanzhong 徐氏三種]. Pages 1 and 2, Bald-Headed Wang. The student who received this text in June 1920 wrote the phrase on page 1: “This is the book that retired bald-headed Wang used to read so earnestly” [Wang yuanwai san, tulaorenjia, ta kanzhong de shu 王員外散,禿老人家,他看中的書].

*kanzhong de shu* 王員外散, 禿老人家, 他看中的書]. The young student used the designation “retired official” [yuan waisan 員外散] to refer to bald-headed Wang, a phrase that was explained in some detail on the very next open page he looked at. On that page (p. 2), the first line of the preface to the Thousand-Character Classic reads, “Rhymed prose by the retired official with imperial appointment Zhou Xingsi” [Liang chiyuan waisan qi shilang Zhou Xingsi ci yun 梁勅員外散騎侍郎周興嗣次韻] (underlining added). This was followed by a paragraph explaining the term “retired official.” Our young student noticed the phrase and was aware of its meaning, so he proudly used it in his own description of bald-headed Wang.20

Judging from the handwriting of the boy in 1920, he could have been about twelve to fifteen years old. If he had been born in 1908 and was twelve years old in 1920, he could have been fifty-eight years old in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution erupted in China. That was not a good time to hold on to old texts

20 Some young student, possibly this boy, also did some scribbling in pencil on the inside back cover (p. 102), writing over the notes on students that Teacher Xu had written. I believe private elementary schools still used traditional texts in the curriculum in China’s provincial cities in 1920.
because they were criticized as reflecting feudalistic thinking and values. Given the tenor of the times, it is possible that he hid the book. Sometime after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and possibly after he died, the book was found by his relatives. They passed it on to a used book dealer (or to a paper recycler, who then sold it to a used book dealer). As mentioned earlier, many of the chaoben sold in flea markets and old book markets in China nowadays (2018) were obtained in this manner by the book dealers.

This last explanation is pure guesswork because we have no way of documenting this phase of the book’s life. However, this seems like a plausible
An Image of Teacher Xu? The man in this photo was actually named Teacher Liu [Liu laoshi 劉老師]. But his hearty and welcoming smile may be reminiscent of Teacher Xu [Xu laoshi 徐老師]. The photo was taken about 1918.

Sidney D. Gamble Photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke Library

and unremarkable explanation for how the book ended up in Beijing, where I bought it at Panjiayuan in September 2005 during the Midautumn Festival. I own the book, now in the fourth generation of its life cycle.

Perhaps the most important point of this chapter is that these materials need to be respected because they were created by pingmin. These cultural
artifacts were used in their daily lives. This bound volume was used by Teacher Xu in the performance of his profession as a teacher and to earn a living. It was used by Teacher Xu’s students to learn valuable skills, which would help them to become productive adults with a degree of formal education that could increase their standing in society. When we first view these items, they may not seem to have a clear context. But they are part of a larger and culturally rich milieu. They were part of the lives of ordinary people in China in the late Qing and early Republican period. In order to understand them fully, not only their materiality but the contexts in which they were actively used by living people, we need to bring them to life, to animate them by making them props in an ongoing human drama—because that is what they were. In analyzing Three Items for Mr. Xu, I have created a story that is logical and plausible and that helps bring the chaoben and their owners to life.

Calculating the Dates of This Book

The dates in this chapter regarding the lives of the protagonists and the book’s creation and transmission were calculated as follows. Based on the different handwriting in the book and the one clear date of 1920, I tried to reconstruct the book’s life cycle. Certainly, the stamp of the copy shop on the cover with the name of Panshi in Northeast China was also important in establishing the context of the place where it was produced.

Based on how an elementary class was organized in the late Qing period, it was clear that these materials (except for the drug prescription) would be useful in classroom instruction. If the teacher was a member of the educated population, perhaps a xiucai, it would be evident why he asked to have the prescription copied down, because, as stated above and in other chapters, many holders of the lowest-level government degree earned income by acting as herbal doctors. They were literate and were looked up to by many people in society, who would have considered it natural for them to give medical advice and pass along prescriptions.

To estimate the time frame of the creation of the book and Teacher Xu’s life, I took the one clearly written date of 1920 on the inside front cover and calculated back three generations, considering roughly thirty years as a generation. A new generation begins when young adults marry and have a child. I assumed in my calculations that these were poor people, not high on the economic ladder, so marriage occurred late for males (late twenties or early thirties), which was when a child was born. Using this imprecise calculation, I calculate that Teacher Xu might have been born about 1840. I assume that he had the book...
Figure 4.13

*Selling Mantou. The man in the foreground is selling mantou 饅頭, a steamed bread that is popular in Manchuria and North China. Considered an affordable and filling food, it can be filled with ground meat, vegetables, or sweet red bean paste. The photo was probably taken in Beijing around 1918.*

Sidney D. Gamble Photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke Library
bound in 1880. Judging from the paper used and the materials inside, this date seems reasonable. I assume that Teacher Xu was forty-three years old in 1883, when he gave the book as a memento to twelve-year-old Wang Bingming 王秉鳴, the boy who became bald-headed Wang. Under the old system, students in Chinese elementary classes were usually between seven and sixteen years old, so I selected twelve years old as the most typical age for students in the elementary private schools.21

The third generation of the book’s life began in 1920, when bald-headed Wang, or someone else, gave the book to a student. I assume the date of June 27, 1920, was written by a student around age twelve when he received it. Judging from the handwriting in pencil, I guess that this student was of elementary-school age. If he was twelve years old in 1920, then he had been born in 1908. Wang Bingming 王秉鳴, the bald-headed man who might have given the book to the young student might have been born in 1871, and his baldness at age forty-nine was noticeable to the boy.

21 These are commonly accepted dates for the ages of elementary schoolchildren in traditional China. They are repeatedly cited by Ōsawa, “Keimō to kyogyō no aida.”