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**Renouncers in Chinese World:  
Reconsidering Gentry and “Local Elites”**

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## Renouncers in Chinese World: Reconsidering Gentry and “Local Elites”

A major interest of Chinese anthropologists and historians has been, and remains to be, the literati (*shi*) of imperial China. The perception of the role of these literati vary, ranging from the keepers of “Chinese Culture” (Qian Mu, 2001a) to philosopher-politicians (Fung, 1952), and to technocrats of the empire (Gu Jiegang, 1998; Yan Buke, 1998). Inspired by a new paradigm, a conceptual shift occurred in the 1990s, when a group of historians proposed to replace the term, *shishen* (gentry), with the term, “local elites” (Esherick and Rankin, 1990)<sup>1</sup>. These lines of research emerged from a ‘distaste’ towards the Weberian construction of “Chinese gentry” as similar to the non-aristocratic/non-commoner, rural, land-owning class in England—a construction allegedly shared by Chinese anthropologists and historians (Fei, 1953; Chang, 1955; Ch’ü, 1962; Ho, 1962) who believe that China had a single, culturally homogeneous social group called *shishen*, scholar-officials or gentry.

While the shift was well-reasoned, collectively subscribed and durably employed,<sup>2</sup> few studies have attempted to assess it in the light of the Chinese categories that were in place in the imperial system. Scholars typically view “local elites” as a better concept to depict the dynamics, and the complexity of interaction, between wealth, status and power. Yet, there is good reason to think that the concept of “local elites” is removed from the relevant social facts of imperial China. In this article, I reconsider the role of the *shen* (gentry) by introducing the *yin* (renouncer)—a neglected sub-category of Chinese *shi* (literati). I argue that by keeping the literati’s vocation of the transcendental *Dao* (the Way) through rejecting the emperor, the renouncers constitute the other-worldly orientation of the literati, complimentary to this-worldly-oriented gentry. In doing so, the renouncers complete the transcendental nature of the literati, which the power-based concept of “local elites” neglects.

I will start with re-assessing the “gentry/local elites” shift. This will be followed by an analysis of the renouncer, the counterpart of the gentry, both of which are under the category of the literati. As such, the gentry has a special status and prerogatives that the “local elite” model tends to miss. I will end with a discussion of the commonalities between the *yin* and the *shen*. In traditional Chinese society, “the literati” (*shi*) means those who are committed to keep the transcendental Way (*dao*), manifested in two subcategories of persons. The one is the gentry (*shen*), who, after serving in the imperial office as degree-holders, retire and live in his hometown. The other is the renouncer (*yin*), who refused to take imperial exam or serve the emperor. Nor does a renouncer engage in local affairs. The “local elites” includes but not being limited to the gentry, designating those who dominate within a local arena.

### A SHIFT FROM “GENTRY” TO “LOCAL ELITES”

Although the “Chinese gentry” was introduced by Western diplomats and missionaries, it was the first generation of Chinese anthropologists and historians who provided sociological explanations of this category of people, among which the best example is probably Fei

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive and sympathetic review, see Li Meng (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For example, it partially inspired the debate on state-society relations and local historical studies (Perry, 1994; Zhang, 2000; Isett, 2007).

Xiaotong (1953, 1992[1948]). Fei adopted a functionalist explanation to the rise of the gentry, perceiving them as rich men seeking self-protection by offering their services to the emperor with their monopolised knowledge of ethics (*daotong*). To him, the gentry “may be returned officials or the relatives of officials or simply educated landowners” (Fei, 1953: 32). The gentry had the power, through negotiations with imperial officials, to alter the emperor’s creed in the interest of their kinsmen and neighbours. They thus constituted the bottom-up track that balanced the top-down power of the emperor. Therefore, the gentry and the emperor were in an interactive relationship in the Chinese social structure, which Fei referred to as a “double track”. In a way similar to the West, where civil rights control the government, the Chinese gentry, together with the emperor’s ethic of “do-nothingism” (*wuwei zhuyi*), “house-arrested” the emperor and harnessed him from relentlessness. Therefore, self-governance at the grassroots was achieved in the lower public domain, between the county magistrate and the household, where the gentry took leadership of public affairs like irrigation and education.

As Fei’s contemporaries, Chang Chung-li and Ch’ü T’ung-tsu also argued that the gentry had informal power in the local arena. Chang was more concerned with the scale of influence among different gentry members in local affairs, and he concisely defined a member of the gentry as a person whose position “was gained through the acquisition of a title, grade, degree, or official rank which automatically made the holder a member of the *shen-shih* group” (Chang, 1955: 3). Ch’ü T’ung-tsu (1962) suggested that the term, “gentry”, should be replaced with the term, “local elite”, but insisted that an imperial degree was indispensable for its membership, including membership in the “official-gentry” (*shen*), which was often absent from the locality.

A group of historians began to challenge the gentry model (Schoppa, 1982; Rankin, 1986; Duara, 1988), and the collective effort finally resulted in a conference monograph (Esherick and Rankin, 1990) arguing against the validity of defining the gentry as a unified, homogenous group of degree-holders. Drawing particularly from “the field of anthropology”, the conference contributors believed that the gentry class had declined in late imperial China, and “[f]irm lines between functional elites like scholars, merchants, and militarists blurred as the conference looked at the often complex combinations of resources underlying elites dominance” (Esherick and Rankin, 1990: xiii). The gentry model alleged as emerging from Weberian bureaucracy or the Marxian class became questionable, especially when the strategies, resources, political processes and changes of elites were in question. Therefore,

We have supplemented the familiar Weberian and Marxian analytical categories with the concepts used by anthropologists studying the practices of individuals within specific social structures. We define local elites as *any individuals or families that exercised dominance within a local arena*, thus deliberately avoiding a definition in terms of one or more of the Weberian categories of wealth, status, and power.

(Esherick and Rankin, 1990: 10, my emphasis)

Therefore, “local elites” was believed as a better category to analyse the Chinese local arena, because “local elites” was a wider category that encompasses the gentry *as well as* the rising militarists, merchants, and bandits, making them under one analytical concept.

This historiography suggests that the gentry characterized as degree-holders had the elite resources fungible with other material sources of power. However, it is exactly in this sense that, as “individuals” “practicing” in the “local arena”, the Chinese gentry, as a part of the local elite, was re-interpreted as a group of power-seekers who, in order to “dominate”, had to pursue “resource”:

To maintain their dominance, elites must control certain resources: material (land, commercial wealth, military power); social (networks of influence, kin groups, associations); personal (technical expertise, leadership abilities, religious or magical powers); or symbolic (status, honor, particular lifestyles, and all the cultural exchanges that inform Pierre Bourdieu’s fruitful concept of ‘symbolic capital’). Elites, or would-be elites, use their resources in strategies designated to enhance or maintain their positions. The focus on strategies calls attention to the dynamic processes of creating and maintaining elite power”

(Esherick and Rankin, 1990: 11).

Since material, social, personal or symbolic powers has little difference as means to control resources, we are told that in terms of seeking individual interest to dominate in the local arena, obtaining an imperial degree was qualitatively no different from earning a large fortune, obtaining lands, or in the case of bandit leaders, professing in armed robberies and killings. The question is: do the Chinese gentry themselves accept this picture?

Almost all first-generation, Western-trained Chinese anthropologists and historians came from gentry families. Rather than following Max Weber—a name little known in 1940s China but was said (Esherick and Rankin, 1990) to have misled them—they were more conscious of the gentry’s particular function, a function taken over by agents of the revolutionary state rather than other forms of “local elites”, for example, the new *baojia* (the surveillance institution) as attacked by Fei Xiaotong (1992[1948]). Merchants, landowners and militarists were also conscious of the fundamental difference between them and the gentry (Ch’ü, 1962: 171). It would be ridiculous to even put together a gentry member and a bandit leader—a figure not new to imperial China (He Xiya, 1925).

In his depiction of the gentry, Ch’ü T’ung-tsu—a sociologist-historian from a prominent gentry family—laboriously explained the fundamental difference between the gentry<sup>3</sup> and other groups like merchants and landowners, i.e. the attainment of bureaucratic status or the qualifications for such status was what distinguished the gentry from other groups (Ch’ü, 1962: 170-171). Arguing against R. M. Marsh (1961), who had proposed viewing the Chinese gentry as “local elites” (earlier than Esherick and Rankin did), Ch’ü emphasised that there were irreducible factors that differentiate the gentry from other local elites:

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<sup>3</sup> Esherick and Rankin’s (1990: 4) recognition of Ch’ü’s suggestion to replace the term, “gentry”, with the term, “local elite”, is true, but Ch’ü’s reason for doing so is exactly the opposite of what is understood by Esherick and Rankin. Ch’ü tried to avoid the misleading association of the Chinese gentry with the English gentry, the latter of which has nothing to do with qualification of an imperial degree. For Ch’ü, the local elite includes no one else but the gentry: “While ‘local elites’ might seem rather too general, it does not have the misleading associations that ‘gentry’ has. But, wishing to avoid further confusion through the injection of a new term, I shall keep the commonly accepted term ‘gentry’, emphasizing the rather unique features of the Chinese gentry” (Ch’ü, 1962: 170).

It is true, as Marsh says, that wealthy merchants and large landowners did contribute to certain aspects of leadership, such as raising funds for financing and operating irrigation projects, granaries, and public works, for maintaining temples, and for philanthropies. But they did not direct irrigation projects and public works;... they did not lecture in academies; they did not perform ‘ideological functions in ceremonies’; they seldom arbitrated disputes; above all, they were not in a position to act as intermediaries between the government and the people. Thus they did not perform the important leadership roles generally associated with the *shen-shih*, because they did not possess the status and privileges of the *shen-shih*... *A distinction must be made between financial contribution and actual local leadership in order to ascertain who were the local elite in a community*”

(Ch’ü, 1962: 314, my emphasis).

We therefore have no difficulty realising that the “behavioural” difference between the gentry and other people who had an influence in local affairs need to be unearthed. This is a difference that the concept of “local elites” had missed when Chinese locality is reduced to an arena of individuals seeking dominance of public affairs. Instead of translating it into “symbolic power”, this difference is a part of the social facts (Durkheim, 1982; Gofman, 1998), vested with values that are not ready to be removed from action (Parry, 1998). Values, as inseparable parts of representations, “are in general intimately combined with other, non-normative representations. A ‘system of values’ is thus an abstraction from a wider system of ideas-and-values” (Dumont, 1986: 247), a system urged, in modern scene, to be separated from “scientific investigation”. Louis Dumont warns us of the risk that this separation “simply confirms the link between science in general and the *is/ought* separation” (ibid., 246), and this is methodologically problematic, as the chance for “us” (the moderns) to understand “them” (pre-moderns and non-moderns) is missed.<sup>4</sup>

When values irremovable from acts are considered, the seemingly similar acts of power are qualitatively different between a gentry member inaugurating a bridge and a group of bandits robbing a village. Attempts should be made to retrieve the value of the act, in order to understand why a gentry member should remain humble, modest and artistic, and, be expected to be morally superior, while other local elites are not necessarily obliged to.

## **RENOUNCER: A NEGLECTED ASPECT OF THE LITERATI**

Fei Xiaotong believed that the gentry of the local should be understood in terms of their relation to the emperor, rather than within the local itself, because the power vested on them came precisely from their dispossession of power in the face of the emperor. The puzzle is that the gentry, while active in the local, were very “inactive” and “passive” in the imperial office. They were skilful in “the art of bureaucracy” (*huanshu*), happy to do nothing, and particularly unwilling to challenge the emperor. According to Fei, the gentry had to refrain from asserting power because the emperor’s throne must not be threatened—a situation started by Emperor Qin Shihuang, who symbolised the beginning of an epoch of absolute, usurped, political power of the emperor, who may pardon any crime except for rebellion. By serving the emperor, a gentry member actually wanted nothing but to protect his family and fortune, and to “return to the native countries at the old age” (*gaolao huanxiang*):

<sup>4</sup> For the epistemological investigation of value, see Decombes (2001).

The Chinese officials when in office protected their relatives, but, when this duty to the family had been performed, they retired. Retirement and even a hermit's life were the ideal. In retirement there was no longer any authority to be served with watchful care, while the relatives who had gained protection from their kinsman official owed him a debt of gratitude

(Fei, 1953: 31-32).

Moreover, the gentry's dream had to be justified in that the emperor had to believe the gentry's services were needed. Therefore, the gentry had claimed, successfully, to possess unique ethical knowledge, or *daotong*—the succession and transmission of the Way crucial to the legitimacy of the emperor's rulership but distinctively different from his political power, or *zhengtong*—the succession and transmission of the throne. Ethical knowledge of the right conduct, *daotong*, was monopolised by the Confucians through their efforts to exemplify Duke Zhou as the model literati, entitling Confucius as “the king without throne” (*suwang*), and creating a *Dao*-keeping class of “scholar-masters” (*shiru*). The separation of ethical and political lines was one of the most important achievements of the literati, but to Fei, it was also a rather selfish move. The gentry were no longer responsible for ethical rulership or good governance, because the political power lay entirely at the hands of the emperor, who might or might not adopt the Way, and the literati's responsibility was only to persuade the emperor. This is why in Chinese society, the gentry were perceived as a very passive and inactive group.

Fei is right in insisting that the gentry be understood in terms of their relation to the emperor, but it is problematic when he referred to them as “official”, “literati”, “landowners”, “the retired” and “hermit” in some situations, and as “gentry” in other situations. These categories are in fact different in his model when we raise the question of what the literati would do if the emperor did not adopt *Dao* (the Way). Indeed, a literati member might wish to become a scholar-official desiring to retire after having served the emperor, and an imperial degree would be indispensable in this case. However, without successfully selling *Dao*, do they have to serve in the office in the hope of gaining access to a fulfilled, retired life or a gentry status?

This issue leads us to the renouncer—a hidden aspect of the literati, and an aspect neglected by advocates of the “local elites” model and the gentry model. If the emperor were not ethical and *Dao* did not prevail, the only choice left for the literati was to renounce the world instead of protect his family and fortune, as Confucius said in the *Analects*, “when wanted, then go (*xian*); when set aside, then hide (*yin*)”<sup>5</sup>. Differing from the gentry, renouncers were neither retired officials nor degree holders. They did not refrain from the emperor's power but instead, rejected it. They refused to take the imperial examinations, choosing to remain poor and inactive in local affairs, and never seeking for any tax-exemption. However, they were the superior part of the literati, admired by official-scholars. “Renouncers are”, said Qian Mu (2001b: 202), “counterparts of the literati. Actually, they grow out of the literati and should be regarded as its part, so though the literati live in the cities, they admire the renouncers [in the mountains and forests].”

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<sup>5</sup> The ancient literatures quoted in this paper are the classics and the Official Histories (*zhengshi*), both are widely found in various forms thus citation is unnecessary. I translate all the quotations from Chinese to English by myself, except for those from the Confucius' *Analects*, by which I use the translation of Arthur Waley (1989) but make necessary modifications.

The renouncers have been extensively narrated in the literatures central to the imperial ideology and other forms of texts, apparently indicating their importance. It is estimated that some 10,000 renouncers have been recorded in these literatures (Jiang Xingyu, 1947: 1). In *Confucius' Analects* and *Mencius*—the two foundational classics for imperial China—there are chapters (Weizi and Wanzhang II) devoted to the discussion of renouncers. Renouncers also constitute a separate category in 15 of the 24 official histories (*zhengshi*)—the imperial-sponsored record of the previous dynasties. The first of this kind appears in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Book of History), where the chapter of *Shijia* (Biography of Kings) starts with the story of a renouncer, Wu Taibo, while the chapter of *Liezhuan* (Biography of Dukes) starts with another renouncer, Boyi. The Chinese literati, including great thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Liu Xiang, Ji Kang, Huangpu Mi, Han Yu, Su Shi, Zhu Xi and Gong Zizhen, had always been keenly interested in renouncers. Numerous renouncers, fictional or real, are scattered in every corner of Chinese ancient writings; they include Jiang Ziya, Fan Li, Tao Yuanming, Ruan Ji, Tao Hongjing, Sun Simiao, Wang Wei, Li Bai, Chen Tuan, Huang Zongxi, Wang Fuzhi, Fu Shan, to name a few. In addition to other achievements, “one third of Chinese poems would be either of renouncers or about renouncers” (Han Zhaoqi, 1996: 107). In the local historical narrations, renouncers are also very important categories. Most provincial, prefectural and county gazetteers have included a chapter of renouncers' biography. Just as a lineage record cannot afford to be without a famous ancestor, a locality cannot do without one or more renouncers. Liang Yongjia (2008a, 2008b) has argued that the moral integrity of the literati exemplified in the renouncer was crucial to the constitution of the locality. It is evident that the renouncer is an important category in the Chinese social world.

If the gentry's inactiveness was to avoid having the emperor feel threatened, a renouncer's inactiveness would make the emperor feel his limitation. In *The Book of History*, Bo Yi and Shu Qi were said to have accused King Wu of being unfilial and disloyal by invading the king's master's territory immediately after his own father's death. However, the king seemed unable to do anything except to ask his general to “dismiss them by supporting their arms”. “King Wu's respect of Bo Yi and Shu Qi's ideals” (*zhouwu quan yiqi zhi zhi*) became, thereafter, an archetypal theme in subsequent writings of renouncers in official histories; this was a theme expressing a very important ideology, i.e. the emperor was obliged to respect humbly the renouncers.

This emperor-renouncer relation had been exemplified numerous, some of which included King Yao's ridicule of Xu You—a renouncer whom the king offered his throne to, King Wen's humble begging of Jiang Ziya for the latter's support, and King Wen of Jin's naming of a fief after Jiezhitui, a renouncer he mistreated. Such emperor-renouncer relations are also found in the cases of Wang Mang vs. Xiang Ziping, Liu Bei vs. Zhuge Liang, Sima Zhao vs. Sun Deng, Liang Wudi vs. Tao Hongjing, Song Zhenzong vs. Zhong Fang, Zhu Yuanzhang vs. Liuji and Kangxi vs. Huang Zongxi. It seems then that in order to establish a dynasty, an emperor must “beg” for the renouncers' assistance by submitting himself humbly to honour the renouncers or to put in another way, an emperor was moral and legitimate if he respected the renouncer with humility. A concise assessment on the renouncers was probably best provided in “the Biography of Renouncer” from *Liang Shu* (History of Liang): “Since the very beginning, no emperor did not uphold the renouncer's ideal. Great emperors like Yao didn't force Chao Fu and Xu You, and Powerful King Wu didn't surrender Bo Yi and Shu Qi. Arrogant emperors like Han Gaozu bowed to Huang and Qi, and the exemplar-following emperor Guangwu was rejected by Yan Guang and Zhou Dang. From then on, renouncers never failed to appear in a single generation!”



Among these examples, a case in point was probably the story of how the “exemplar-following emperor Guangwu was rejected by Yan Guang and Zhou Dang”. When Zhou Dang, a renouncer, was introduced to Emperor Guangwu, he bowed instead of getting down his knees. An official then submitted a petition to accuse Zhou Dang of disrespecting His Majesty. Rather than punishing Zhou Dang, the emperor decreed, “From the beginning of time, sage-rulers always have in their land literati who refused the rulers’ invitation. Following the example of Bo Yi and Shu Qi who refused the food from King Wu, Zhou Dang of Tai Yuan rejected my support. I therefore decree to bequeath him forty rolls of silk”. As to Yan Guang, Emperor Guangwu’s humility verges upon being humiliated:

The emperor immediately proceeded to Yan Guang’s abode in a royal coach, but Yan Guang chose to remain in bed, when the emperor approached. Laying a hand on Yan Guang’s belly, the emperor said, “My dear Guang, wouldn’t you rise and help me?” Yan Guang didn’t respond and continued to sleep. After quite a long time, he opened his eyes, staring at the emperor and reproached, “When King Yao offered his throne, Chao Fu rejected it by washing his ears. The literati have their own ideals. No need to force!” The emperor exclaimed, “Guang, even I can’t get you!” and left him in a sigh.

(Biography of Renouncer, *History of Latter Han* [Houhan Shu])

The principle that “sage-rulers always have in their land literati who refused the rulers’ invitation” (*mingwang shengzhu biyou bubin zhi shi*) was observed by most Chinese emperors (Zhang Liwei, 1995: 252). The emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties respected the renouncers so much so that many scholars chose to pursue the “Zhongnan shortcut” (*Zhongnan jiejing*)<sup>6</sup>, i.e. pretending to renounce for a quick promotion. However, they were aware that they would be seriously criticised by their contemporaries and historians of later generations. Historical criticism was felt real by most Chinese, especially by renouncers, so much so that a “true” renouncer would be one who went unnoticed. Zhongnan shortcut may also suggest that renunciation is a category that once empirically applied, becomes less nominative. In fact, many renouncers never existed, and even if they did, were not as lofty as what had been recorded. Renunciation is not a major historical phenomenon as Indian or Christian hermits. Rather, it is an ideological claim by the literati to assert its moral status in society as autonomous from the emperor. This is especially so when we consider the rich record of the Chinese official’s remonstrance at the cost of sacrificing one’s life. It is exemplary in a dual sense: it exemplifies the principle that enhances the moral tradition but only as an example and not as routine social activity.<sup>7</sup> *The central point here is that as a category of people, renouncers were believed to have existed.* They had to be real because they represented an important value of the Chinese society, i.e. the choice of serving or rejecting the emperor remained at the literati’s hand, and the emperor had to respect that choice.

It is probably clear now that a gentry member cannot be understood as another individual who “exercised dominance within the local arena”. His “dominance” was not only different from that of a merchant, a militarist or a bandit leader with respect to socially-sanctioned values, but also conditional to his choice of whether to serve the emperor. The gentry’s counterparts were not those who were powerful but socially inferior, but the renouncers, who share the same moral code as the gentry and yet differ from the latter, in their refusal to take

<sup>6</sup> Zhongnan is the name of a mountain believed to be one of the popular destinations for renouncers.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Prasenjit Duara for pointing out the tradition of remonstrance.

the imperial examinations and to serve in the imperial office. Accordingly, this morally-superior figure did not possess fortune and dominance in the local arena. We find here a perfect example of a dichotomy between authority and power: a renouncer is superior because of his utter rejection of power. This fact is sufficient for us to drag the gentry from the dubious category of “local elites” as power-seekers, a category alleged to prevail in the Chinese society without sufficient proof, and to put the gentry side by side with the renouncers and scholar-officials turned gentry. By doing so, we are following the logic of an institution that lasted over 20 centuries, leading us to inspect the common values of the gentry, scholar-officials and the renouncer.

## IN OR BEYOND OF THE WORLD: TWO SIDES OF THE LITERATI'S VOCATION

One may ask in what sense then, did the renouncer constitute an integral part of the Chinese literati? The answer lies in the fact that there is a fundamental value underlying the scholar-official, gentry, and renouncer, i.e. keeping the Way (*Dao*), best explicated in the Confucius' *Analects*:

Be of unwavering good faith, love learning, guard against death and keep the Way integral. Do not enter a state that pursues dangerous courses, nor stay in one where rebellions are taking place. When the Way prevails under Heaven, then show yourself; when it does not, then renounce.

To Confucius, to show and to renounce are two sides of the same coin—to “keep the Way integral” (*shan Dao*). In another chapter, he was more explicit on this point when he said, “the literati's vocation is the Way” (*shi zhiyu Dao*). The literati should not die in vain (“guard against death”) but “escape punishment and disgrace if the state is ill-governed”. Accordingly, Confucius praised Qu Bo Yu as a superior man, “when the Way prevails in his state, he is found in office. When it does not, he can roll his principles up, and keep them in his breast”. Renunciation is not the only choice, because a scholar should always keep a good judgement on whether the Way has prevailed before making a decision. Confucius himself hesitated at his own choice of whether to renounce (Qiao Qingju, 2007), when he says, “I am different from them [the renouncers], and I can either renounce or show”. He would rather become Duke Zhou, who assisted the ruler in making the Way prevail, which explains why Confucius travelled through kingdoms to promote his philosophy. In the same token, Mencius also qualified renunciation as a choice based on one's judgement of “timing” (*shi*), i.e. the particular moment in the ebb and flow of civilisation (Qiao Qingju, 2007).

Based on the principle stating that “a literati's vocation is the Way”, Confucius judged different renouncers differently. He praised Tai Bo as a person who had “reached the highest point of virtuous action. Thrice he declined the throne, and the people in ignorance of his motives could not express their approbation of his conduct” (*Analects*, Chap. 8). In the Chapter of Weizi (Viscount of Wei), he gave comprehensive assessment to different renouncers. He deemed the Viscount of Wei who withdrew from the court as “one of the three men of virtue in the Yin Dynasty”. As for Bo Yi and Shu Qi, Confucius praised them as “ancient virtuous persons”, who “chose to die in the Shou Yang mountain, and were remembered by the people until today”. The renunciation of Bo Yi and Shu Qi was done entirely with the intention of pursuing “benevolence” (*ren*), and they obtained it with success, because they were steadfast to the principles. As Confucius said, “Refusing to surrender their wills, or to submit to any taint in their persons—such, I think, were Bo Yi and Shu Qi”. As to

Liu Xia Hui and Shao Lian, Confucius said, “they surrendered their wills, and submitted to taint in their persons. Their words are fair, and their actions were mediocre”. As to Yu Zhong and Yi Yi, he said, “It may be said of Yu Zhong and Yi Yi, that, while they hid themselves in their seclusion, they gave a license to their words; but in their persons, they succeeded in preserving their purity, and, in their retirement, they acted according to the exigency of the times”.

In the Chapter of Weizi, Confucius also judged the renouncers he met differently, on the basis of whether a renouncer was committed to keeping the Way. He tried, in vain, to dissuade Jie Yu, the madman of Ch’ü, from renunciation. Confucius considered himself different from the renouncers, Chang Ju and Jie Ni, and left them with a sigh: “It is impossible to associate with birds and beasts, as if they were the same with us. If I associate not with these people—with mankind—with whom shall I associate? If the Way prevailed under Heaven, there would be no use for me to change its state”. Zi Lu, a student of Confucius, criticised another renouncer, “Not to take office is not righteous. If the relations between old and young may not be neglected, how is it that he sets aside the duties that should be observed between sovereign and minister? Wishing to maintain his personal purity, he allows that great relation to come to confusion. A superior man takes office, and performs the righteous duties belonging to it. As to the failure of right principles to make progress, he is aware of that”. Confucius’ attitude towards renunciation is best expressed in his words to his favourite student, Yan Hui, “when wanted, then go; when set aside; then hide—it is only I and you who have attained to this” (*Analects*, Chap. 11).

It is clear now that as the Confucian canon, *The Analects* at least sent three messages about the renouncer: first, the renouncer is part of the literati, whose vocation is the Way; second, to renounce means not to take office; third, to renounce is the literati’s wise choice to keep the Way when the ruler does not uphold it.

Historians have argued that the idea of “the literati’s vocation is the Way” was novel during the time of Confucius. This idea was equally shared by many other contemporary philosophical schools of his time, including the Mohists and Daoists (Fung, 1952; Yu Yingshi, 2003). The common recognition of the Way grew out of an earlier time, when *shi* designates the aristocrats who “hold positions in the office”, and the *daos* the *shi* were expected to adhere to were in the plural. Along with the disintegration of the feudal system of the Western Zhou Dynasty (21<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.–476 B.C.), the heterogeneous *shi*, as the lowest rank of the aristocrats, lost their positions within the whole system and began to be regarded as of the first rank in the category of the commoners, the other ranks being the peasants, craftsmen and traders. As a result, they were able to think beyond their positions on broader issues, so much so that “not only were they able to think of, reflect upon, and question over the world as a whole, but they were bestowed with the freedom to explore the ideal world—that is, the Way (*Dao*)” (Yu Yingshi, 2003: 602). Along with an ancient Confucian historian (Zhang Xuecheng), Yu Yingshi argued that part of the reason why Confucius was inscribed at the centre of Chinese thought is the fact that he, together with other pre-Qin philosophers, created the idea of the singular Way—a transcendental knowledge usurped by this newly arisen *shi* who, as such, was designated as the literati, the people who learn, keep, and transmit the Way.

We are now then in a better position to reconsider the gentry. The gentry do not constitute a complete picture of the literati. Rather, they are this-worldly literati, or the *literati-in-the-world*, and the renouncers are the other-worldly literati, or the *literati-beyond-the-world*. The

idea of “the literati’s vocation is the Way” makes the literati inactive in two respects, i.e. to be inactive in the office with the expectation of local power after retirement, or to be inactive in the whole world by rejecting any power from or given by the emperor. To show up in the office or to hide are the options available for a literati member to keep the Way and thus, to be transcendental. We see the operation of this idea in the Chinese imperial system, and it does not have much to do with the mundane power, but with the transcendental nature of usurping the notion of “imagining the world”.

Comparatively speaking, renunciation has been found to sustain the relation of the transcendental and the mundane (Dumont, 1960, 1986; Madan, 1982). Many of these writers hold that in Indian society, the world is held to be empty (*anitya*). To renounce the world, therefore, is to seek relief (*moksha*) and arrive at the eternal world, where “*brahmana*”—the ultimate existence—resides. Similarly, the mundane world in Abrahamism is entirely dependent on God, and to renounce the world is to seek “salvation”. The mundane and the transcendental are thus held very distinctively different, and the former is an illusive or temporal projection of the latter.

However, the Chinese cosmos does not make the distinctive difference between the transcendental and the mundane. Confucians and Daoists, in general, hold that this-world and the other-world are “neither overlapped nor distinct” (*buji buli*). “If the Way represents the Confucian ‘transcendence’, and the everyday life, the ‘mundane’, we can find these two domains are neither entirely overlapped, nor entirely distinct” (Yu Yingshi, 2003: 606). Therefore, transcendence in Chinese cosmology does not mean having to leave the worldly world completely—you can seek the Way within it. This called by Yu Yingshi (2003: 607) the “inward transcendence”:

Confucius’ “the literati’s vocation is the Way” is applicable to pre-Qin Confucians as well as post-Qin literati. “The Way” had been characteristic in itself, which we can call it “inward transcendence”. Chinese literati could be generally described as people of “inward transcendence”.

This non-overlapped, non-distinctive difference between this-worldliness and the other-worldliness implies a series of differences between the Chinese renouncers and their counterparts in Europe or India.<sup>8</sup> For one thing, individualism, regardless of whether it is outside or inside the world, has never been fully appreciated in China. Renouncers were not represented as total individual—many were extremely filial to their parents. In other words, as renouncers, they are believed to be devoid to certain relations, especially with the emperor, but steadfast in other relations, such as those with their parents. For another thing, the literati may seek the Way either in this world or in the other world. While “relief” (*moksha*) and “salvation” are vehicles for seeking the ultimate truth in India and Europe, the Chinese literati’s method of seeking the Way is achieved through “body-cultivation” (*xiushen*). This explains why instead of being filthy or sinful, the Chinese body is viewed as a potential container of the Way, as long as it is cultivated. “Since the ‘transcendental breakthrough’ took place in ancient China, ‘body-cultivation’ or ‘self-cultivation’ has become a common theme for Confucians, Mohists and Daoists (Yu Yingshi, 2003: 614). Thus, Yu Yingshi (2003: 617) was very confident,

<sup>8</sup> Eisenstadt (1986) would call the non-distinction of the mundane and the transcendental “non-axial age” cosmology, which involves immediate responsiveness like magic, possession and efficacy. While there have been observations of the imperial cosmology being quite consistent with this argument (Duara, 1997; Yu, 2005), the cosmology posed by the literati is less examined.

We can be completely sure that, after the ‘philosophical breakthrough’ took place in ancient China, the transcendental ‘Way’ has been kept within the human body. Therefore, pre-Qin literati who seek ‘the Way’ or ‘learning’, all emphasise on ‘seeking from oneself’, on ‘self-enlightenment’. This is the exact meaning of the ‘inward transcendence’

In terms of the transcendental and the mundane, the complementary nature of the renouncer and the gentry is therefore further clarified.

Retrieving the ideal of “the literati’s vocation is the Way” and the meaning of renunciation is not unimportant—it entails an institution based on cosmology, rather than an institution seemingly based on power. In the dynastic and local histories, the literati are often divided into a continuum of categories, ranging from officials (good and bad) to local worthies. Renouncers form a separate category parallel and complementary to them, in the sense that they are the only literati that do not take office but seclude themselves in the “mountains and forests” (*shanlin*). In Chinese social world, “mountains and forests” and “rivers and lakes” (*jianghu*) are places beyond the control of the emperor, but integral to the Chinese society. As Qian Mu (2001b: 200) observed, “when we talk about the Chinese society, it should be divided into four parts: first, city; second, towns and countryside; third, mountains and forests; fourth, rivers and lakes.”

David Gibeault (2008) provides an excellent explanation of how the Chinese institution based on the proper relation between the emperor and the renouncer works. The relation is the principle of the establishment and continuation of a dynasty, established through the founder-emperor’s humbleness to the renouncer with a reversal of the hierarchy. As “the renouncer’s gift”, in return, the renouncer will ensure the continuity of the dynasty. The relation is much like the principle of marriage where women, like renouncers, represent a form of alterity that once assimilated, are able to ensure continuity of the lineage. Gibeault (2008: 42) argues

The absorption of the renouncer’s values by the emperor is for the court to absorb the alterity that the renouncers represent, to the price or condition that he accepts, at certain moments, to humiliate himself before the renouncer, so that he can receive his mandate—something power cannot achieve. But the more fundamental dimension of this relation is that in order to base his reign of a form of ethic, the court must operate in a movement: first it must distinguish itself from the global order, the cosmos, and represent a part of it, and in the second stage, regulate this part of the cosmos in the name of the global order. Between the two stages, is the relation to renunciation, with its differentiation from it (the refusal to serve) to its encompassment (inclusion into an order of titles).

The absorption and assimilation of the potency of alterity is nothing special to Chinese social world—it was even established as “the elementary forms of politics” (Sahlins, 2008). In this light, we can even think of retrieving a Chinese institution manifested in building, body technique, government apparatus, philosophy, historical writing, poetry and folklore, each of which sustains the proper relation between the renouncer and the emperor, the other-world and this world. Entering the world by becoming an official and a gentry member after retirement, and leaving the world by becoming a renouncer, are complementary in the literati’s principle of learning, transmitting, and keeping the Way as his vocation. It is in this

light that gentry will be better understood, as part of the literati who play a role in Chinese cosmology, rather than a part of the “local elites” who seek for “dominance”.

## CONCLUSION

We have examined the shift from “gentry” to “local elites” in Chinese studies. I demonstrate the shift was not based on a proper understanding of why gentry-turned anthropologists and historians had insisted on the fundamental difference between the gentry and other “local elites”. I also demonstrate this insistence is legitimate when the Chinese categories that express internal relations are taken into consideration. This leads us to consider the Chinese renouncers, a hidden aspect of the literati that gentry also belong to, and a sub-category that both the “local elites” model and the gentry model have neglected. The literati’s submission to the emperor’s power was not obligatory, so that a gentry life was not necessarily what a literati member was after. On the contrary, if a literati member chose to renounce, he had no local dominance, but would be respected by *anyone*, including especially the emperor.

Renouncers and the gentry were the sub-categories of the literati because they must commit in keeping the Way, but they were different in their cosmological positions by being *beyond* or *in* the world. This was demonstrated in the Confucius writing as well as in the official histories where renouncer-emperor relation was once and again depicted as a reversal of hierarchy. I therefore suggest that although we may perceive the gentry of imperial China as “power-seekers” in the local arena, they were not merely “local elites” when the Chinese cosmology is taken into consideration. Both the gentry with an exam qualification of imperial service and the renouncers who refused to undertake this service were supposed to keep the Way—a value of the imperial political philosophy shared by the literati and the emperor.

Introducing renouncers reminds us that while social historians grasp the variety and minute changes in Chinese history, some may have neglected the social facts vested with cosmologically sanctioned value. In this regard, questioning the values integral to the concept of a society seems a good supplement to what has been found<sup>9</sup>. If the concept of “local elites” is valid, it cannot be entirely based on the concept of “power” any longer, because power does not appreciate the internal relations of the gentry and the renouncer, or that of the literati and the emperor. As Marshall Sahlins comments, “perhaps it is only lately in human history that power became a purely social fact, as established by real-instrumental means of coercion—the way it seems to contemporary Social Science” (Sahlins, 2008: 184). Renunciation thus created an important moral space apart from the state and sustained by the transcendental nature of the literati. I do not suggest that the only way to understand the gentry is their relation to the renouncer, nor do I suggest that renouncer-emperor is the only relation of the transcendental and the mundane. I am merely pleading for a less power-charged approach to Chinese society.

When Tschén Yin Koh, the alleged “last Confucianist”, was invited in 1950s to direct the national institute for historical studies, he was said to have listed three conditions: no political meetings, no Marxist-Leninist studies, no contact with politicians. Tschén’s conditions are cherished among contemporary Chinese intellectuals, who are consciously or unconsciously aware of the fact that a scholar still has to choose between serving in office or “rolling the

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Yu (2005), for example, has highlighted the religious nature of the Chinese state, and Romyen Taylor (1989) has reminded us of the importance of the Chinese renouncer.

principles up, and keeping them in his breast.” This was manifested by the various “democratic parties” (*minzhu dangpai*) incorporated under the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, which was set up to prove that the political power was capable of absorbing the other represented by the literati. Though no contemporary intellectual is stubborn enough to follow the outworn principle of renunciation, the so-called “exit strategy”—leaving the system by moving to another country, an intensifying problem China is now faced with—has become available since 1990s. Whether the renouncer’s value survives in post-1949 China is an open question, but the fundamental demarcation between “within” and “without” the state power, the demarcation used to be represented by the literati’s choice of being a this-worldly gentry member or an other-worldly renouncer, persists in an age of Chinese nationalism, which radicalises this demarcation in an unprecedented manner.

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