State and Crafts in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)

Moll-Murata, Christine

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Moll-Murata, Christine.
State and Crafts in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66331.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66331
The Artisan’s Place: The ‘Four Occupational Groups’ and the Social Position of Craftspeople

In imperial and pre-imperial periods, Chinese governments made practical provisions to allocate and supervise skilled labour in the service of the state. A particular perspective of social hierarchy came with this system which expressly included artisans.

The concept of the ‘four occupational groups’ originates from the intention of rulers and administrators to divide and settle the population according to occupations and to monitor their numbers and activities. Together with the assessment that scholars and farmers were ‘fundamental’ but artisans and merchants were ‘secondary’ or derived groups, this notion confirmed the dominance of agriculture and Confucian learning and administration.

Origins and Early Applications of the Concept

Chinese philosophy has brought forth several concepts of hierarchy in human society. The first textual evidence for the basic Confucian view can be traced back to the philosopher Mencius (fl. fourth century B.C.), who considered the most fundamental relationships in human life to be those between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends. These pairs, which set up a hierarchy of age, descent, and gender, were captured in the formula of the ‘five human relationships’, which was sometimes also reduced to the first three matching pairs. They were shaped into the principal outlook on humanity by Confucian commentators in the first century B.C. This is still – at least partly – culturally relevant to East Asian societies.

A further concept that also goes back to Mencius is the distinction between rulers and administrators, who work mentally, and the ruled, who labour physically. It is the quintessence of an explanation for the necessity of the division of labour:

Great men have their proper business, and little men have their proper business. Moreover, in the case of any single individual, whatever articles he can require are ready to his hand, being produced by the various
handicraftsmen: if he must first make them for his own use, this way of doing would keep all the people running about upon the roads. Hence, there is the saying, ‘Some labour with their minds, and some labour with their strength. Those who labour with their minds govern others; those who labour with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them.’ This is a principle universally recognised.  

Several other rankings and views, e.g. on the hierarchy of nobility, were formulated in the pre-imperial period. The idea that is most relevant for the crafts originates from sometime between the fifth to third centuries B.C. It defines four occupational groups of commoners (literally ‘four people’ simin 四民): 1. officials/officers, both civilian and military (shi 士); 2. farmers (nong 農); 3. artisans (gong 工); and 4. merchants (shang 商). We find this concept in works such as the Guanzi (Master Guan) in the following passage:

Guanzi replied [to the question of Duke Huan of Qi as to how he should organize the people]: ‘They [the gentry, peasants, artisans, and merchants] should not be allowed to dwell together in confusion. If they do so, their speech will become distorted and their work disorganized. For this reason, the sage kings, in situating the gentry, were certain to send them to places of leisure. In situating the farmers, they were certain to send them to the fields. In situating the artisans they were certain to send them to the bureaus responsible for them. In situating the merchants they were certain to send them to the marketplaces.’  

This also occurs in the Shujing (Book of History) and Gongyang zhuan (Gongyang’s commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals), always with

2. Guanzi chap. 20, p. 135 ‘Xiao kuang’ 小匡 (Little basket), in Allyn Rickett’s translation, Guanzi, p. 185. The ‘Sayings of the States’ (Guoyu), ‘Qiyu’ 齊語 (Sayings of Qi), chap. 6, p. 226, have a close paraphrase of the passage in Guanzi.
3. Shujing, ‘Zhou guan’ 周官 (Offices of the Zhou): ‘The Minister of Works manages the earth [works] of the country, fixes the living quarters of the four people, and sets the seasonal schedule for working the earth.’ The comment says: ‘The ‘Winter Minister’ [i.e. Minister of Works] is in charge of the empty portions of the territory, where the ‘four people’ settle, namely officers, farmers, artisans, and merchants’; transl. by Séraphin Couvreur, Chou King, p. 335, (12).
4. Gongyang zhuan 公羊傳, Cheng gong yuan nian 成公元年 (First year of the reign of Duke Cheng, third month), jiegu 解詁 (commentary): ‘The four people of antiquity were, first, those who were virtuous and able and held official positions: the officers; second, those who cultivated the
an emphasis upon the distinction between the four occupational groups and the importance that rulers should not allow them to mix with each other.

Derk Bodde has pointed out that the term was first introduced by the legalist school of thought that ‘wanted to build up the state’s wealth and power through a planned economy that would involve the total population and utilize quantitative techniques’. As applied by the legalists, the distinction between the four groups hinges precisely on occupation and not income or hierarchical status. Thus, the ‘officers’ from around the eighth to third centuries B.C. were low-level, learned aristocrats who lived by their professional skills either as civilian or military officials, while others were engaged in agriculture together with tenants or serfs. In the imperial era, they became the landholding ‘scholar-gentry’ from which the official class was recruited. ‘Farmers’ loosely designated all those working on the land, whether as owners, tenants, or hired labourers. The ‘artisans’ included skilled and unskilled craftsmen, and the ‘merchants’ encompassed the whole range from very large-scale traders and proto-industrialists – for instance the owners of iron foundries – to peddlers.5

The sequence of these four groups, with the officer/officials first and the merchants last, was not yet fixed in pre-imperial times but commenced from the Han and thereafter remained in this order.6 The designations benye (‘root’ or fundamental occupations) for the officers and farmers and moye (‘branch’ or secondary/derived occupations) were coined in the era of the Warring States (c. third century B.C.). Throughout the period of imperial China, in the precepts of the ruling and educated elites, this dichotomy between ‘fundamental’ and ‘derived’ implied a ranking of useful and less useful activities that should be promoted or restricted by the rulers. This tendency is captured in the phrase ‘emphasizing the roots and disregarding the branches’ (zhongben yimo) or, more specifically, ‘emphasizing agriculture and disregarding commerce’ (zhongnong yishang). Sometimes the artisans, gong, were included with the merchants.

Recent research has fine-tuned the argument to the effect that already in the pre-imperial era, during the period between 353 and 334 B.C., the legalists advised rulers to restrict as much as possible the ‘secondary occupations’, land and produced grains: the farmers; third, those who had ingenuous minds and experienced hands and produced utensils: the artisans (三曰巧心勞手以成器物曰工); fourth, those who circulated wealth and sold commodities: the merchants. Since the four people did not mix among each other, there was enough wealth for all.’ See the variant in Hanshu (Dynastic history of the Han), chap. 24a, pp. 1117/8, which formulates more tersely, ‘those who created ingenuously and produced utensils were called artisans 作巧成器曰工, or in Nancy Lee Swann’s translation in Food and Money, p. 115, ‘those who devised and made utensils [and instruments] were the craftsmen’.

5 Bodde, Chinese Thought, pp. 204-205.
6 Ibid., p. 371 ff. has a detailed analysis of all Zhou and Han occurrences of the term.
which produced for and traded on the commercial market, or to forbid them altogether (jinmo, ‘prohibiting the secondary occupations’). The legalist philosopher Han Feizi (d. 233 B.C.) claimed that merchants and artisans made up two of the ‘five vermin of the state’ that only brought forth or distributed useless objects. In the later Han dynasty, Wang Fu (ca. 78-163 A.D.) criticized the extravagance and ‘cunning’ decoration in the craft objects and the profit orientation of the merchants. Apart from the fact that some artisans produced art and crafts objects of high value, their extraordinary skill, qiao – a character that also bears the connotation of ‘cunning’ that resembles the English term ‘crafty’ or ‘crafted’ – made them suspicious in the eyes of the scholar-elite.

The concept of the ‘four people’ was used throughout imperial China as a set designation for commoners, implying virtually ‘everybody’. It is occasionally mentioned in the dynastic histories, but the priorities among the four occupations are neither discussed nor redefined. In the Tang dynasty it was once prominently used by the scholar-official Han Yu (768-824) in an essay where he criticizes the impact of Buddhism and Daoism in general and specifically the prerogatives of tax freedom and suspension of labour services accorded to monasteries, monks, and nuns. In the text, he claims that the ‘four people’ had to feed two unproductive groups, the Buddhists and the Daoists.

Conversely, not everybody who worked as an artisan was a free commoner and belonged to the group of the gong. In some periods, especially between the third and eighth centuries A.D., craft labour was also considered a lowly occupation and executed by slaves and bondservants. In the Tang dynasty, artisan households were legally classified as ‘lowly people’ together with other groups like the musicians of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, bondspeople, musician’s households, and male and female government slaves. However, from the Ming dynasty onward, only the category of slaves remained in a legally debased status.

---

10. Bodde, Chinese Thought, p. 203, with reference to a book title like the agricultural almanach Simin yueling 四民月令 (Monthly ordinances for the four people) by Cui Shi 崔寔 (d. ca. 170 A.D.). For the Simin yueling, see also Monique Nagel-Angermann, ‘Nongjia’, p. 82.
12. Hansson, Chinese Outcasts, pp. 28/29. However, some artisan occupations, such as tanners and butchers, retained a low image. But generally speaking, the outcast status was more
In the second millennium, only a few thinkers and officials reconsidered the ranking of scholars and farmers as fundamental and of merchants and artisans as secondary, or the concept of the four occupational groups as a whole. Those who did so were the Song philosophers Chen Xiqing (1180-1256) and Zheng Zhidao (fl. 1079); the Ming scholars He Xinyin (1517-1579), Zhao Nanxing (1550-1627), Wang Daokun (1525-1593), and Feng Yingjing (1555-1606); and the Qing philosopher Huang Zongxi (1610-1695).\(^\text{13}\) They postulated that farmers, artisans, and merchants all belonged to the ‘fundamental occupations’, or even that merchants and artisans surpassed the farmers in importance. However, such reasoning remained the exception to the rule. The dominant view was the ‘physiocratic’ conviction that agriculture in combination with subsidiary production, mainly in textiles, was of the greatest importance to the state and that specialization in manufacturing and commerce was undesirable and suspect. This was formulated by the Yongzheng emperor in 1727 as follows:

Among the four classes of people, next to the scholars, farmers are the most valuable. All artisans and merchants rely on their food for farming, which is why farming is the basic pursuit (ben) throughout our realm while crafts and trade are merely secondary (mo). With the rising demand today for the ever more elaborate and finely crafted implements, clothing, and amusements, we are surely going to be needing more artisans. One more artisan in the market place, however, means one less farmer in the fields. Moreover, when the simple people see how much more artisans make than farmers do, they are sure to stampede to learn a trade. A sudden increase in the number of artisans will mean a glut of manufactured goods on the market, which will make it harder to sell things, as blockages develop, and prices fall. Thus, not only will an increase in people who pursue secondary occupations harm agriculture..., it will also have a harmful effect on the artisans themselves.\(^\text{14}\) [...] Hastily correcting this by legislation is not what the situation demands and would be hard to achieve. The only solution is patiently to instruct people day by day so that they understand that the basic occupation is an honourable one.\(^\text{15}\)

associated with sexual pollution and less with blood and death than, for instance, in Korea and Japan (p. 18).

14 This is the translation by Susan Mann, ‘Household Handicrafts and State Policy in Qing Times’, p. 78.
15 Fang Xing, ‘The Retarded Development of Capitalism’, pp. 392-393, gives a longer excerpt of the relevant edict, which is included in the ‘Veritable Records of the Qing’, Da Qing Shizong Xian (Yongzheng) huangdi shilu, chap. 57 (Yongzheng 5/5/4), fol. 3b, p. 884. This shows the insight of the emperor that the government hardly had the option to reverse the general trend of commercialization.
Make them respect honesty, not indulge in crafty skills, and if this is done
day by day and month by month, it will eventually become a habit, and
although not all artisans have to return to farming, it can at least prevent
the farmers from hastening to become artisans. [...] 16

Why did the imperial state and especially the first Qing rulers insist on
extolling agricultural pursuits rather than emphasizing manufacturing and
commerce? In view of the population increase and the labour intensiveness
of rice cultivation, it seems plausible that the central government feared
that the food supply would be jeopardized if too many farmers left their
occupation. The central government may also have been worried that the
tax-in-kind on the rice-producing provinces and regions, the so-called ‘grain
tribute’, would decrease. Moreover, many believed that political stability
would be endangered if the ideal situation of a village-based agricultural
state were to crumble. 17

This opinion remained dominant until before the Opium War, and even
important advocates for political and social reforms such as Gong Zizhen
(1792-1841) 18 and Wei Yuan (1794-1857) 19 initially remained true to the traditional
pattern, although Wei Yuan later changed his view. The transitional phase
between the First Opium War (1842) and the Sino-Japanese War (1895) led
contemporary intellectuals to the conviction that commerce and industries were
of the utmost importance for the ‘self-strengthening’ and ‘enriching’ of China.

Historians’ Assessments

Chinese and Western historians of China have reflected upon the concept of
the ‘four people’ in various ways. Those who discuss phases of pre-imperial

16 This is the end of the excerpt as given in Peng Zeyi, Zhongguo jindai shougongye, vol. 1,
p. 419. The target of the Yongzheng emperor’s policy is expressed even more clearly here.
17 For a detailed discussion of the insistence on the ‘four occupations’ and its extension, which
prescribes the gender relation of men who till and women who weave, but stay in the house, see
18 Gong Zizhen, a forerunner of late nineteenth-century reformers, was less successful as
mid-level official in Peking, but later became famous for his early call to abolish the civil service
examinations, footbinding, opium smoking, and exaggerated deference to the emperor in court.
Hucker, Eminent Chinese, p. 431-434.
19 Wei Yuan was especially concerned about China’s foreign relations and in 1843 published
Haiguo tuzhi 海國圖志 (An illustrated treatise on the maritime kingdoms), the first geography
of overseas Western countries. Before this, Wei Yuan, who was acquainted with Gong Zizhen,
had edited the first Qing dynasty edition of statecraft writings.
and early imperial social history do not refrain from using it, even if they qualify this critically, to describe the constituents of these societies. For instance, Derk Bodde conceives of these four as ‘four major categories or social classes’ but notes the omission in this concept of at least four groups that were significant in the West: the clergy, the nobility, the military, and slaves. On the relationship of the Confucian scholar to the artisans, he states that this concept, together with Mencius’ division between brain workers and manual workers, resulted in

a polarization of mental and manual work which barred the literatus from any sort of manual activity other than painting and calligraphy, kept the hand worker in unlettered silence, and induced the former either to disregard the latter entirely in his writings or to describe his way of life in casual, patronizing, or idealized language.

In his research on social mobility, Wolfram Eberhard also refers to the ‘four classes of free burghers’ and emphasizes that craftspeople made up the group that generally had ‘the smallest chances of upward mobility’.

Philip A. Kuhn discusses the concept of the ‘four large occupational status groups’, which he defines as ‘scholars, agriculturalists, artisans, merchants’ as an element in his analysis of the four axes of social differentiation formulated in pre-modern sources: (1) occupational status; (2) rulers and ruled; (3) free and unfree; (4) rich and poor. According to Kuhn, political status ranked supreme in social importance, but occupational status was not unimportant and closely related to the political hierarchy. The first two of his axes were considered universal and built into the natural order. However, this was not the case with the latter two – the free and the unfree, and the rich and the poor – which were seen as ‘man-made’ rather than naturally occurring.

Other historians more sharply refute the value of the concept. Ho Ping-ti, for instance, finds the classification into ‘four major functional orders’ too broad and too narrow at the same time. In the first place, it does not take into account ‘debased people’. And within the particular groups of the fourfold division, a broad range of stratifications prevailed, which makes it

20 Bodde, Chinese Thought, p. 203.
21 Bodde, Chinese Thought, p. 222.
22 Eberhard, Social Mobility, pp. 237-238.
24 Ibid., p. 27.
25 Ibid., pp. 22-25.
26 Ho Ping-ti, The Ladder to Success, p. 18.
obvious ‘that the traditional Chinese society was always a multiple-class society’.27 Marie-Claire Bergère finds the ‘quadripartite division of society’ especially unsatisfying for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when class relations changed and new groups formed, as exemplified in the increasing number of brokers in commerce and politics as well as rebel members of secret societies that belonged to none of the traditional categories. Merchant communities assumed new roles as they mediated between these newly emerged middle strata and the public authorities.28

A representation of the four groups from the early twentieth century was designed in the Qijianlong workshop of the printing centre Yangliuqing near Tianjin.29 The artists obviously felt the need to comment on the lack of one distinct professional group, the soldiers. Nevertheless, in the printing they presented an idealized image of the four groups in harmony. Among the four, the artisans are not easily identifiable. Since they are not shown at work, it would be difficult to recognize them as artisans and not simply as merchants, were it not for the title ‘Scholar, farmer, artisan, merchant’. The inscription, in the spirit of the self-strengthening movement and the increasing militarization of the late Qing society, reads:

Study battle, strengthen daily,  
Scholars form a single faction,  
Compete to become stronger,  
Coordinate merchants, exhort workers,  
In China, farming always comes first,  
But this is a shortcoming, it is one’s duty to serve as a soldier.30

學戰日烈唯士所宗  
競爭增劇通商勸工  
況在中國首先重農  
惟有缺點義務充兵

While there can be no doubt about the dynamism of the late Qing society and the emergence of new economic players, or about the economic variance in each of the four groups, in the late Qing era, the concept of the four groups was

27 Ibid., p. 20.  
30 Flath, The Cult of Happiness, translation of the inscription by Flath, p. 61.
far from withering away. On the contrary, it was applied to the contemporary situation and the perceived need for industrialization, commercial relations with foreign countries, and military service, as expressed in the poem: tong shang ‘to take up trade relations’, quan gong ‘to promote [industrial] work’, and chong bing ‘serving as a soldier’. For the first time, the functions of the gong – the craftsmen of old and present-day workers in manufacturing sites and industry, technicians, and engineers – were discussed and favourably assessed in comparison to the tasks and achievements of the other three groups.

Late Qing Views on the Position of Artisans

In the historical narratives of the dynastic histories that were compiled between the second century B.C. and the eighteenth century A.D., the four occupational groups (simin) or the synonymous term, ‘scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants’ (shi nong gong shang) only occur occasionally, and always in the meaning of ‘all commoners’. The concept is not discussed or qualified.

The situation changed in the nineteenth century, and this change can be identified from within the so-called ‘statecraft writings’. From then onwards, these writings reflect an increasing concern for the composition of the group of commoners and, at the very end of the dynastic rule, also for a reassessment of their relative importance.

The concept of statecraft – literally, ‘to order/manage the world’ (jingshi) – originates from the Song dynasty. Statecraft authors, most often committed officials and scholars, aimed to solve immediate political and socio-economical problems with a long-term view to creating a ‘universal moral order’.

For the application of the fourfold division since the sixteenth century in Japan, where it was combined with ‘status’ (mibun) and legally more binding than in contemporaneous China, see Douglas R. Howland, ‘Samurai Status’, pp. 355-362. A text analysis of the twenty-five dynastic histories installed at the Academia Sinica full text database yields a result of 50 hits for simin and 7 for the synonymous shi nong gong shang, Hanji quanwen ziliaoku/Scripta Sinica, http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm.

Leonard, Wei Yuan, p. 20.
Ibid., pp. 20-22.
Statecraft writings deal with all matters and aspects of administrative concern. They were compiled from existing texts that were not initially written with the purpose of being included in these collections. Some of them were imperial edicts or government orders, while others were the communication of officials to the central government, mostly in the form of memorials. The latest editions also contain texts that are suggestions from intellectuals outside the government, or descriptions of foreign political and administrative matters that stand in no immediate relation to China but were thought to be useful as possible models.

In the Qing dynasty, the first of these collections was edited in 1826 by He Changling (1785-1848), a provincial administrator in Jiangsu, and Wei Yuan, who served as a mid-level district administrator in the same province. The editors proposed a change of the bureaucratic framework in order to prevent corruption and to stabilize social and economic conditions. However, the collection also contains texts from the early and high Qing that were considered relevant for contemporaneous problems. With the first of these editions, Wei Yuan created a model for political expression that was taken up by later intellectuals who edited sequels and complements to the original edition. The editors, including Wei Yuan, belonged to the scholarly elite but did not rank high in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Some of them were related to more prominent personalities, such as Mai Zhonghua (1876-1956), a student and the son-in-law of Kang Youwei,35 or Sheng Kang, father of the industrialist Sheng Xuanhuai (1844-1916).36

In her study on the relationship of statecraft writings and the press, Andrea Janku explains that from the 1890s on, such compilations increased and reached their apex around 1898. After Kang Youwei's Hundred Day Reform was crushed in the summer of 1898, the original group of statecraft compilers kept silent or resumed their work in other forms from exile. In 1902, statecraft writings were once again used in order to justify the government’s reform efforts. Meanwhile, many of the previous editions were reprinted, but compilation and reprint activities petered out after the fall of the dynasty. As a public sector began to take shape and political opinion could be expressed in newspapers and journals, statecraft writings and journalism approached each other in content, and with this assimilation, the genre of statecraft writings gradually faded away. The last of the editions is from 1914.37

36 Janku, ‘Preparing the Ground’, p. 75, fn. 27.
37 Ibid., pp. 74-76.
The ten most important collections, dating from the years 1826 to 1902, are listed in the following table. They formed the text corpus for this study. Recent research has identified about nineteen late Qing and early Republican statecraft collections.

Table 49 Collections of statecraft writings, 1826-1902

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editors and Titles</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Chapters</th>
<th>Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 He Changling and Wei Yuan, Huangchao jingshi wenbian (Statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1826</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Rao Yucheng, Huangchao jingshi wenbian xuj (Continued collection of statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Ge Shijun, Huangchao jingshi wen xubian (Sequel to the statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1888</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Sheng Kang, Huangchao jingshi wen xubian (Sequel to the statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Chen Zhongyi, Huangchao jingshi wen sanbian (Third edition of statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Mai Zhonghua, Huangchao jingshi wen xinbian (New edition of statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Shao Zhitang, Huangchao jingshi wen tongbian (Comprehensive edition of statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 He Liangdong, Huangchao jingshi wen sibian (Fourth edition of statecraft writings of our August Dynasty)</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

38 These were installed at the Academia Sinica Taiwan ‘Electronic Editions of Chinese Writings Full-text Database’ 中央研究院漢籍電子文獻瀚典全文檢索系統, http://www.sinica.edu.tw/~tdbproj/handy1/ and have later migrated to other sites. Photomechanic reproductions were published in several editions, for instance by the Guofeng chubanshe and in the Collectanea jindai Zhongguo shiliao congkan.

39 Shen Yan, ‘Wan Qing jingshi wenbian’, p. 58, counts nineteen; Andrea Janku, p. 74, table 2, has seventeen sequels to the 1826 edition.
A closer investigation of the context of the terms ‘the four groups’ (simin) or ‘scholars-farmers-artisans-merchants’ (shi nong gong shang) in the earliest of these collections shows that in the texts of the first collection (1826), both terms refer to commoners in general. Some texts outline the characteristics and complementary functions of each of the four groups and any other groups that are perceived as necessary or at least as existent. For example:

The scholars understand the way of the former kings and support the ruler of men in governing the realm. The farmers till the fields with physical labour and harvest the grain to feed the realm. The artisans produce the necessary vessels and objects for the use of the realm. The merchants bring scarceness and abundance into contact and assemble goods for the profit of the realm. Besides, those ordinary people who are close to the officials, such as present-day office assistants, are indispensable for administration, and therefore must also be appended to the four people.40

Other texts designate the scholars as ‘those who excel’; soldiers as ‘those who are strong’; and farmers, artisans, and merchants as ‘those who are weak’.41 Single groups are also discussed. The statement one comes across

---

40 Jin Fu 靳輔 (1633-1692), ‘On creating wealth and augmenting provisions, memorial one’ (‘Sheng cai yu xiang diyi shu’ 生財裕餉第一疏), Collection 1, chap. 26, fol. 20a/b. Jin Fu, a bannerman, was a specialist in river conservancy and served as the Director-General of the Yellow River Conservancy for eleven years. He successfully organized dike and canal construction on the lower reaches of the Yellow River. See Hummel, Eminent Chinese, p. 161 ff.

41 Shen Qiyuan 沈起元 (1685-1763), ‘Reflecting on strategies for current tasks’ (‘Ni shiwu ce’ 擬時務策), Collection 1, chap. 35, fol. 41b. Shen Qiyuan directed the Confucian academy at Luoyang; see Hummel, Eminent Chinese, p. 175.
most frequently is that the scholars rank first among the four groups, while it is mentioned only once that the farmers face the greatest hardships of all four. Merchants are also mentioned once, but there is no separate characterization or discussion of artisans.

It was also a matter of debate what the right apportionment of the four categories of people was. Generally, the best ratio was considered to be 70 percent farmers and 10 percent each of artisans, scholars, and merchants. The most extensive discussion of the four groups was formulated by Yun Jing, the founder of the ‘Yanghu school’ of practical learning. He pointed out the fact that at the time not only four but as many as fourteen groups existed but that those who fed and provided the essential services were still the same four as in ancient times. To some extent, the additional ten groups is a rhetorical inflation stemming from a preference for pairs. It includes, in an allusion to Han Yu, Buddhist and Daoist clergy; the nobility (gui) and the rich (fu); military leaders (cao bing zhe) and their followers (jianyi zhe), their offspring (zidi), wives, and in-laws (yinya); commercial agents and brokers (ya, hui); servants (pu and tai); courtesans; and actors.

---

42 Zhou Kai 周凱, ‘An explanation of the poem on cultivating mulberry trees’ (‘Zhong sang shishuo’), Collection 1, chap. 37, fol. 23a claims that ‘scholars are the first among the four groups, and often farm as well as study. When the scholars lead [in introducing agricultural methods], the people [i.e. farmers] will certainly follow.’ Zhou Kai (ca. 1779-1837) acted as a mid-level civil and military official in various provincial governments and was a specialist in navigation and shipbuilding. For further references on the position of the scholars within the four groups, see Xu Chengxuan 許承宣 (I. 1676, Supervising Censor in the Office of Scrutiny for Public Works, see Zhongguo lidai renming da cidian, p. 750), ‘Comment to a document on ‘Four problems of corvée and taxation’ [of 1645]’ (‘Fuchai guanshui sibi shu’), dated 1680, Collection 1, chap. 28, fol. 28a; Chen Qingmen 陳慶鬥, ‘About being a honest official’ (‘Shixue yiguan lu’), Collection 1, chap. 22, fol. 28a.

43 Wang Peixun 王沛恂, ‘Record on wild silkworms’ (‘Ji shan can’), Collection 1, chap. 37, fol. 23b.


45 Jin Fu, ‘On creating wealth and augmenting provisions, memorial one’, in Collection 1, chap. 26, p. 7-1. Xu Chengxuan, ‘Comment to a document on four problems of taxation [of 1645]’, Collection 1, chap. 28, fol. 28a says that scholars constitute ten percent of the entire four groups.

46 For biographical information, see Hummel, Eminent Chinese, pp. 959-960 and Zhongguo lidai renming da cidian, p. 1783. Yun had passed the second-degree official examinations in 1783 and successfully worked as regional administrator in various districts. He was known as an upright official, but in 1814 was relegated and stripped of his offices after being accused of overlooking that his subordinates had accepted bribes. He was an expert in classical, pre-Han dynasty writing (guwen, a style revived by Han Yu) and close to legalist thinking. Since he came from Yanghu in Jiangsu, his school of thought was entitled ‘Yanghu school’ (Yanghu pai 陽湖派).

47 Yun Jing, ‘Subsequent changes from the Three Emperors onwards’ (‘Sandai yin’ge lun’), Collection 1, chap. 11, fol. 11a-12b.
According to Yun Jing, on top of the burden of feeding these ten superfluous groups, other tendencies lead to the impoverishment of farmers, artisans, and merchants. He states that contrary to the ideal in ‘antiquity’, when the rulers owned all land and made the people till it, the rich now buy land and delegate agricultural labour to landless, destitute workers (yong). The artisans of olden times had specific patterns of production and were supervised by the officials, but later they allegedly did not conform to any rules and ‘made everything on their own’. Yun Jing claims that unskilled artisans cannot support themselves, and the skilled hands produce items of such exaggerated refinement that it takes them several years to finish a single one, with the result that they, too, cannot make a living. Traditionally, merchants were not allowed to wear sumptuous dress and use luxury carts, but in Yun Jing’s era, they indulged in exaggerated luxury which did not match with their positions, and tried to imitate the scholar-officials. Consequently, their wealth also decreased. Yun Jing ends his argument with the urgent advice that the members of the unproductive groups be reduced.

Another conservative thinker, Wang Boxin (1799-1873), a friend of commissioner Lin Zexu (1785-1850), who had ordered the destruction of imported opium in Canton in 1839 and the punishment of those Cantonese compradors who had handled the opium trade, called for an outright ‘prohibition of the secondary occupations’ (Jin mo). Deploiring the situation where craftspeople were no longer supervised and controlled by officials, he made a distinction between those artisans who followed their inherited trade and were impoverished and those who produced ‘clever devices’ for the market and flourished. He called for the punishment and discrimination of the latter and the merchants who traded in their products.

Such anti-commercial invectives, which do not touch on the position or value of the scholarly class, gradually diminished in the statecraft collections in the course of the late nineteenth century. They showed the anxiety of a part of the scholarly elite that society was changing for the worse and that the economically active groups that produced and traded goods were to blame for it.

Re-evaluations: Turning to Antiquity and Facing the West

From the fifth of the statecraft collections (1898) onwards, the change to more assertive views of craft production and commerce becomes manifest.

---

48 For biographical data, see Hummel, Eminent Chinese, p. 511.
49 Collection 4, chap. 55, fol. 3a-4a.
This re-evaluation sometimes went hand in hand with a more critical view of the role of the scholars. Among the lines of thought developed, some still referred to antiquity, while others brought up for discussion the position of crafts and commerce in overseas countries. Both antiquity and the situation abroad served as positive models that stood in contrast to the circumstances in China at that time.

In these argumentations, the ancient times were superior not only because able administrators closely supervised the crafts but because the saint kings and their highest ranking councilors were engineers and inventors. The examples cited are almost identical: the mythical figures of Fuxi (the inventor of hexagrams for divination, hunting, fishing, and animal sacrifice), Shennong (‘Celestial Farmer’, patron of Chinese medicine, agriculture), Huangdi (‘Yellow Emperor’, inventor of Chinese characters, ships and carts, medicine, music, sericulture), the saint kings Yao and Shun (inventors of the game *weiqi* and the calendar) and Yu (hydraulic engineering), and finally the historical personages of Duke of Zhou (regent for the second Zhou king Cheng, fl. 1030 B.C., consolidator of the Zhou dynasty, the purported inventor of a compass-like ‘south pointing needle’), Zhang Heng (78-139), a court astronomer in the Later Han who invented a seismoscope and a rotating celestial globe, and Zhuge Liang (181-234), military strategist and councilor to Liu Bei, ruler of the state of Shu-Han in the Three Kingdoms, to whom the invention of the ‘wooden ox’, a war engine, is ascribed. According to this reasoning, after the Song dynasty, the spirit of inventiveness and interest for technical matters declined because the scholars were too concerned with book learning and passing official examinations. Craftspeople were hence considered vulgar, and it was believed that only the simple-minded became artisans. Another text

---

51 The *muniu* 木牛 or *muniu liuma* 木牛流馬 (wooden ox and flowing horse), is most often identified as wheelbarrow.
52 Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838-1894), ‘A theory on promoting crafts and industries’, written in 1893 (Zhen baigong shuo guisi 振百工說癸巳), Collection 5, chap. 63, fol. 3a. Xue served as secretary to Zeng Guofan and was a diplomat in London and Paris from 1890 to 1894; see Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, pp. 331-332. For the same sequence of inventions by sage kings and court officials, see also ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’ (‘Shu chuangxing yixue hou’ 書創興藝學後), by an anonymous author, Collection 7 (1901), chap. 87, fol. 8b.
53 ‘A theory on promoting crafts and industries’, Collection 5, chap. 63, fol. 3a. As to the low esteem for craftspeople, even after the merchants had risen in prestige by buying official titles, see also ‘Suggestion to all provinces to enlarge their official manufactories’ (‘Gesheng tuiguang...
draws on a citation from the ‘Book of Changes’ (*Yijing*) that criticizes the neglect of technical matters: ‘[In later times] it was ignored what the *Book of Changes* says: ‘In preparing things for practical use, and inventing and making instruments for the benefit of all under the sky, there are none greater than the sages.’”54

Over time, the voices that called for an equitable appraisal within the four occupational groups became more and more articulate. They claimed that in antiquity the artisans and merchants stood on an equal footing with the scholars. A skilled artisan could allegedly even criticize the government. In later times, the Ministries of Revenues and Work controlled commerce and crafts, but the officials did not understand the actual problems of commerce and crafts or industries. Consequently, they demanded that the ways of antiquity be applied.55

However, the greatest difference with the first collections of statecraft literature lies in the fact that comparisons to industrializing and industrialized countries – the ‘West’ and Japan – were beginning to be incorporated into discussions on the four occupational groups. The main contrast was seen in the status of the counterpart of the Chinese artisans (*gong*) abroad, namely craftspeople, technicians, engineers, and industrialists (of all scales). Three crucial factors seemed different: foreign rulers appreciated the efforts of craftspeople and industrialists, protected their property rights by legislation, and made sure that technical knowledge was transmitted and enhanced in official vocational schools. As we have seen before, authors began to question the normative dominance of the scholars, but the discourse diversified into positions that perceived the Western counterparts of the artisans as dominant and decisive in Western societies and economies, and those that insisted on the dominance of the merchants. Xue Fucheng formulated both

---


55 ‘A theory on Chinese and foreign wealth and poverty, similarities and differences’ (‘Zhong wai pin fu yi tong lun’ 中外貧富異同論), Collection 7, chap. 106, fol. 32a. See also Ying Zuxi 應祖錫 (1855-1927), ‘Promoting the industries and opening commerce’ (‘Xing gong tong shang’ 興工通 商), Collection 9 (1902), chap.12, part 5, sect. 8 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=874265). Ying Zuxi served first as a diplomat in Spain, later as a regional administrator under the Qing and in the Republic of China.
opinions in separate texts. In ‘Theory on promoting crafts and industries’, he explained that:

In Western usage, states are built on commerce and industry. The artisans generally form the substance and the merchants the application, which means that the artisans actually rank higher than the merchants. The scholars research the natural sciences and techniques, which means that as far as merit is concerned, the artisans combine their own and the scholars' affairs.

In his conclusion, he compared the Western situation to China’s antiquity. If China wanted to strengthen itself and promote the crafts, it first had to overcome its prejudices against artisans and its exaggerated appreciation for scholars and official examinations.

The critique of the interrelation of classical text learning as the main road to office, power, and reputation is also formulated by contrasting this with the West. One text claims that in the West, merchants, artisans, soldiers, and farmers all learned their trades in specialized schools and therefore stood on the same level as Chinese scholars:

The appreciation of commerce in the West goes so far as to establish commercial schools. One first has to learn a trade in order to be a merchant. That means that the merchants of the West are similar to the scholars in China. Actually, not only the merchants are similar to the scholars, but all technical branches, military matters, and agriculture are taught in schools in order to train the talents. That means that artisans (technicians) as well as soldiers (military officers) and farmers (agronomists) all are like scholars.

Taking this kind of vocational training as a model, reformers demanded that such schools also be established in China and that the most efficient

56 Identical to ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’, Collection 7 (1901), chap. 87, fol. 8b.
60 ‘Suggestion that China should open additional training centers for the industries’, Collection 8, chap. 42, sect. 18 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=464464); ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’, Collection 7 (1901), chap. 87, fol. 8a/b.
merchants and engineers should be conferred official posts as incentives,\(^\text{61}\) or that industrialists should be elevated to the nobility.\(^\text{62}\)

Several authors considered the Western system of ensuring property rights for inventors as key to the success of the West and should therefore be emulated in China.\(^\text{63}\) They argued that without patent legislation in China, the West would continuously lead in technical innovation, and China would never catch up.\(^\text{64}\) In one instance, the importance of patent rights was spelled out in detail. In an account that here and there runs counter to the understanding of historical facts, Chen Chi (1855-1900)\(^\text{65}\) narrates the story of the ‘simple copper smith’ (\textit{tonggong} 銅工) Krupp, who learned advanced gun-making technology in France with the consent of Napoleon Bonaparte. France was the first country where the inventor’s patent rights were protected by law, which for a while made it the leading power in Europe. When Krupp presented his breech-loading gun (sic) to the German ruler, he was richly rewarded and given nobility status. In the German-French war [1870], Krupp’s guns defeated the French. Thus, it was the invention of ‘a small copper manufacturer’ rather than military prowess and diplomatic skill that decided the victory.\(^\text{66}\) Chen Chi concludes that the only way for China to rise out of its backwardness was to promote industry, and the first step in promoting industry was patent legislation. In this account, which contains several counterfactual points,\(^\text{67}\) the author directly addressed the emperor

\(^{61}\) Ying Zuxi, ‘Promoting the industries and opening commerce’, Collection 9, chap. 12, part 5, sect. 8 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=874265), demands the option to confer official positions to merchants and artisans. ‘A theory on Chinese and foreign wealth and poverty, similarities and differences’, Collection 7, chap. 106, fol. 32a more specifically calls for official status for the most skilled technicians.

\(^{62}\) Xue Fucheng, ‘A theory on promoting crafts and industries’, Collection 5 (1898), chap. 63, fol. 3b.


\(^{64}\) ‘Suggestion to all provinces to enlarge their official manufactories’, Collection 7, chap. 87, p. 8b.

\(^{65}\) As a middle echelon official in the Ministries of Revenue and Justice and Secretary in the State Council, Chen Chi studied Western affairs and recorded his ideas on economic and administrative reform in \textit{Yongshu} 庸書 (A commonplace book, 1893) and \textit{Xu fuguo ce} 續富國策 (Sequel to ‘Strategies for enriching the country’, 1896). Together with Kang Youwei he organized the ‘Study association for (national) strengthening’ (Qiang xue hui 強學會). Wang Yantao, ‘Chen Chi de jingji xiangxiang’, p. 183.

\(^{66}\) Chen Chi 陳熾, ‘A theory on fostering industries and strengthening the country’ (‘Quan gong qiang guo shuo’ 勸工強國說), Collection 6, chap. 9, fol. 2b.

\(^{67}\) For instance, the technology that the Krupp family developed was steel casting rather than copper manufacture, and cannon rather than gun fabrication. Although not impossible, it seems improbable that (Friedrich) Krupp (1787-1826) saw Napoleon in person, as in Chen Chi’s narrative. It was not Friedrich but his son Alfred Krupp (1812-1887) who successfully presented
and the central government. Therefore he stressed the acknowledgement that Western artisans who had become manufacturers and industrialists received from their rulers and underlined the risk that all rulers run if they do not give their utmost attention to such industries.

Finally, many of the statecraft writings express the hope of retrieving profits lost to Western countries trading in China. For this reason, they point to Western models of industrial promotion and the protection of property rights. In this sense, Xue Fucheng points out:

If we disregard what the Western people esteem highly, then the extreme wealth produced in China will gradually flow overseas, China will become poorer and weaker every day, and the West will become richer and stronger every day – and this is what the Westerners keenly desire.68

To conclude this review of perceptions of the concept of the four occupational groups, we should add that even the late collections of statecraft writings contain articles that insist that there were far too few farmers, and that the other three groups as well as the additional ten described by Yun Jing had increased disproportionately. One writer, who uses a pseudonym, advocated that several ten thousands of inefficient scholars and several millions of artisans ‘who merely seek excessive refinement but are unproductive’ and ‘merchants who are not active in business’ should return to working on the land. In his view, the government should concentrate on developing new agricultural land rather than on fostering trade and commerce.69 However, this remains an exception embedded in a majority of accounts that call for a revision of rigid agrarianism, in the spirit of Confucius, ‘the sage whose actions were timely.’70

breech-loading cast steel cannons to the Prussian king Wilhelm I. Furthermore, while Friedrich in his final years had all but driven the family business into ruins, the Krupps, having been members of the Essen notables since the seventeenth century, and in particular Alfred Krupp, were hardly ‘small copper smiths’. See William Manchester, *Krupp*, p. 37 ff.

68 Xue Fucheng, ‘Explanation on the English use of merchants to open new lands’ (‘Yingjili yong shangwu pi huangdi shuo’ 英吉利利用商務闢荒地說), Collection 5, chap. 74, fol. 4b. See also ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’, Collection 7 (1901), chap. 87, fol. 8b; ‘Suggestion to all provinces to enlarge their official manufactories’, Collection 7, chap. 87, p. 8b.

69 Gu'an zi 古庵子 ‘On the four occupational groups’ (‘Simin lun’ 四民論), Collection 7, chap. 106, fol. 16a.

70 ‘Extension of the theory on the four occupational groups’ (‘Guang simin lun’ 廣四民論), Collection 7, chap. 106, 16b to 17a. For the quote from *Mengzi* 孟子, ‘Wanzhang’ B, see the translation by D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, p. 150.
The concept of the four occupational groups was applied even at a time when it may have seemed outdated and even by the reformers of the day who invoked it to call for industrialization and the promotion of commerce: ‘The wealth of the country is stored in four big chambers. The first are the scholar-officials, the second the farmers, the third the artisans, the fourth the merchants.’

Concept and Reality

How close is such reasoning to the realities of society, and what, in particular, does it tell us about the actual social position of the craftspeople?

The observed texts variously touch on the relationships between the four occupational groups. Until the late nineteenth century, the dominant position of the scholars remained undisputed. Thereafter, the first critical voices were raised. Farmers were rarely mentioned in the texts after the fifth collection, and the focus shifted to the two other groups, which previously were conceived of as secondary or derived and now required ‘promotion’. This comes as no surprise as far as the merchants are concerned. Several indicators show that the actual position of the merchants had risen in the course of commercialization since the Late Ming era. The most important of such indicators was the possibility of participation in civil service examinations. In the Song period, merchants and artisans had been excluded from the examinations and consequently from taking office. But since the Ming dynasty, these discriminatory restrictions were lifted. In order to attain greater acceptance by the political elite, the merchants adapted to the norms of the scholar-official class by acquiring knowledge of the Confucian scriptures that formed the canon for official examinations, and in addition to that emulated the lifestyle and fashions of the ‘high-cultural’ circles.

---

73 Lufrano, Honorable Merchants, p. 37.
74 Ho Ping-ti, The Ladder to Success, p. 42; Miyazaki Ichisada, China’s Examination Hell, p. 19, mentions only restrictions as to ‘base occupations’ such as running brothels, and that the candidate needed a guarantor for his personal respectability, but not – if he was a commoner – a certificate of his ancestors’ occupation. See also Lufrano, Honorable Merchants, p. 38.
75 See, for instance, Brook, Confusions, p. 128, for the mid-Ming Huizhou merchants based at Yangzhou. Compare also Antonia Finnane’s more sceptical approach to the question whether Huizhou merchants in Yangzhou actually were an exemplary and representative case of ‘blurred
The merchants did not create a dominant culture of their own that would have superseded that of the learned classes with privileged access to state office. Antonia Finnane perceptively remarks that the wealthy merchants of Yangzhou had their portraits made in their gardens, showing them pursuing elegant pastimes rather than doing business in their counting houses.\(^{76}\)

As we have seen, orthodox representatives of the state and the scholar class wished to limit the influence of this group and hence invoked the ideal of an agrarian society. However, after the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, with the enlarged export and import markets, business opportunities broadly increased, commercialization intensified, and buying official titles and examination degrees became a frequent practice among merchants.\(^{77}\) Moreover, Western values spread in post-Opium-War China, especially Protestant utilitarianism, and this contributed to more appreciative views of profitable commercial business.

When reformers called for a wider recognition of the positive contribution of merchants to society, an innovative form of business organization – the so-called ‘official-supervised, merchant-managed’ enterprises – emerged, where merchant know-how and capital was invested under official patronage. Together with the arsenals and dockyards, these were the greatest modern companies established in the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^{78}\) Some of the statecraft writers such as Zheng Guanying (1842-1922)\(^{79}\) were actively involved in such companies.

The position of artisans, if seen from their legal chances of receiving a higher education, was formally equal to that of the merchants.\(^{80}\) However, the examples of artisans who rose to fame and high social status only on basis of their skills are few and far between. There have always been the boundaries’ between social groups, that is, between scholar-literati and merchants in her Speaking of Yangzhou, pp. 253-264.

\(^{76}\) Finnane, Speaking of Yangzhou, p. 264.

\(^{77}\) Naquin and Rawski, Chinese Society, p. 221.

\(^{78}\) Feuerwerker, China’s Early Industrialization, p. 9, lists as examples and models for late Qing industrial and commercial enterprises the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company (1872), the Kaiping Coal Mines (1877), the Shanghai Cotton Cloth Mill (first planned 1878, later the Huasheng Cotton Mill), the Imperial Telegraph Administration (1881), the Moho Gold Mines (1887), the Hanyang Ironworks (from 1896), the Daye Iron Mines (1896), the Imperial Bank of China (1896), and the Pingxiang Coal Mines (1898).

\(^{79}\) Zheng had pursued classical studies in his youth but did not pass official exams. He learned English at an Anglo-Chinese school in Shanghai, and in 1860 entered an English trade company at age seventeen, where he worked as a ‘comprador’ before setting up his own business. Like many other merchants, he acquired official rank by purchase. See Feuerwerker, China’s Early Industrialization, p. 116, and especially Johannes Kehnen, Cheng Kuan-ying, p. 18 ff.

\(^{80}\) Lufrano, Honorable Merchants, p. 37.
big names, especially in palace architecture. In the Ming era, some of these builders rose to official status, like Xu Gao, who became Minister of Public Works in 1562.81 However, as Clunas remarks, throughout the Ming period it was noted with disapproval when persons of artisan backgrounds were elevated to high government positions, as these were reserved as the domain of the learned classes.82 During the Qing era, palace architects were never to rise as high as that. Lei Jinyu (1659-1729), the patriarch of the most renowned family of palace builders in the Qing, acquired a rank and official salary of the seventh grade of nine,83 which was much lower than a minister, who ranked grade 2a in the Ming. The ‘Record of outstanding artisans’ (Zhejiang lu), which portrays the efforts of the Lei family in the chapter on Qing architects, includes short biographies of 42 builders. Most of them were mid or high level officials, and except for the Leis, only two other persons are explicitly described as artisans. All the others ‘supervised’ rather than engaged in manual efforts and arrived at their leading positions in the traditional way of official examinations rather than by professional craft training.84

Other cases known from the late Ming or Ming-Qing transition when artisans rubbed shoulders – or, as the Chinese expression goes, ‘sat together and exchanged greetings’ – with the high-cultured circles was when they produced luxury items like carved bamboo, lacquers, bronzes, and ceramics. Elite customers treasured those wares as proofs of their connoisseurship, but this did not mean that the status of artisans rose to equality with the scholars or even with the merchants who could afford such art objects.85

Until the very late Qing period, the most feasible path of upward mobility for artisans must have been to acquire enough wealth to enter commerce, with the option of studying the prescribed curriculum for the state examinations or to purchase office. Clues that artisans tried to enter commerce can be found. For instance, a French Jesuit missionary who visited the Jingdezhen porcelain production centre wrote in 1710: ‘Although for one artisan who gets rich, a hundred ruin themselves, they will always try their fortune in the hope to accumulate enough money for opening a shop of their own one day.’86 More examples of this trend are given in the chapters on shipbuilding

82 Clunas, Superfluous Things, p. 147.
83 Zhu and Liang, Zhejiang lu, in Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan IV/1 (1933), p. 84.
and printing. From the numerical evidence, merchants’ guilds as bodies of self-organization seem to outnumber craftspeople’s guilds, and authorities also seem to have taken more authoritarian measures against artisan guilds than against merchant guilds.⁸⁷ In Hankow, the ‘Upper Eight Guilds’ (shang ba hang) were those of ‘the most lucrative commercial trades of the city: copper and lead dealers, piece-goods dealers, medicinal herb dealers, paper dealers, Shanxi bankers, pawnbrokers, vegetable oil dealers, dealers in miscellaneous commodities’, while the ‘Lower Eight Guilds’ (xia ba hang) referred to the handicraft workshops (zuofang).⁸⁸

The opinion that commerce relied upon manufacturing and that therefore craftspeople should rank above the merchants was formulated for the first time in the late statecraft writings.⁸⁹ It stands to reason that such ideas were articulated most decidedly in texts that deal with institutions of vocational training that were founded as a key part of the Qing government’s efforts to promote industry, i.e., the schools and official model factories that were opened between 1902 and 1909 in Beijing and the provinces.⁹⁰ The last of the statecraft collections contains the statutes for the Peking Reconstruction Craft Centre,⁹¹ which offer more concrete insights into the labour force than the more exhortative and abstract texts. This centre formed the core of a government employment programme for reconstruction after the devastations of the Boxer Rebellion (1900/1901). The statutes explain that: ‘The four groups lost their occupations after the Western powers invaded Peking to fight the Boxer Rebellion.’ The centre therefore was intended not only for people originally from Peking but also for those who had fled the turmoil in their home regions and caused the population in the capital to swell from around 700,000 to two million.

Except for merchants, officials, and soldiers, there are basically two ways of earning one’s living: ‘eating from one’s strength’, which the Westerners call ‘workers’, and ‘eating from one’s skill’, which the Westerners call ‘technicians’. Most of the physical labourers are domestics, rickshaw pullers, water carriers, and mason’s helpers. Most of the skilled labourers

---

⁸⁷ Timothy Bradstock, *Craft Guilds in Ch’ing Dynasty China*, pp. 63-64.
⁸⁸ William T. Rowe, *Hankow*, p. 332.
⁸⁹ ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’; ‘Suggestion to all provinces to enlarge their official manufactories’, Collection 7, chap. 87, fol. 8b; ‘On the importance of the industries’, Collection 8, chap. 42, sect. 14 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=464464).
⁹¹ Huang Zhonghui, ‘Statutes for the Peking Reconstruction Craft Center’ (‘Chuangban Beijing shanhou gongyi ju shuo tie’ 創辦北京善後工藝局說帖), Collection 10, chap. 9, p. 6b to 7b.
are carpenters and masons. Moreover, there are people from various craft branches in town, certainly not below several hundred thousands, but they are all migrants, not local people. They originally led a secure life, but came to our city because of the foreign attacks and have lost all their belongings. Some of them have become criminals. In order to prevent further illegal actions, it was suggested to establish several reconstruction offices. […] Three groups of people can be allowed into the center: 1) Those who originally have learned a craft. These are the foremen who teach the others. 2) Young and clever persons will be taught by the foremen such crafts as: cotton weaving, belt weaving, embroidery, ivory or wood carving, cloisonné making. 3) The unskilled, old and young and crippled can weave mats, make ropes, brooms and brushes and do all simple and rough jobs.

The plans for the centre foresaw that the objects produced should be typical Peking arts and craft products that were in demand by foreign customers, but crafts that were so far unknown in China could also be introduced.

It would be unfair to end this account with an institution devoted to poverty reduction and crime prevention rather than with the modernization and mechanization of craft production. For the statecraft writings also contain texts on technical schools with higher ambitions of teaching the theory of mechanics in order to enable, in the second phase of instruction, practical and ingenious constructions.92 The most famous among these are the schools of the Fujian Navy Yard and the Jiangnan Arsenal discussed in the previous chapters. China’s economy was on the road to industrialization by the early twentieth century, and the reformist intellectuals perceived the necessities of the times. The government in its last years tried to develop new administrative structures that were intended to accommodate and foster commerce and industries in ‘modern’ ways.

The Place of the Female Artisan

The concept of the ‘four groups’ is not gender specific. Since it aimed to classify the ruler’s subjects in a general sense, it sets out from the perspective

92 ‘Written after the inauguration of an industrial school’, Collection 7, chap. 87, p. 8b; ‘Suggestion to all provinces to enlarge their official manufactories’, Collection 7, chap. 87, fol. 9a/b; ‘On the importance of the industries’, Collection 8, chap. 42, sect. 14 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=464464); ‘Suggestion that China should open additional training centers for the industries’, Collection 8, chap. 42, sect. 18 (http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=464464).
of households rather than individuals. While in the Qing dynasty, male sojourning was a frequent practice, the female artisan’s place was in her family. Within an extended family, a married woman’s chances of rising to a managing position depended on the relative position of her husband within the birth hierarchy and the number of sons she bore, her relation to the mother-in-law but also, and not least, on her personal skill in the craft production. As Susan Mann has convincingly argued, the custom that girls and women ‘begged for skill’ qi qiao on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month stems from the hope for continuous work efficiency and, consequently, for a good income to support oneself and the family.

The trades in which women engaged lay mainly in the textile sector, such as spinning, weaving, and embroidery, or were related to processing any cash crops the family might produce or raw materials that were locally available, such as cotton, silkworms, bamboo, and wood for paper production and carving printing blocks, sugar production, or tea curing.

Both Mann and Bray have discussed how the Qing state also tried to control male and female occupational patterns. According to state orthodoxy, which drew on ancient models, the right type of complementary work for peasant couples was silk and hemp spinning and weaving for women, and grain production for men. Since the late Ming era, this basic pattern was discontinued in many regions because weaving cotton proved so profitable that entire families would engage in it, with the husband at the loom and the wife spinning, or in the case of silk production, reeling the silk. In other regions, women worked in the fields. This seemed disquieting to the Confucian elites, because it was the beginning of a specialization that implied that farmers could become artisans or merchants. In the perception of the elites and the government, in an agricultural family the occupation of the male head of the household was in agriculture, even if women and children earned incomes from craft production for the commercial sector. The transition from a farmer to an artisan took place when the men in the

93 Francesca Bray, ‘Towards a Critical History’, pp. 187-188, citing from Shenshi nongshu 沈氏農書, reports that rural landlord households hired women by the year to weave cotton. The extent to which this was practised and organized is not discussed, but since food for these women was accounted for one year, they probably lived with the family of their employer. Urban weaving households, according to Bray, p. 189, hired only men and paid daily wages.
95 Mann, ‘Household Handicrafts and State Policy in Qing Times’.
97 Ibid., pp. 190-203; Bray, ‘The Meaning of Work’.
family gave up farming. It is from this perspective that the gender issue also plays a role in the stability of society, which was believed to rely on an ideal numerical relation of the ‘four groups’.

Conclusion

The concept of the ‘four groups of the people’ appears to have remained immutable throughout the imperial period, despite the fact that more occupational groups than those four existed at all times. By itself, the concept was not devised as an instrument for a comprehensive social analysis of all the ruler’s subjects but for monitoring the balance between the agricultural part of the population – which was the most important for the revenue of the state – and the rest, who were also deemed potentially more dangerous to social stability. Assuming that governments had the power to restrain or control occupational structures, political counselors from the fourth century B.C. included the additional idea that the non-agrarian and non-administrative occupations were ‘derived’ and ‘secondary’. This ranking was disputed and re-evaluated in certain periods, and it was finally rejected by the reformers of the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, reformist circles invoked the concept of the four occupational groups in order to demand a greater appreciation for the manufacturing and commercial occupations as well as a thoroughgoing revision of the educational system. This, they claimed, was the only way to ensure wealth and self-assertion against Western and Japanese encroachments on the Qing empire.

Some indicators – such as the opportunity to attend Confucian schools and to participate in state examinations since the Ming period, and the fact that since the mid-Ming era artisans were no longer registered as subjects obliged to render corvée service – show that artisans’ legal status was improving. Nevertheless, artisans who did not produce luxury items or work as court architects found it nearly impossible to rise to prominence, and their work was considered ‘menial’ by the more articulate elite. Their opportunities for upward mobility, if they existed at all, lay in commerce and from there, if their finances allowed it, to learning. Thus, although they ranked third in the hierarchy, they were in fact worse off than the merchants.

Philip Kuhn has observed that the ‘four occupational groups’ is the closest of all Chinese concepts to the medieval and early modern European model of the three classes or three estates.98 Both notions do indeed group the ruler’s

subjects according to their occupations, but the differences in substance outweigh the similarities in structure. The European medieval concept of oratores, defensores, laboratores – or clergy, nobility, commoners – as in early modern France, does not differentiate between those engaged in gainful work for subsistence or profit, as does the Chinese model of farmers, artisans, merchants. In the simin concept, the military element is completely missing, and the religious function of the clergy is not quite parallel to the more moral and political obligations of the Chinese scholars. The French estates had explicit political and economic functions and rights in the state. This was not the case in Ming and Qing China, where it would have been unthinkable for elected representatives of the four occupational groups to assemble before the emperor and deliberate on fiscal matters and other grievances. The question posed by the Abbé Sieyès (1748-1836) ‘Qu’est-ce que le Tiers état?’99 would have been meaningless in the Chinese context, since at least the ‘last’ three of the occupational groups constituted the commoners that were combined in the European third estate. Although the French Revolution of 1789 and the ousting of the Qing dynasty in 1911 were both the result of the struggle of majority groups for greater political participation and coincided with the beginning of industrialization, the preconditions of social formation were obviously not equal.

The reformists from the 1880s on appealed to the government for a greater appreciation of craftsmen and technical producers within the four occupational groups. However, in the political arena, this concept was invoked by one of the harshest opponents of the imperial system, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), to drive home another message. In 1902, while in exile in Japan, he noted that there was no problem with equality among the four occupational groups because a class system with special prerogatives had not existed in China since the period of the Warring States. While labour issues might arise in future days, he did not see this occurring anytime soon because the industrial production sector had not yet been developed. In his analysis, China’s most pressing problems were a lack of general political participation and the building of a nation-state.100 As a result, appeals that would have pitted occupational groups against each other were not taken to battle when the Chinese monarchy was brought to fall in the 1911 revolution.

---

99 Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, Qu’est-ce que le Tiers état?
100 Liang Qichao, Xinmin shuo 新民說 (‘On the new people’), chap. ‘Lun ziyou’ 論自由 (‘Discussion of liberty’), pp. 40-42. For other references by Liang Qichao and related authors to the four occupational groups as representatives of the entire ‘people’, see Janku, ‘Preparing the ground’, p. 103, 105, 107, 111.