

The Culture of Language in Ming China: Sound, Script, and the Redefinition of Boundaries of Knowledge. By Nathan Vedal. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 321. \$32.17 paperback.

Intellectual life in Ming China in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was more than one of speculative Neo-Confucian philosophy or affected genteel dilettantism, let alone a kind of *après moi le déluge*-infused hedonism of the affluent consumer society in the lower Yangtze delta. Rather, it was a period of self-conscious intellectual communities who drew new, inclusionary boundaries around their objects of study to create a brand of scholarship not seen before nor since. Vedal's new book describes the formation, content, and afterlife of this scholarship by focusing on the discipline of philology, an umbrella term used in reference to the study of classical texts globally and represented in China by the bibliographical category of the "lesser learning" (*xiaoxue* 小學). Because of the particular epistemology of the Ming scholars whom Vedal studies, philology in his book comprises phenomena quite far removed from the classical corpus itself, including non-Chinese scripts, the universality of human speech sounds, and music. Through a fluent and lucid discussion of these objects of inquiry, *The Culture of Language in Ming China* opens a window into an exciting, diverse intellectual world that is alien from what we thought we knew and yet replete with its own coherence. As such, the book is a history of science of the best kind, one with which every future investigation of knowledge in late imperial China will have to engage.

The Culture of Language in Ming China is divided into an introduction, seven chapters grouped into three parts, and an epilogue. The introduction first asserts the importance of philology in late imperial China as the discipline that clarified the meaning of the ancient texts from which the socio-political order drew its legitimacy. Second, the introduction presents the book's chief intervention: to show that Ming scholarship was not the reverse of philology, but rather an expansive kind of philology anchored in a contemporary academic community that was made invisible when philology was redefined in the eighteenth century.

The grouping of the book's chapters into three parts reflects Vedal's aim. The three chapters of Part One deal with the core of Ming philology. Chapter 1 presents the ontology and epistemology that made the discipline's radical expansion possible. Ming scholars, Vedal shows, believed that the "self-so" (*ziran* 自然) world beyond human artifice had a Coherence (*li* 理) to it, and that Coherence should be reflected in human institutions, practices, and knowledge. This assumption lent scholars the sanction to draw from other branches of knowledge in their philological studies; despite the difference in subject matter, the underlying Coherence was the same.

Universal Coherence, it seems, was best grasped through the study of "Image and Number" (*xiangshu* 象數), cosmological thinking originating in an interpretation of

the *Classic of Changes*, an ancient obscure divination manual that had been expanded into a canonical Confucian text. Numbers offered a symbolic system separate from the mass of Chinese characters, and their association with sound accordingly enabled scholars to abstract character readings—speech sounds—from the characters themselves. Thus freed, speech sounds could be imagined and investigated beyond the confines of the Chinese language(s) known to the scholar. Two approaches grounded in this cosmology became prominent in Ming scholarship: an association of speech sounds to music, where sounds were similarly represented by numerical relationships, and the discussion of speech sound on the basis of new or different scripts and notations.

Chapter 2 discusses the scholarly use of foreign scripts as examples of the second approach. Indic scripts had long had a limited presence in China through the mediation of Buddhism. The Ming period witnessed increased scholarly interest in them from outside the clerical community. At the same time, the Latin alphabet was introduced to China by European Catholic missionaries and their Chinese collaborators and was met with interest by philologists. Finally, after the Manchu conquest in the mid-seventeenth century, yet another foreign script became available to scholars. These three sets of scripts had one characteristic that set them apart from Chinese characters: they were all phonographic in that they recorded sound on a level beneath the syllable. As such, they were useful tools for the investigation of the number and variation of speech sounds as well as their relationships. Vedral makes two important points regarding these scripts in the period. First, they were primarily used as phonetic notations, not as means to record foreign languages. Second, they were generally considered to be analytic tools that were more difficult than Chinese characters, not as ways for increasing literacy by virtue of their relative simplicity (yet Vedral notes exceptions to this tendency).

From a focus on speech sounds and their notation in Chapter 2, Vedral turns to changes in the philological study of Chinese characters in Chapter 3. Vedral focuses on Learning-of-the-Mind (*xinxue* 心學) scholars who saw in the Chinese script a kind of “painting of the mind” (*xin zhi hua* 心之畫). Even though the linguistic scholarship discussed in this chapter is centred on writing, it is not dealing primarily with texts. Similar to the phonological scholarship of the previous chapter, which dealt with sounds and their organization, the scholars discussed here deal with graphs, their structure, and their arrangement. Wei Jiao 魏校 (1483–1543), one of the scholars in focus, printed his writings using modified ancient character forms and searched for deeper, symbolic meanings of graphs and their components beneath their ordinary usage. Others arranged characters by subject matter in their dictionaries, which they expected readers to then read sequentially, from beginning to end, to understand the worldview represented in their books.

The two chapters that follow constitute Part Two. Chapter 4 investigates the links between phonological scholarship and opera. Vedral points out that phonology

as a discipline always had a close relationship to literary production and appreciation. In the medieval period, the genre that phonology served to describe was poetry. In the Ming period, by contrast, phonology was brought to bear on opera performed in some or other form of contemporary Chinese (as opposed to the Middle Chinese of regularized verse). Phonological reasoning served to prescribe certain character readings. Indeed, the discussion of pronunciation in operatic performance at times turned into a discussion of what kind of language constituted standard Chinese, anticipating the reemergence of such debates in modern China. Meanwhile, phonological analyses developed to help opera singers were adopted by philologists who used them to clarify the structure of the Chinese syllable.

Chapter 5 takes up another aspect of the relationship between literature and philology. Vedal here turns to the reading of the Confucian classics; arguably the core of Chinese philology. Some scholars assumed that the classics were poetic texts through and through, and sought to restore their poetic character by imputing new readings to characters in the text. One step further involved assuming that the classical texts had been accompanied by music, and that this music, just like the poetic qualities of the texts, could be recreated. Since there were no musical scores to go by, Ming scholars relied on their understanding of the classics' phonology, which, as abstracted sounds, they then associated with musical sounds of differing pitch. The assumed universality of the sounds of speech and music enabled the study of the ancient world to advance further than the limited textual heritage alone would allow.

Parts One and Two in *The Culture of Language in Ming China* substantially change our view of the Ming period. Yet long-acknowledged characteristics of Ming China certainly remain in Vedal's account, and indeed underpin his analysis. Ming society is here still characterized by its improved communications, commercial publishing, and intellectual syncretism. Scholars interacted in person and through correspondence, while an imperial court of little intellectual ambition enabled the drifting of scholarly inquiry away from Confucian antiquity and to other traditions. Vedal anchors his account in this broader context, which in his telling enabled the emergence of a scholarly community that expanded the boundaries of philology through their interaction.

Before leaving the discussion of the book's first two parts, I should note that Vedal does not make a strong claim of causality through dividing and arranging the chapters so as to proceed from cosmology to the reading of the classics. He does not single out cosmological thinking as the reason that philology developed in the way it did. Rather, there were obviously mutually reinforcing tendencies at play. Precedents of the cosmologically-inspired study of sound existed and were available for scholars to draw on, but the reasons for them becoming so prominent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries certainly also included the introduction of the Latin alphabet to China in this period, as well as the development of opera as a literary genre and

a form of artistic performance. I think we should read these chapters to say that this confluence produced the Ming moment in the history of philology.

Chapters 6 and 7 and the book's epilogue treat the reception—rejection and survival—of Ming philology in the Qing period and into the twentieth century. Vedral discusses the emergence of a very different form of philology—retrospectively called Evidential Learning (*Kaozheng xue* 考證學)—in the eighteenth century, whose proponents used Ming scholarship as a foil against which they defined themselves.

The distorted image of the late Ming is a historiographical creation of the seventeenth and especially eighteenth century. Between the disapproval of classically ignorant contemporaries by a recalcitrant, peripheral intellectual in the seventeenth century to the compilation of a comprehensive catalogue of high-brow writing for the creation of an imperial library in the late eighteenth, an image of the Ming period emerged in which knowledge production under the preceding dynasty was presented first and foremost as the antithesis of the ideals of the day.

Vedral shows that whereas philology expanded in the Ming period, it contracted in the Qing to form a discipline that primarily researched the texts of Chinese antiquity by only comparing texts dating from the same period. Within Evidential Learning, gone was the use of contemporary or abstract language and music, which previously had been seen as legitimate scholarly resources thanks to a cosmology assumed to be universal. While this shift in intellectual priorities in itself is well known, Vedral relativizes it by showing, in Chapter 6, that scholarship more similar to Ming philology actually survived even into the nineteenth century. Once the Manchu language arrived in China, for example, it became studied alongside the Latin and Indic alphabets that had already been treated in Ming scholarship. In the nineteenth century, furthermore, cosmological reasoning bolstered the centrality of China and its linguistic tradition in the face of increasingly influential Western bodies of learning. Ming scholarly texts were likewise reprinted, albeit in bowdlerized forms that encouraged new and surprising uses of them (e.g., as textbooks for foreigners).

Having shown that Evidential Learning was never the sole form of philological scholarship, even in the late eighteenth century, Vedral in Chapter 7 turns to the issue of how it came to loom so large in the historiography. The chapter focuses on Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), a scholar who lived through the Ming-Qing transition. Relatively marginal in his time, Vedral shows how Gu, along with a select few others, were elevated in the eighteenth century to the status of pioneers of Evidential Learning, thereby making the continuation of such scholarly practices in the later period appear as a natural consequence. By marginalizing other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars in influential bibliographical projects, proponents of Evidential Learning strengthened the position of their brand of philology, in which antiquity and not universal cosmology was the epistemological starting point. Primarily concerned with the fate of Ming learning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Vedral adroitly

avoids answering the many questions that remain regarding the nature and extent of Evidential Learning, even as his account makes it appear less necessary and less dominant than earlier treatments would have us believe. Instead, Vedal leaves the reader with a nuanced account that highlights the survival of characteristics of Ming philology even within Evidential Learning itself, including the shared emphasis on contemporary scholarship practiced by a self-conscious disciplinary community.

Chapters 6 and 7 can be read as the book's conclusion. Yet Vedal ends the book with an epilogue, in which he relates the study of language in the Ming period to the proposals to reform the Chinese language and script in the twentieth century. The epilogue allows Vedal to engage with a period in the history of Chinese linguistic thought that has received a lot of attention in recent years. Vedal shows that while some twentieth-century reformers found little to gain by associating their proposals with scholarship hundreds of years old, elements of that tradition nevertheless remained in the new phonetic notations. Furthermore, after a period of implicit rejection, the Ming heritage was brought back toward the middle of the century to show that scholars had long had an interest in alternative scripts and notations auxiliary to Chinese characters. He thus shows that a period in the history of Chinese philology that at first strikes the reader as unexpected and almost flippant retained an intellectual relevance into quite recent times.

The Culture of Language in Ming China is a well-written book whose fluid exposition is aided by the author's familiarity with both Chinese linguistics and music. Only once—when the structure of the Chinese syllable is described in a box separate from the narrative (pp. 32–33)—does the complexity of Vedal's source material appear too much for the assumed intellectual background of his audience.

Reading a book as successful as *The Culture of Language in Ming China* naturally invites the question: how did he do it? Reverse-engineering Vedal's book helps to understand the state of the field from which it emerged. Parts of the book can be read as a history of Chinese linguistics, but one rearranged so that the emergence of phonology as a field of study in the medieval period arrives only in Chapter 4, even as Ming phonology was already studied in Chapter 2. Similarly, at times it appears as a deconstructed reception history of the legacy of certain Song-dynasty scholars, Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011–1077) in particular but also Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086).

Most of all, however, the book is what Vedal acknowledges it to be: an engagement with the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Complete library of the four treasuries) and its catalogue of books included as well as those noted but excluded (*cunmu* 存目). This massive bibliographical project was carried out at the court of the Manchu Qianlong 乾隆 emperor in the 1770s and early 1780s. The project was strongly associated with Evidential Learning, which is reflected in the selection of books and in their descriptions in the bibliography. Vedal uses these choices and the accompanying descriptions to discuss the reception of Ming philology in the eighteenth century.

Yet more importantly, the *Siku quanshu* and its catalogue, which are arranged by theme, provide a basic selection of sources for Vedal to work with. To be sure, *The Culture of Language in Ming China* relies to a significant degree on research on original Ming and Qing editions, which Vedal in many cases can only have consulted *in situ* in libraries in several countries. Reading his footnotes nevertheless gives the impression that the most important corpora used were the massive series of reprints produced to complement the *Siku quanshu* in the 1990s and early 2000s: primarily *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Collectanea of books noted but excluded in the [catalog of] the Complete library of the four treasures) and *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (A continuation of the Complete library of the four treasures). Like *Siku quanshu* itself, these series are arranged according to a bibliographical system which places phonological and graphological books in a section on philology (*xiaoxue*) within the broader Classics Division (*jingbu* 經部). I assume that Vedal's concern with bibliography and disciplinary boundaries is to some degree related to his engagement with these collections, which embody such divisions.

We are well aware of the importance of increased (and at times, reduced) access to government archives for research on the Qing period, as well as the utility of databases of the *Veritable Records* (the court chronicles) and of local gazetteers, and increasingly other full-text searchable book collections for research on both the Ming and Qing periods. The very wide scope and powerful arguments in *The Culture of Language in Ming China* show that the series of facsimile reprints derived from the *Siku quanshu* are also sources of great potential for research on late imperial Chinese history.