Lost modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the hazards of world history / Alexander Woodside.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Woodside, Alexander.
Lost modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the hazards of world history / Alexander Woodside.
p. cm. — (The Edwin O. Reischauer lectures)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-02217-3 (alk. paper)
JQ1510.W66 2006
320.951—dc22 2005056710
Introduction

In this book I propose that the rationalization processes we think of as “modern” are more manifold than is often assumed. They may occur independently of one another, as a multiplicity of developments, in some instances quite separately from such obvious landmarks as the growth of capitalism or industrialization.

To defend this proposition, I reconsider one common element in the history of China, Korea, and Vietnam from the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.) in China, including the major Korean and Vietnamese dynasties after these two smaller countries had broken away from Chinese rule. These were the Koryo (918–1392) and Choson (1392–1910) dynasties in Korea and the Ly (1010–1225), Tran (1225–1400), Le (1428–1788), and Nguyen (1802–1945) dynasties in what is now called Vietnam. (The Vietnamese did not generally call themselves “Vietnamese” before the twentieth century, any more than the “ancient Greeks” called themselves Greeks; but anachronisms cannot be avoided here.)

That common element under reconsideration is the rise of embryonic bureaucracies, based upon clear rules, whose personnel were obtained—in form at least—individually of hereditary social claims, through meritocratic civil service examinations. The notion that the basis of good politics could be established through the “development of people” (zuo ren in Chinese)—that is, by training people to be politically useful, rather than by taking them as they were—goes far back before the unification of China in 221 B.C.E. But it was the Tang dynasty that made success or failure in the struggle for Chinese government positions theoretically dependent upon the scrutiny of candidates’ talent, by means of public competitions held at fixed periods. And it was the Tang dynasty that allowed civil service office-
seekers to make their own applications for advancement through examinations, rather than requiring them to get the recommendations of aristocratic patrons or high court officials.

The examination sites themselves became public spectacles. In China in the 1700s the Jiangnan examination site—a walled complex of brick huts to which individual candidates were assigned—accommodated more than sixteen thousand students. The sites reminded people of the importance of the competitive measurement of administrative talent, roughly in the way our big football stadiums remind us now of the excitement of athletic competition. The spectacular quality of the examinations was, in effect, an appeal to public opinion, an advertisement not just of the examinations’ importance but also of their claim to what would now be called transparency. By the 1400s, for example, applicants’ answers in the Korean civil service examinations passed through the hands of collection officers, registration officers, recording officials, collating officers, and readers, whose tasks were to see to it that candidates’ names were concealed from their examiners; that their answers were recopied in other people’s handwriting before examiners saw them; and that many examiners, not one, evaluated the candidates’ performances. Not even the examinations at contemporary Western universities take so many transparency-enhancing precautions.

The examinations were also intensely bureaucratic, anticipating the world for which they were recruiting talent. The precolonial Vietnamese civil service examinations, which are probably the least well known of the three, demonstrated this bureaucratic flavor in the early 1800s very clearly. Usually held in fields patrolled by elephants, and full of candidates’ tents (as contrasted with China’s brick huts), the three-stage regional Vietnamese examinations were held on the first, sixth, and twelfth days of the seventh lunar month; the winners were publicly announced, in order of excellence, on the twenty-third day. Staff at the sites included proctors, invigilators, and preliminary, intermediate, and master examiners. All of them had to sign the examination books they processed; the 1834 regulations forbade the examiners to meet one another privately, let alone to gamble or play games, while the examinations were in progress. Quotas were set in advance for the numbers of winners permitted, and in the provinces where the examinations were held local officials had to make the special hats and clothes for their quotas of degree winners one month before the examinations began. Brothers, fathers and sons, and uncles and nephews were allowed to take the examinations together, in a suspension of Confucian family hierarchy. But examiners had to file written reports as
to whether these relatives had entered the sites together, and how closely
the styles of their answers coincided, in order to protect the importance of
individual effort as against that of family solidarity.

In all three mandarinates rulers were nervous about the examinations’
potential for literary forms of mockery or subversion, aimed at them. So
there were word-count controls. In the first half of the 1800s Vietnamese
examiners’ questions had to obey word limits (300 words at the re-
gional examinations for policy questions). So did candidates’ answers
(1,000 words for regional policy answers). Like our own contemporary
civil service examinations, therefore, the preindustrial Chinese, Korean,
and Vietnamese examinations could hardly be accused of stimulating pure
thought. But they did prepare candidates for the stereotyped paperwork of
administrators, such as the rice price reports, comparing changing rice
prices in the provincial capital with the prices prevailing in a sample outly-
ing county of the same province, that Vietnamese provincial officials had
to send to the court at Hue four times a year in the early 1800s.

The examinations and the governments dependent upon them gave the
preindustrial Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean polities split personalities.
Essentialist accounts of their political histories miss their precarious syn-
thesis of incompletely compatible elements. On the one hand, there was
the stress upon administrative utility, and trust in invisible, nonfamilial
authority (such as that of the examiners). On the other hand, there was the
faith in Confucian virtue, not utility, and the ethical supremacy not of in-
visible authority but of kinship hierarchies, or simulations of kinship rela-
tions. Multiple value systems, varying from individual to individual in de-
grees of acceptance, must have created a certain amount of normative
ambivalence, even if they helped as much as hindered political stability. Yet
pluralism—meaning in this instance a competitive coexistence of different
values and institutions, in which none imposed itself to the complete ex-
clusion of the others—was long thought by nineteenth-century European
thinkers, ranging from Guizot to Tocqueville and beyond, to be the mo-
nopoly of what they deemed the world’s only progressive civilization, that
of Europe. It is no doubt excessive to write, as one British historian did,
that the east Asian examinations were “forerunner to that current Ameri-
can obsession, the exaltation of PhD training.” Yet a clarification of the
place of the east Asian mandarinates in world history is nonetheless crucial
to the criticism of those false forms of revolutionary fantasy that exagger-
ate the differences between “traditional” worlds and “modern” ones.¹

The term “modern” was fatally compromised by its provincialism right
from the outset. The term apparently emerged in late written Latin. By the
ninth century Europeans were applying it to the age of Charlemagne, as a
way of contrasting Charlemagne’s rule in western Europe with the “antiq-
uity” of both pagan writers and the early Church fathers. Yet compared
with Charlemagne’s empire, Tang dynasty China (and probably also the
Cambodian Angkor empire) was at this time arguably more modern—as
we would understand the term—in state capacity and political manage-
ment.2 The extreme antidote to this provincialism has been to claim, in the
words of the French scholar Bruno Latour, that “we have never been mod-
er.” We falsely think we have separated Nature and Society, whereas in fact
all we have done has been carelessly to “mix together much greater masses
of humans and nonhumans”; our “myth of the soulless, agentless bureau-
cracy, like that of the pure and perfect marketplace, offers the mirror-im-
age of the myth of universal scientific laws”; rationalization itself is at once
a sin we are incapable of committing and a virtue we are incapable of pos-
sessing.3

The historian’s halfway house between these two extremes might be to
follow the lead of the legal historian Harold J. Berman. Berman’s 1983
work on the formation of the Western legal tradition urged us to move
“beyond Marx, beyond Weber” and to overcome the fallacies of various
Western nationalisms, religious prejudices, and nineteenth-century his-
torical materialisms and ideal-type analyses, in rewriting our past. Spe-
cifically, Berman took on both Protestants and Marxists in arguing that the
modernization of Western legal systems had really begun with the papal
revolution in canon law from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, long
before capitalism or industrialism. Our overly simple genealogy of what
was modern in Western history therefore needed to be revised, not least by
the exercise of looking for the “modern characteristics” in “what is gener-
ally considered to be a premodern era.”4 If the Berman exercise is worth
performing for Western history, it is equally worth performing for Asian
history. That is the purpose of this book.

The Berman approach necessarily means disclaiming (once again) pic-
tures of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean preindustrial history that have
the peoples of these kingdoms “sighing and groaning” through many cen-
turies of dynasties that “rose and fell,” the “retarding force” of such monar-
chies and their cycles being attributed to a “sea” of “feudal” economic ar-
rangements.5 For contemporary Chinese political dissidents like Yan Jiaqi,
whose words I have just quoted, pessimism is understandable. But history
does not tyrannize by itself; it provides opportunities. A politically intelligent Martian would not have had kind words to say about the democratic potential of German history, if he had gone there in 1938, or of that of Spain if he had gone there in 1960.

Of course the mandarinates’ monarchies were palpably unmodern in many ways, not least in the parasitism of their royal families, especially in China. (The Ming grand secretary Xu Guangqi calculated in the early 1600s that there were about eighty thousand living relatives of the Ming royal house that had ruled China since 1368; all of them were entitled to government stipends.) Such parasitism was serious not just economically but psychologically. In China it irritated “aristogenic” civil servants who had a strong feudal nostalgia, and an injustice-collecting tendency to contrast their own inability to mobilize what they regarded as their full patrilineal kinship lines with the far greater capacity to do so of the royal house, not to mention the legendary hereditary feudal lords of a bygone age. But the European state that inspired Max Weber’s picture of modern bureaucratic rationalism—his own Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II—was dominated before World War One by a monarchy and warrior caste that could equally have been described as archaic or unmodern.

Nobody captured the normative ambivalence of the credentials-worshipping mandarinates—in the form of the fury of would-be aristocrats who nonetheless had to pass examinations before they could compete for the small number of jobs in the state bureaucracy—better than the Korean reformer Yi Ik (1681–1762). His words are worth quoting, not least because they recognize the kinship of the Korean and Chinese mandarinates: “In Korea, the selection of officials is entirely based on the civil examination system... Ts’ui Liang of the [Chinese] Northern Wei dynasty once remarked that even with ten people sharing one office, there would still not be enough posts to go around. This remark applies very well to the current (Korean) situation. Hence, in families boasting of an aristocratic lineage or intellectual tradition, there are innumerable people, thin as rakes, clutching their credentials and giving vent to their bitter resentment.”

Had the east Asian mandarinates been as “feudal” as they are sometimes depicted—in the sense of having a strong hereditary correspondence or parallelism among kinship, economic rewards, and political power, extending from courts to villages—one of the central problems of their political theory, the weakness of communications between “high” and “low,” or rulers and ruled, would be hard to explain. That was a bureaucratic issue:
the monarchs of the mandarinates largely governed through texts composed for them by mandarins, rather than by more personal (and perhaps more feudal) means of persuasive human contact.

The point may be demonstrated by a look at two multiethnic empires in the 1700s. The Manchu emperor Qianlong, who ruled China and also the Mongols and other central Asian peoples for most of that century, could adopt a personal and indeed feudal style with the elites he ruled outside China proper. Yet even here the culture of the mandarinate asserted itself. Qianlong complained that he personally had to correct edicts written in Beijing by his Mongol and Manchu translators because the Mongol and Manchu nobles for whom they were intended could not understand them. The breakdown was the fault of court translators, who were not Chinese themselves but had nonetheless grown up in Beijing and been influenced by Chinese examination prose mannerisms, which had spread like a virus to the other written languages of the bureaucracy. This was not the sort of problem likely to afflict the rulers of Europe’s most significant multiethnic empire in the 1700s, that of the Habsburgs in Vienna. In Vienna there was no monoculture of civil service examinations. Magyar and Czech and Croat clerks were not so eager to Germanize themselves linguistically that they took up a stilted style that threatened the Habsburgs’ ability to communicate with minority nobilities on their frontiers. Indeed when Qianlong’s opposite number, the Habsburg archduchess Maria Theresa, wished to appeal to her Hungarian nobles to support her in a war in the 1740s, she appeared before them as a supplicant carrying the crucifix of a celebrated emperor of the previous century, plus her four-month-old baby.9 Qianlong, in contrast, tried to restore communications with his Mongol nobles by ordering a “back to basics” reform of examination-system writing, in which examiners were to weed out “eight-legged essay” superficialities. So much for our traditional pictures of the empire of China as founded upon “face”-based relationships and “feelings,” Europe as founded upon impersonal rules and reason.

The precocious limited defeudalization of the three Asian polities that had examination systems is in fact part of the history of human reason, of the attempt to apply supposedly rational thought to politics and economics. As such, the topic cannot be discussed in an entirely triumphalist manner. A different kind of history is needed, in which the focus is directed toward the vulnerabilities of this experiment as well as its achievements, the magnetism of the ideal but also the pressures over the centuries, in all three
polities, to abandon it. In particular, the theme of how political systems imagine risks is critical to this form of comparative history. How did German rulers imagine political hazards after Luther? Or English property owners after the Levellers? Or how do elites in industrial societies conceptualize the hazards of global warming now? The east Asian effort to create nonhereditary merit-based power altered the way Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean thinkers imagined risks. The effort itself was a very great “leap in the dark” (to borrow the phrase British conservative leaders used a century and a half ago to characterize the extension of voting rights), and its fears as well as its excitements need to be captured. Western thinkers like Machiavelli and Pascal saw the hazards of merit-based power almost entirely in simple terms of the resentments of the excluded; the mandarins’ political theory, for many centuries, scrutinized also the self-subversion of meritocratic elites from within.

The result is that much contemporary Western public administration theory functions like an unconscious echo chamber of questions and controversies that, in admittedly much different language, were explored in the mandarinate a long time ago. In the early twenty-first century, for example, Western specialists in public administration anxiously dissect what they call the “bureaucratic accountability paradox.” Postfeudal public servants are on the one hand mere instruments of higher political authority, epitomizing as such the danger of a deficiency of personal responsibility for what they do; on the other hand they are active policymaking participants, epitomizing as such the danger of a usurpation of higher political authority by their own subjective behavior. And explicit and implicit demands for accountability within bureaucracies, designed to communicate performance standards for such officials in this type of setting, may actually weaken the individual moral capacities the officials need to obey such standards in a fully responsible manner.

East Asian mandarins, obliged to work with a more moralistic Confucian world view, discussed this problem more as a matter of the difficulty of creating greater “self-esteem” among government officials, or the difficulty of nourishing (from without) a sense of “shame” among more menial government clerks. But the rudiments of accountability paradox theory were there, by the Ming dynasty if not earlier. The problem of shamelessness in the exercise of power, within a merit-based bureaucracy, is a modern one. It is not just the quaint obsession of bygone Confucian literati. The point is not to romanticize feudalism (as many Confucian lite-
rati did), even if it may be true, as Noam Chomsky suggested some time ago, that mandarins are not always more benign than aristocrats.\textsuperscript{10} Attempts to increase merit-based power, pioneered in eastern Asia, are nonetheless surely an advance. But fairness to the grandeur of the struggle to do this requires that we look at its hazards too.

Accordingly, in Chapter 1 of this book I introduce the three mandarinsates. I argue that the Korean and Vietnamese civil service examinations, beginning in the eighth and the eleventh centuries respectively, are at least as instructive as the better-known Chinese examinations. Full political refeudalization was always more possible in the two smaller kingdoms, allowing for a greater opposition to postfeudal meritocratic ideals; yet refeudalization never entirely succeeded. In all three mandarinsates, moreover, there were precocious concerns about “grade inflation” in the examinations themselves; at least the beginnings of a critical awareness of their own administrative subjectivities; a growing use of the language of administrative utility rather than a political language celebrating the virtues of hereditary privilege; and, especially in China, an anxiety about the transition, by means of the relatively anonymous examinations, from face-to-face political activity to more depersonalized modes of administrative management as the polity expanded.

In Chapter 2 I argue that the mandarinsates anticipated various hazards of meritocracy that the Western experience has largely confronted more recently. These included hazards related to the instabilities of impersonal administrative power based upon written texts. They also included hazards related to postfeudal forms of elite self-esteem creation, which came less and less from within (inner satisfaction at successfully embodying heroic or aristocratic virtues) and more and more from without (in an environment where class and status ethics were no longer preordained, state techniques of encouragement such as better salaries became more important). And they included the hazard that political orders based upon merit-based bureaucracies might have a weaker capacity to mobilize their peoples for public goals than regimes based upon feudal service ethics or (in more recent times) mass patriotism.

In Chapter 3 I argue that the three mandarinsates pursued welfare goals like the alleviation of poverty and the greater equalization of landholding, but that in their very modern-seeming conversion of political problems like poverty into administrative concerns, they ran the risk of allowing administrative goals to become decontextualized ends in themselves, contrib-
uting to a disjunction between administrators and administered, and to significant kinds of public apathy. All three mandarinates tried to overcome the apathy and revitalize local political behavior in acceptable ways, such as through the Neo-Confucian formula of village covenants. These are contrasted with the artificial forms of community creation of early modern Europe. Ironically, the covenants worked least well in China, whose deeper bureaucratic culture created the greatest need for them.

Chapter 4 moves from the precolonial period to the postcolonial present. In it I suggest that the continuing ghostly presence of the mandarinate in the contemporary Asian Leninist reform states of China and Vietnam lies not so much in specific institutions as in the persistence of a more general crisis (well known to the mandarins) of bureaucratic subjectivity, now greatly expanded. At the end of the twentieth century certain aspects of mandarinate were being reinvented in eastern Asia along cross-cultural or transnational lines. The danger was that centuries of skepticism about bureaucracy, than which nothing was more east Asian, would not be revived as speedily in this process. Compulsory family planning programs in contemporary China and Vietnam are used to illustrate this danger, and to show that the old incubus of bureaucratic subjectivity is now doubly determined, by domestic bureaucratic practices but also by imported global managerial theories such as cybernetics and “system engineering.”

The title of this book could just as easily have been “lost creativities.” Modernity (singular) is a dubious concept, as I concede in more detail in Chapter 1. A focus on modernity may oversimplify (if not suppress) historically lived time; it may ignore history’s “losers,” and the various modes of resistance to power, legitimate or illegitimate; and it may even indicate complicity with the workings of global capitalism. (Just what this last could exemplify in practice is the argument, in present-day China, that “mountain people” are a threat to any rational political system because large-scale capital investment in grain production in mountainous areas will yield only modest returns; and that in the name of modernity’s requirement that all human societies move from a “mountain-rural” to a “plains-urban” civilization, China’s “mountain people” should be forcibly resettled from mountainous areas.)\textsuperscript{11} “Modernities” pluralized, in contrast, allows us to begin to uncover traditions of discursive rationality that the cruder singular notion of the modern has obscured; or at least to end uses of the singular term for the modern that merely camouflage one civilization’s historical self-centeredness.
But how did the modernities that I propose existed in preindustrial east Asia get “lost”? For Westerners, from the second half of the 1800s on, the east Asian examinations lost their novelty, and therefore their provocativeness. In previously aristocratic European societies there was an increase in numbers of non-aristocratic civil servants; the belief grew that merit could be measured; in the 1860s the very term “meritocracy” came to be used in British Labour Party journals. In this new epoch in Western history, an epoch of IQ tests and intelligence-measurement researchers like Alfred Binet and Edward Thorndike, the more limited techniques of the older east Asian meritocracies—which (unlike the new Western merit-judging procedures) had not discriminated against old age as well as against hereditary claims—began to resemble exotic, old-fashioned relics. But it is less easy to understand why Asians themselves should have given such short shrift to their own pasts.

The loss of these modernities begins with the military defeats the French, British, and Japanese inflicted upon the three mandarinates in the 1800s. The one-sided conflict between the two technological worlds represented by steam-powered Western warships and preindustrial Chinese war junks, at the time of the Opium War, also exposed, in an unprecedentedly humiliating way, the deficits in administrative achievement about which sensitive scholar-officials had been worrying for many centuries before the industrial revolution. The weakness of all bureaucracies, not just Confucian ones, is their inability to create feelings of belonging equal to those found in the patron-client relations of the European, Japanese, and Thai feudal periods, or in the politics of states based upon mass nationalisms. A look at the troubles of the contemporary European Union will show that the problem is not a peculiarly nineteenth-century Asian one. The mandarinates’ difficulties in increasing their capacities for popular mobilization for collective purposes harbored a paradox. A bureaucracy’s formal ideology rarely reflects what the bureaucracy actually does. Nonetheless, the need for at least some conformity with this ideology, in the interests of idealizing the bureaucracy’s public mission, not only makes changes in the ideology awkward, but awkward even to explain, to the bureaucracy’s beneficiaries and dependents.

For this reason the elite government leaders who successfully proposed the abolition of China’s civil service examinations in 1905—just at the moment when the Western world was beginning to embrace such examinations—did not make the actual subject matter of the examinations their principal target. The examinations could have been converted, after all, to
the service of a new curriculum. What the abolitionists attacked was the Chinese examinations’ association with an insufficiency of collective will-power. In 1905 Yuan Shikai and his fellow reformers asserted that Prussia’s victory over France in 1871, and Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 itself, were due not to Prussian and Japanese soldiers but to the socializing force behind those two countries’ soldiers, namely their primary school teachers. (This myth—that patriotism-inculcating schoolteachers could produce military victories—was then current all over the world; in 1905 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the British social reformers, were making exactly the same claim as Yuan Shikai.) The purpose of education, they insisted, must be mass mobilization, not bureaucratic recruitment. China must make a psychological revolution, shifting from a mandarinate whose educational interest was “storing talent” to a more collectively minded society whose schools aroused and enlightened popular willpower.12

As examination-based civil services multiplied in the Western world after 1905, however, the Asian mandarinates should have regained some of their historical persuasiveness. That their modernities remained “lost” may be explained by the rise and popularity, all over the world, of Western scientific management theory. Frederick Winslow Taylor, perhaps the most globally influential American thinker of the twentieth century, published his book on “scientific management” in 1911. Taylor claimed that only the most precise scientific methods, applied to the analyses of the relations between human workers and the new industrial machinery, could increase workers’ efficiency.

The effect of “Taylorism” was to spread the illusion, in World War One and its immediate aftermath, that Taylor’s quasi-utopian theories of increased work productivity, in places like steel mills, through more “scientific” links between work classifications and their material rewards, could be applied to the work of civil servants as well; the techniques of getting enhanced performances from Bethlehem Steel’s shovelers and iron handlers might be transferred to enhance the performances of government secretaries and clerks. By the end of the 1920s both the British government and the American federal government had struggled to adopt “scientific” systems of civil service work classifications, in which pay levels were tightly linked to work positions. This principle implied a more materialistic definition of civil servants’ natures than that favored in the less “scientific” mandarinates. Material rewards were everything in Taylorism, the moral nobility of good administration far less.

Taylorist gospel inevitably spread to China. By the 1930s Nationalist
China not only had its own journals devoted to the administrative sciences, with titles like “Administration Research” and “Administrative Efficiency,” but its own Administrative Efficiency Research Society (Xingzheng xiaoli yanjiu hui). The Nanjing government promoted the translation and introduction of European and American theories of “personnel administration.” There was an elite debate over whether China should follow the British or the American approach to the classification of civil service posts; almost two millennia of Chinese bureaucratic experience were ignored. The political scientist Qian Duansheng argued for the British model, on the grounds that it was simpler than the American one; American civil service job classifications were allegedly too sophisticated and too finely differentiated to succeed in China, given what Qian thought were the cultural conservatism and the skilled reflexes of evasiveness of Chinese officialdom. Xie Bokang, whose 1937 book Renshi xingzheng dagang (An outline of personnel administration) was probably the most influential text of its kind in China before 1949, conceded the greater complexity of the American scheme of bureaucratic job classifications. But he demanded its application anyway, on the grounds that it better represented global developmental trends. The Taylorization of bureaucracy—the recasting of bureaucracy in the image of a profit-seeking corporation—was part of the attempted “internationalization” of the Chinese government in the 1930s. The foundation for this was elite-based transnational alliances to which returned overseas students like Xie Bokang inevitably belonged.

In fact the Nationalist government largely resisted the rationalization implicit in American or British civil service rules. These were more influential, if anywhere, at the Chinese municipal level. But what is remarkable is that the presumption that bureaucracies could be made more effective through differential rewards for difficult and simple tasks completely ignored the evolution (and contestation) of this principle in the preindustrial mandarinates.

Amnesia of this sort also reigned in Vietnam, a French colony between the 1880s and 1954. The French colonizers preserved the mandarinate in the north and center of the country. But they made it humiliatingly subordinate to a better-paid French colonial bureaucracy. The French also abolished the mandarinate’s competitive civil service examinations in 1919 without replacing them with an equally meritocratic new recruitment system, and they generally converted what one Vietnamese observer called this increasingly “ridiculous caricature” of a mandarinate into a pitiful
symbol of Vietnamese inferiority to their European rulers. The moral ethos of the old mandarins vanished.\textsuperscript{14}

The communist revolutions in the former mandarinates, until very recently, also worked to ensure that the history of the mandarinates remained lost. Lenin greatly admired Taylorism and American management theory. He claimed in 1918 that socialism was a matter of Soviet power, Prussian railroads, and American techniques. Stalin reinforced this message in 1924 with the proposition that the “combination of Russian revolutionary sweep and American efficiency is the essence of Leninism in party and state work.”\textsuperscript{15} It is true that for a long time communist revolutionaries condemned political science, to which much Western postwar thinking about bureaucracy belonged, as a “capitalist class science”; but they eventually relented, with Yugoslavia re legitimizing the study of political science in 1951, Czechoslovakia in 1965, Rumania in 1969, China in the early 1980s, and Vietnam, most belatedly, in 1991. Behind this reinstatement lurked the belief that if power produced knowledge, the relationship between the two could be reversed: the Asian acquisition of Western knowledge about bureaucracy would facilitate the acquisition of Asian administrative power of a quality comparable to that of the mature Western industrial states. In other words, the loss of the history of the mandarinates’ modernities seemed a necessary accompaniment of the hope of convergence.

Of course the reluctance of the descendants of the mandarinates to recognize their achievement, indeed the double damnation of the mandarinates for being both tools of “despotism” and arenas of pre-Taylorist “inefficiency,” has its funny side. When the Chinese leader Zhu Rongji congratulated some Chinese scientists in 1996 for founding a management sciences department, he urged them to expand their study of Western management science, singling out for praise Lee Iacocca’s reorganization of the Chrysler automobile corporation. Zhu conceded in passing that preindustrial China had also produced good management thought; but the examples he gave (Guanzi, the Han dynasty “salt and iron” debate) all safely preceded the full decline of the Chinese aristocratic age. Taiwanese Chinese disciples of the Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek—who argued that most forms of equality were inimical to liberty, and that the hereditary transmission of property and power strengthened the social good—have gone even farther. They have praised the aristocratic world of Confucius, about a millennium before the consolidation of civil service ex-
aminations, as the best evidence of Hayek-style enlightenment in Chinese history, before the shabby limited egalitarianism of the meritocratic ideal took root.

Contemporary Chinese critics of bureaucracy dismiss the British historian Arnold Toynbee’s claim that England borrowed its modern civil service from China. As one of them put it recently (in 2000), any Chinese person who celebrates this is “an Ah Q”: a reference to the novelist Lu Xun’s famous character, a feckless villager with bogus self-esteem who depends upon fantasizing about victories that are really defeats. In Vietnam one psychologist at the end of the 1970s felt the need to point out publicly that even Hanoi newspaper cartoons about Vietnamese bureaucrats were cut off from history. They surrounded their subjects with Western office paraphernalia that Vietnamese officials did not yet possess.16

Such dismissals of the mandarinates’ achievement possibly exist in direct proportion to a subconscious fear of it. That is, the fear that the history of the mandarinates, taken seriously and applied to present-day concerns, will remind us only too well that there is no such thing as a bureaucracy based upon pure reason. Western writings about bureaucracy, perhaps because of their relative newness as a genre, often cultivate a formalistic clarity, a disembodied normativeness, at the costs of overestimating the technical aspects of administrative behavior and underestimating the nontechnical ones. The very formalism of such writings makes it easier for contemporary eastern Asians to turn them into political cookbooks for imagining more efficient, more abstract bureaucracies than ever existed in real life, in the mandarinates or anywhere else.

No such transmutation could ever occur with the great analyses of actual bureaucratic activity written in the mandarinates, for example Wang Huizu’s Xuezhi yishuo (Opinions about learning to govern, 1793). In Wang’s text, written by a working county magistrate, officials like county magistrates live in a metaphorical wonderland. Wang compares them to medicine men, or to wooden puppets, or to glass screens. Such shifting identities, so remote from the abstract clarity of a Max Weber or a Chester Barnard, reflected the uncertainties of a postfeudal administration, easily penetrated by its environment, without a strong sense of being religiously or socially underwritten. English justices of the peace of this period could hardly have been treated in the same way. But Wang’s images also point to the vulnerabilities, the messy bargaining, and the absence of clear models of action, that probably afflict bureaucratic decisionmaking in general.
This is not a popular theme in the former mandarinates in the early twenty-first century, searching as their leaders are for elixirs of self-strengthening.

Obviously this book is too small to do as conclusively for the three mandarinates what Harold Berman did for the history of the Western legal tradition. That is, to demonstrate the modern characteristics in a supposedly premodern era; document the abundance of resources of human rationality in state building that existed before the Renaissance or the Enlightenment; and prove that modernizing developments, in something like law, could occur quite independently of capitalism and industrialization, as well as at their own rates. But I hope this book will incline us more to the possibility that the mandarinates were dealing with tasks and hazards of governance that were unmistakably modern, rather than just those of preindustrial “despotisms” whose independence was jeopardized in the 1800s.

The study of the mandarinates’ political and administrative theory, in particular, should not be entirely shoved aside by our interest in their varying aptitudes for capitalism, or in their Confucian ethics and ritual conditioning processes. As to the latter, the Mussolini formula (“moral order” produces “public order,” the Italian dictator famously maintained) is as much wishful thinking as historical fact.\(^\text{17}\) Public order depends as much upon political activity and its theorizations as it does upon social “orthopraxy.”

I hope this book will also call attention to the transnational nature of the three Asian mandarinates and the ways in which their different experiences illuminate one another. To this end, China, Vietnam, and Korea all feature in the story. This approach may confound readers who are used to distinguishing between “East Asia” (China, Japan, and Korea) and “Southeast Asia” (Vietnam and its neighbors to the west and south). But the terms “East Asia” and “Southeast Asia” are idols of the postwar Western academic (and strategic) mind. Up to a point they are useful for carving up subject matter at our universities. But they should not be allowed to paralyze intellectual inquiry. I am not pleading for the complete disestablishment of such categories, merely for a less reverential attitude toward them. After all, the day may even come when we may want to compare the histories of Korea and Burma, making the impact of Buddhism the unifying principle.

However: I am not a Korean studies specialist. The field of Korean studies is more of a battleground than most. Yet I suspect that even the most
quarrelsome scholars in Korean studies would muster a rare degree of collective agreement among themselves that outsiders such as myself were unfit to generalize about Korean history. Readers should therefore be aware that what is said about Korea in the following pages is even less authoritative than what is said about China and Vietnam.
Notes

Introduction


6. Ding Shouhe, comp., *Zhongguo lidai zhiguo ce xuancui* (Selected highlights of Chinese state administration policies through the centuries), (Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe, 1994), 664–667.


14. Pham Quynh, “Chan chinh quan truong” (The improvement of officialdom), *Nam phong* (The southern ethos), March (1926), 108–112.


### 1. Questioning Mandarins


