In early 1799, the Wu County magistrate’s illegal flogging of a licenti-ate triggered a literati protest in Suzhou. Upon hearing about it that summer, the newly installed Jiaqing Emperor reproached the provincial officials for mishandling the case. The emperor sympathized with the protesters. He critiqued the provincial officials for suggesting a light punish-ment for the county magistrate while handing out harsh verdicts to the licentiates: banishment for the ringleader, three years of penal servitude for the other two leaders, and the annulment of the degrees of twenty protesters.1 The emperor’s intervention prompted a review of the judicial deliberations, leading to the acquittal of all but three literati. The principal offender was still sentenced to banishment, but he was allowed to re-main home to care for his elderly parents. The other two leaders served penal servitude sentences not far from Suzhou and managed to return home less than two months later thanks to a special imperial amnesty. Meanwhile, the provincial-level and county-level officials all received varying degrees of punishments, with the Wu County magistrate being stripped of his post. Later in the nineteenth century, Suzhou literati seized upon this event as a watershed victory over corrupt local officials. They viewed the Jiaqing Emperor as their benefactor, an emperor who had gra-ciously intervened to rescue the Suzhou licentiates while chastising the officials for misconduct.

The Jiaqing Emperor’s attitude toward the protest contrasted with the manner in which his father, the Qianlong Emperor, reacted to a similar
incident in 1759. Qianlong criticized the governor-general of Sichuan Province for suggesting the impeachment of an assistant brigade commander who had arbitrarily chained a licentiate: “If we impeach an official for such a trivial matter as having fettered a licentiate, an ignorant crowd will take this as a pretext upon hearing the news, and will necessarily initiate a vicious tide.” While the Qing legal code prohibited corporal punishments of licentiates, Qianlong asserted that chastising officials guilty of such minor offenses was detrimental to the disciplining of literati behavior. Under Qianlong, death sentences generally awaited those involved in literati protests and, as a result, such occurrences dropped substantially during his reign.

The episode in 1799 marked a significant departure in the state position vis-à-vis local elites in the Jiaqing period as the imperial court began to adopt a less rigorous stance toward the literati. The emperors strengthened the ban on officials’ illegal flogging of licentiates, and indeed many were impeached for that offense during the nineteenth century. Literati protests, such as the one in 1799, foreshadowed the state’s more tolerant and lenient approach to these incidents in the nineteenth century. Probing into the causes of literati protests during this period, the Qing regime paid more attention to administrative malfeasance than the occurrence of protests. The regime also refrained from Qianlong’s practice of single-handedly attributing the faults to the protesters. The leaders of the protests could possibly expect to have their lives spared as courts commuted the punishments to exile. In a related effort to overhaul local administration, Jiaqing also relaxed restrictions on “capital appeals” (jingkong), which led to a substantial increase of such appeals throughout the nineteenth century. These imperial initiatives recognized the role of local elites as whistleblowers of local administrative malfeasance, an issue that the emperors considered a serious threat.

This seismic shift in the relations between the state and local elites was not limited to the imperial court’s leniency toward literati protests or the recognition of their role as whistleblowers. The abyss separating the distinct approaches between Jiaqing and Qianlong also encompassed their respective attitudes toward elite participation in local administration. Let us consider the following episodes. In a report on the famine relief operations in the Beijing area in 1801, officials brought to the emperor’s attention that private relief resources had supplemented state funds and
called for the suspension of private donations. Such a practice had been frowned upon during the Qianlong reign since government funds for public projects could be supplemented with private resources only with prior endorsement from the state. The Jiaqing Emperor, however, criticized the officials, underscoring that donations should be praised and rewarded rather than prohibited. Receiving private donations for relief efforts should not be viewed as a problem, rebutted Jiaqing, adding: “If there is a relief activity aided by private donations in addition to government relief, then one more hungry person will get a meal.”

While Jiaqing adopted a more tolerant attitude toward local initiatives, Qianlong sought to aggressively assert the supremacy of the state over civilian leadership, reflecting a concern over the possibility that elite donations might encroach on regular state functions. In 1752, when Shanxi suffered from a serious drought, the provincial governor memorialized the throne informing that silver donations from local leaders had been deposited at the Circuit Intendant Treasury for relief purposes. This led to harsh criticism from the Qianlong Emperor. In times of natural calamities, the emperor explained, local elites could directly succor the needy with their own grains or could instead purchase them for distribution to indigent people. Injecting silver from civilian elites into the government treasury, however, was not acceptable. The emperor remarked:

As for the state relief or temporary remission of taxes, the large instances amount to several millions of taels while even small ones amount to hundreds of thousands of taels. These are all met by mobilizing regular state revenues. I have always been munificent in spending state revenues on these. How much is it anyway that local wealthy people donate? Preserving donations at state treasuries and helping relief with it is not what an appropriate form of government should be. If this practice should once begin, then not only will the poor people in the locality struck by the disaster suffer from lack of food, but also the wealthy households will be ordered to donate money. In relieving the disaster-stricken people, how can the state go as far as doing this?

Although this passage stresses the welfare of the population, its message is far more nuanced. First, the emperor sought to mobilize regular state funds instead of elite donations, in the belief that this would relieve
the people’s burden. Second, the emperor drew a strict line between civilian and state resources. Local elites could contribute where officials fell short and, in this sense, they were deemed as supplementary revenue. However, as this case shows, if the primary function of imperial administration was itself managed with resources from civilian elites, then it stained the dignity of the state and Qianlong’s perceptions of the duties to be carried out by officials. While acknowledging the contributions of elites for local public matters, Qianlong paid careful attention to maintaining state prerogatives in the public realm.

The contrast between the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries in relation to elite functions in various areas of local administration can be illustrated further. In 1748, a censor submitted a memorial to the Qianlong Emperor about the relief activities in Shandong Province, requesting that they be managed by the locals’ private wealth. The emperor rejected this proposal, first by insisting that an official-led relief activity would be the ideal course of action, and then by listing the negative side effects of elite-led relief efforts: “There is fundamentally no better remedy for famine relief than local officials distributing grains themselves. Hungry people often instigate troubles, relying on their numbers. Rich people, since the needy are either their relatives or neighbors, do not have the power to control them. The violent ones will not be satisfied though they are given much and will seize others’ portions by force. This leads to restraining them with government laws.” Elite-led relief efforts not supervised by government officials were an invitation to chaos, Qianlong argued, because they would generate local resentment and hostilities. Moreover, the emperor continued, a more accurate accounting of relief resources could be expected only under official supervision. If the local elites took control of the accounting, then they might exaggerate the amounts of donations, or mistakenly underreport the number of lives saved. Therefore, the emperor concluded, “those who say that a relief [operation] by wealthy people is better than a relief [operation] by government officials, are the ones who know one thing but do not know the other.”

Qianlong, as the above case illustrates, believed that official initiatives and supervision were necessary elements in the management of a relief operation. The Daoguang Emperor, Jiaqing’s successor, however, dis-
agreed with Qianlong. Just as Jiaqing acted on the principle of blurred lines between official and civilian initiatives, the Daoguang Emperor displayed a willingness to accommodate elite initiatives in local welfare projects. When Daoguang received a report of a natural disaster in Zhejiang in 1820, he worried that the official relief operation might be insufficient to cover the vast calamity-stricken area, and held that a relief program organized by wealthy degree-holders and commoners would be more effective. This represented a reversal in the hierarchy of public works management from Qianlong’s assertion of the superiority of official relief programs over those led by local elites.

What do these episodes tell us about the transitional period from the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century? What happened to the state-elite relations during this period? By looking at the early nineteenth century from these perspectives, this book will explore the rise of elite activism during this period, examining the manifestations of this activism in diverse social and cultural dimensions. Nowhere was this activism as pronounced as in Suzhou, a city in Southeast China renowned for the literati’s considerable success in imperial examinations, strong elite power, and the pride in their local tradition and accomplishments. After undergoing the devastation inflicted during the late Yuan (1271–1368) and early Ming upheavals, Suzhou managed to restore its former economic glory by the middle of the fifteenth century, and it remained one of the most prosperous economic centers in China throughout the late imperial period.

The wealth that circulated among the elite population of the city, together with the region’s long tradition of activism, prompted the urban elites to take action swiftly and earnestly as soon as they sensed the symptoms of a policy shift in public works management and the loosening of the state’s control over literati’s cultural practices in the early nineteenth century.

This book, however, is not simply a local history of Suzhou. Rather, it is a study of the interplay between central government policies and local reactions. This is the reason that a significant portion of this book is devoted to the examination of central policies, making use of a number of untapped or underutilized central government documents such as the Like shishu (Summaries of the routine memorial related to the Board of Rites) and the Like tiben (Routine memorials related to the Board of Personnel) preserved in the First Historical Archives in Beijing. These
sources, among several others, attest to the dimensions of the transformations in elite social and cultural practices of this period.

In the December 2011 issue of the journal *Late Imperial China*, eminent Qing historian William T. Rowe wrote a stimulating article that highlighted the significance of the early nineteenth century, urging scholars in the field to explore this almost uncharted territory. This book is intended to serve as an answer to his call, an excursion into the social and cultural world of early nineteenth-century China.

*A Brief Survey of the Previous Scholarship on the Early Nineteenth Century*

Rowe is not the only scholar who recognizes this period as a lacuna in Qing history, one that roughly spanned the four decades of the reigns of the Jiaqing and Daoguang Emperors prior to the outbreak of the Opium War in 1839. In fact, almost all scholars working in the field would agree that the early nineteenth century is the least researched period in the entire history of the Qing. The early nineteenth century has failed to draw sufficient and consistent scholarly attention because it was overshadowed by eras of pivotal historical developments that preceded and succeeded these decades. On the earlier end lay the “prosperous age” (*shengshi*) of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Emperors in the eighteenth century, while on the later, the post–Opium War period characterized by the impact of Western imperialism, massive domestic rebellions, and modernization efforts.

An early generation of Qing historians in the West, spearheaded by John K. Fairbank, highlighted the West’s impact on the institutional, cultural, and economic changes in Chinese society following the Qing’s forced entry into an international order dominated by European powers in the mid-nineteenth century. Starting in the 1970s, however, Western scholars began to shift the scope of their analysis to domestic matters, which were relatively free from Western influence but that nonetheless carried far-reaching and crucial consequences. As Paul A. Cohen has aptly
pointed out, this shift of attention from the topics related to China’s contact with the West to those more germane to China proper signified a critical reflection on the implicit connotations upon which the approaches of the “China’s response to the West” school were built: that significant and truly meaningful changes took place in China only in modern times and in the midst of interactions with the Western powers. The “China-centered” approaches that emerged in reaction to the earlier so-called Fairbank school framework focused on the significant historical events during the entire span of the Qing history, many predating the Opium War. While this “China-centered” approach greatly expanded our horizon of knowledge by looking at issues far earlier than 1840, it came short of, however, highlighting the themes that shaped the first four decades of the nineteenth century.

The relative dearth of attention in the early nineteenth century is not only found in the Western scholarship on Qing China, but also extends to mainland Chinese historians. From the 1950s to as late as the 1980s, Chinese historians exerted great effort in identifying the “sprouts of capitalism,” signs of modern economic developments that supposedly had appeared in the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Apart from these efforts, they also directed their research focus on the period that began in the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, China was drawn into an international order molded by Europe, a process that mainland Chinese historians characterize as the start of China’s experiences with capitalism and imperialist aggression. More recently, Chinese historians have steered their attention away from this gloomy period in Qing history to a more glorious one, the “prosperous age,” an age of relative peace, economic prosperity, territorial expansion, and population growth ushered in by the three capable emperors in the eighteenth century. This new orientation is perhaps shaped partly by the Chinese pride soaring in tandem with the country’s economic leaps at the turn of the twenty-first century. In an effort to draw lessons from the precedents to better understand and inform contemporary society and politics, scholars have tried to look at a past when China enjoyed a similar age of peace, power, and prosperity. As a result, the early nineteenth century has failed to attract persistent and concentrated attention, as Chinese historians, just like their Western counterparts, have largely overlooked its significance.
This does not mean, however, that the period in question has been entirely neglected. A number of important works have laid the foundation for our seminal understanding of the period. As early as 1952, Suzuki Chūsei broke new ground in this field with his book on the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1804) that plagued the newly enthroned emperor Jiaqing. Susan Naquin has also contributed to our knowledge of popular religion during the Jiaqing reign in bringing to light vivid details of the Eight Trigram Rebellion (1813). Philip Kuhn and Susan Mann Jones’s pioneering chapter for the Cambridge History of China, published in 1978, describes the signs of political and social crises that beset early nineteenth-century China and the rise of statecraft thinkers who sought to cope with them. Statecraft ideology during this period has also been closely examined in Benjamin Elman’s exploration of the intricate relations between kinship networks and scholarly thinking. Apart from statecraft ideology, another strong orientation in philosophical thinking in the early nineteenth century was evidential research scholarship (kaozheng xue), and Steven B. Miles’s study of the Xuehaitang Academy in Guangzhou examines the social composition of the Guangzhou local elites as well as their efforts to construct a local identity.

On the political side, James Polachek has demonstrated the reascendence of the late-Ming-style Han literati political activism around the turn of the nineteenth century. In this regard, the breakdown of the Grand Canal system in the mid-Qing period constituted a factor that triggered the Jiangnan literati political activism, and Jane Kate Leonard’s book emphasizes the emperor’s agency in coping with this problem by illustrating the Daoguang Emperor’s meticulous management of the Grand Canal crisis in the 1820s. More recently, Wang Wensheng has illuminated the significance of the Jiaqing Emperor’s reform policies as a watershed from the aggressive expansionist stance of the Qing Empire to a less interventionist approach to state-building that purposefully downsized imperial power. Chinese scholars have contributed to our understanding of this period primarily by writing on the two early nineteenth-century rulers. Guan Wenfà’s study of the Jiaqing Emperor describes the emperor’s policies designed to purge the faction led by Hešen (an imperial favorite and notoriously avaricious official in the Qianlong court) and domestic rebellions, among them the White Lotus
and the Eight Trigram sects. Similar studies on the Daoguang Emperor discuss various domestic and foreign challenges that confronted the emperor, among them the Muslim Rebellion in the Northwest during the 1820s and the Opium War (1839–42), crises almost identical to the ones that his father had encountered.

Despite the tremendous debt that we owe these scholars, we still lack a systematic and coherent explanation through which we can relate diverse incidents of the time with one another. In other words, we still need to answer what the historical phenomena of the early nineteenth century shared in common and how this period compared and contrasted with the previous century.

**Moving Beyond the “Decline” Paradigm**

Previous scholarship has portrayed the early nineteenth century as an epochal moment during which the Qing dynasty declined, with the prosperity, stability, and expansion of the previous era giving way to economic crisis and instability. The deepening of the crises fostered a fragile domestic environment that weakened China and invited foreign aggression in the nineteenth century. Since this “decline paradigm” loomed large in studies on the early nineteenth century, they focused largely on identifying signs of such “decline.” Various factors have been presented as symptoms of the empire’s downfall: population increase, ecological exhaustion, skyrocketing corruption among government officials, serious shortfall in state revenue collection, deterioration of the salt administration and tribute grain transportation, outflow of silver, and millenarian rebellions led by the White Lotus and Eight Trigram sectarians. Consider, for example, the influential Qing history book by the eminent Chinese scholar Xiao Yishan, published in 1986. Xiao identifies the period from the rise of He Shen to the reign of Jiaqing as the time when the Qing Empire turned from prosperity to decline. He traced the origins of the Qing downfall in multiple dimensions, all rooted in the later years of Qianlong’s rule. The Jiaqing Emperor sought to resolve some of these problems, Xiao explains, by purging He Shen’s cronies, urging frugality upon his officials, and emphasizing bureaucratic discipline. Despite this imperial
Introduction

campaign, Xiao argues, the Qing Empire continued its downward spiral until its final collapse in 1911.

This book, however, questions whether it is appropriate to label the early nineteenth century simply as an era of “decline.” The period requires diversified lenses through which to identify and explain a number of important issues, approaches that can go beyond the decline paradigm. The use of the term “decline” covers as much as it uncovers the historical realities of the early nineteenth century. Clearly, signs of crises that might be interpreted as the evidence of the decline of state capacity were unmistakable. State fiscal conditions worsened and malfeasance among officials and clerks was rife. Portraying the period simply as a time of decline, however, ignores the conscious efforts of the early-nineteenth-century rulers to make accommodation for the social realities and design a form of government more conducive to such realities. The more relaxed ruling style adopted by the Jiaqing and Daoguang Emperors was one that entailed distancing itself from the heavy-handed approach of their predecessors Yongzheng and Qianlong. The rulers of the early nineteenth century also lacked the grand visions and the imperial fervor to launch various social, cultural, and military programs to mold society in accordance with the imperial schemes. Jiaqing and Daoguang, however, did not remain indifferent to the challenges of the day, nor were they idle spectators to the empire’s decline. They exercised certain degrees of agency in shaping new policies. Wang Wensheng characterizes the reform measures taken by Jiaqing and his officials as efforts of “political retreat,” through which Jiaqing “pulled Qing empire-building away from a vicious cycle of excessive ambition that bred resistance back onto a sustainable track of political development.” In this respect, it would be unfair to consider what seems to have been the weakening of imperial power as an all-encompassing sign of decline, since changes in the imperial ruling style is a matter that transcends the simple linear model.

If we shift our standpoint from the center to the locality, then the overall social and the cultural environments that surrounded local elites defy the simple characterization of the early nineteenth century as a period of decline. While the worsening fiscal conditions adversely affected regions and administrative institutions across the Qing Empire, at the same time the reformulation of state-elite relations granted local elites greater say over local matters. This could be evidenced in the rising num-
bers of enshrinement and the flourishing of local literature. Local elites now enjoyed greater freedom to participate in social and cultural realms that had been restricted, if not denied, to them in the previous century. Observing the choices in cultural activities once again made available to the elite population, it would be difficult to label the period simply as a time of “decline.” Rather than frame the early nineteenth century in a linear narrative depicting the downward spiral of the Qing dynasty, this book describes this period as a time that witnessed a transformation from one ruling style to another, one that embodied a more localized nature and was marked by the devolution of power to local elites.

From “State Activism” to “Elite Activism”

While the nineteenth century is characterized by the rise of elite activism, the eighteenth century has often been described as a period of “state activism.” Much scholarship has been devoted to illuminating the array of policies aimed at increasing the reach of the state deeper into society. Bolstered by increasingly steady streams of revenue to government coffers and imperial visions to engender society in accordance with the state schemes, the Qing regime under Yongzheng and Qianlong expanded and reinforced its hold on various social sectors, such as lineage, benevolent societies, private academies, famine relief activities, and the market brokerage system. As Rowe has shown in his work on Chen Hongmou, despite occasional attempts by officials to enlist the help of local elites or rely on market mechanisms whenever possible, it is nonetheless apparent that a greater degree of state control was exercised in many aspects of the management of public affairs in the eighteenth century.

State activism in the eighteenth century has been studied mainly from a social history perspective. The Qing state under Yongzheng and Qianlong, however, not only aimed at bringing order to the elites’ social actions, but also strove to construct a more centralized cultural order. A significant portion of this book is devoted to the analysis of the cultural dimensions of eighteenth-century state activism and how these interventionist policies ceased and then generated new sets of practices in the early nineteenth century.
Introduction

To forge this centralized cultural order, the Qianlong Emperor implemented a policy of rigorous censorship of literati writings, most notably the literary inquisitions of the 1770s. A travel diary by a Korean envoy to the Qianlong court reveals the degree of state intervention into the literati’s cultural world. According to the author, the Qing officials and scholars, both the Manchus and the Hans, exercised extreme caution in written communications, even with the Korean envoys, to the extent of shredding papers and blacking out characters to avoid their words from being misconstrued. The state intervention in the cultural realm had lasting effects. As a compiler of a local gazetteer in Suzhou in the early twentieth century tells us:

The loss of book collections in the Southeast region all originated from the havoc wreaked on the literati during the three reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. A man surnamed Jiang of our Suzhou prefecture had an extremely good collection of the Song and Yuan editions. The loss [of this collection] was caused by the poetry incident (shian) that happened after the death of Mr. Shen Deqian. Jiang was a student of Mr. Shen, and when he heard of the mishap brought on Mr. Shen, he burned all the books he possessed, no matter old or new, and threw [the ashes] into a well. The water in the well is black even now.

This draconian state control even extended to the dead. Shen Deqian (1673–1769), a Suzhou scholar-official who had enjoyed Qianlong’s favor in his late years, faced posthumous accusations of writing a preface for a literary collection that contained seditious elements. In 1778, he had all his posthumous honors withdrawn, his tomb inscription demolished, and his tablet removed from the Shrine of Local Worthies.

This literary inquisition was perhaps the most dramatic representation of the cultural interventionist policies of the time. But the policies extended to more than just finding words implicit or explicit of a pro-Ming sentiment. As this book will demonstrate, the Qianlong court strongly discouraged the production of local histories whose descriptions of local people and traditions deviated from the imperial court’s views. As the writing of local gazetteers and private histories was intertwined with the interests of influential families, this practice often exaggerated
Introduction

or distorted achievements of the prominent local figures. The government under Qianlong even mandated that local gazetteers undergo a review by provincial officials and obtain their endorsement before publication. The government intervention in this realm surfaced as an attempt to check the exorbitant influence exercised by local families on this cultural genre. The Yongzheng and Qianlong courts seized control of the enshrinement process of local worthies, another practice tied to the reputation and the status of local families, and applied more rigorous criteria in reviewing candidates’ qualifications. These state efforts in subordinating elite cultural practices to the dictates of the central government often clashed with the interests of entrenched local elites.

In a similar vein, the Qianlong court launched the *Siku quanshu* project, the ambitious program of book collection and establishment of imperial libraries, in part to shore up the cultural centrality of the emperor, since the paucity of books in the imperial library certainly undermined the court’s authority. Private book collectors in the Jiangnan region played an instrumental role in this project, supplying the overwhelming majority of the publications. The collected books were then copied and preserved in imperial libraries in both northern and southern China, which reminds us of a typical pattern of incorporating southern culture by the imperial state. The emperor, however, did not originally plan to erect imperial libraries in Jiangnan, limiting them to the four imperial palaces in northern China. It was only in 1782 that the emperor belatedly authorized the transcription of three additional sets of the *Siku quanshu* to be housed in the three southern libraries.

I have so far outlined various aspects of state interventionist policies during the eighteenth century, manifested in diverse social and cultural arenas. If the eighteenth century is marked by state activism, then what happened to this orientation after the demise of the Qianlong Emperor? As will be explained more fully in the following sections, the nineteenth century witnessed, once again, the ascendance of elite activism in social and cultural spheres. How do we, then, place the Jiaqing and Daoguang era in terms of its position in the larger process of the development of local elite activism? Focusing on the interplay between politics, social practices and cultural production, this study will trace the unfolding of elite activism in these realms from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries.
Introduction

Origins of Elite Activism in the Nineteenth Century

One of the most striking aspects of the political adjustment observed by the early nineteenth-century rulers consisted in the establishment of new relations with the elites of the empire. These proved enduring, as they formed the fulcrum upon which the Qing regime lasted for another century. The new policies implemented by the early nineteenth-century rulers, directly or indirectly, opened the door for a reinvigorated elite social activism and enlarged the scope of permissible elite cultural practices. While some changes might have been byproducts of the imperial reform initiatives, others were intended results of this conscious policy shift.

Elite activism in the nineteenth century is often considered a defining feature of the post-Taiping society. By elite activism, I mean the increased participation of elites in local public affairs in terms of their monetary contribution and the assumption of managerial roles. This was accompanied by the strong assertion of local identity, which constituted a cultural representation of such activism.

Since the pioneering work by Philip A. Kuhn on social militarization in the mid-nineteenth century, the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) and the subsequent restoration process came to be considered as the starting point of the ascendant elite activism in the Qing period.44 Mary Rankin argues that elite public roles expanded during the restoration efforts in Zhejiang after the Taiping Rebellion. She demonstrates that the public actions of reinvigorated elites at this time were not limited to the local managerial areas but reached further into the national political realm.45 William T. Rowe’s study of the city of Hankow shows the extent of the public engagement of the gentry and merchants in the management of urban public affairs, primarily in the latter half of the nineteenth century.46

While this book acknowledges the Taiping Rebellion as a pivotal turning point in the expansion of elite public roles, it challenges the idea that its outbreak marked the beginning of elite activism. Instead, this study suggests that the rise of elite activism can be traced earlier to the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, when the bureaucratic inefficiency rendered the mobilization of local elites a viable option and aggravating fi-
nancial difficulties made the reliance upon elite economic resources inevi-
table. This book does not view the Qing state and society before the 
Taiping Rebellion as a simple continuum of the previous eighteenth cen-
tury. Rather, it tries to emphasize the similarities that the early nineteenth 
century shares with the later Qing period in terms of social and cultural 
aspects of elite activism, and the dissimilarities this period shows with 
the eighteenth century. This way, the rise of elite activism in the nine-
teenth century is examined not as originating entirely from the mid-
nineteenth century rebellion but as initially resulting from an effort to 
respond to various economic and social crises that befell China at the be-
beginning of the nineteenth century.

One of these crises stemmed from rapid demographic growth. The 
eighteenth century witnessed the doubling of the empire’s population 
from 150 million to 300 million. The demographic pressures persisted as 
the population continued to climb further thereafter, reaching 430 mil-
lion in the mid-nineteenth century. Recent studies on the population of 
of the Jiangnan region, the focal area of interest in this book, suggest that 
the rate of the population growth in this region from 1750 to 1850 might 
not have been as rapid as in other areas, such as the middle Yangzi region 
or North China.47 The population in Jiangnan, however, did increase during 
this period, although at a slower rate, hovering around 20 million by 
1620 to 36 million by 1850.48 The urban population living in or close to 
county seats within Suzhou prefecture numbered around 500,000 in the 
late sixteenth century, and then soared to about one million in the Jia-
qing reign, marking a twofold increase.49

The population growth during the mid-Qing period is often thought 
to have weakened administrative control, as the number of local official 
posts remained largely stagnant despite the population upsurge. This ris-
ing disparity between population level and administrative control, to-
gether with the declining state fiscal conditions, induced an increased 
degree of official reliance on local elites.50 But government policies proved 
crucial in expediting the expansion of elite public roles.

In an article on the origins of a Chinese public sphere, Mary Rankin 
mentions that, due to the failure of the regular bureaucracy to keep pace 
with the population, the managerial roles of local elites expanded from the 
mid-eighteenth century.51 She draws this conclusion largely from her obser-
vation that the list of local public institutions in gazetteers grew lengthier
Introduction

from this period onward. According to Rankin, elite activism in the late nineteenth century was transformative, distinct from the earlier one, as the former carried political and extra-regional dimensions. The intensification of elite public roles from the mid- to late-Qianlong years, Rankin argues, provided the institutional bases for the full-fledged, transformative political activism that occurred in the late nineteenth century.52

In a comprehensive study on eighteenth-century China, Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski suggest briefly that the initiatives and responsibilities of managing local public enterprises under strong government supervision in the early Qing—such as irrigation, philanthropy, schools, and granaries—came to be delegated to local elites. They consider that this shift to local initiatives had already become visible at the end of the eighteenth century, but that it “gained rapid momentum in the nineteenth.”53

The findings by these scholars seem to suggest that elite public roles began to multiply in the later Qianlong years. They provide, however, distinct insights on the significance of the early nineteenth century. In Rankin’s view, extra-bureaucratic management of local public works in the early nineteenth century served as a continuation of the pattern that had already emerged in the later eighteenth century. Naquin and Rawski, on the other hand, seem to consider that elite public roles intensified in the early nineteenth century albeit their earlier origin. Despite their differences on the timing of the rise of elite activism, they all drew their conclusions from local gazetteers: the lengthened list of public institutions or biographical information of philanthropic men. In contrast, this book will rely on a quantifiable set of evidence to estimate the degree of elite public functions from the Qianlong to Daoguang period. Based upon this evidence, I argue that the Jiaqing, and especially the Daoguang years, marked a watershed in terms of elite financial and managerial participation in local public works, which clearly demarcates this period from the previous century. I do acknowledge that local public institutions, such as benevolent halls, mushroomed during the Qianlong reign, and that local elites managed certain public works in the later eighteenth century. But I do not subscribe to the view that the early nineteenth-century forms of public works management constituted a simple continuation of the late eighteenth-century pattern. Under aggravated fiscal conditions and deep official distrust of subbureaucratic personnel, elites increasingly ran public works as managers and fund providers in the early nineteenth cen-
tury. Considering this period as an epochal moment in this dimension is justified not only by quantifiable data, but also by government policies and regulations that encouraged such participation. In this respect, this study corroborates the claims of Naquin and Rawski while further elaborating upon their conclusions.

Chapter Overview

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the shifts in state-elite relations reflected in the social and cultural practices of elites in early nineteenth-century Suzhou. This book consists of two parts. Part I, comprising chapters 1 to 3, illustrates the rise of elite activism in the management of local public works. Chapter 1 traces the changes in imperial attitudes toward elite participation in the local public realm as well as the systematization of state rewards for elites’ managerial roles and their contributions for local public causes. Based upon quantitative data drawn from untapped Qing documents housed in the First Historical Archives in Beijing, this chapter shows the growth in the number of people awarded for their contributions during the Jiaqing and Daoguang periods, underscoring the agency of local elites in public works. In response to enlarged elite contributions, the state devised regulations to officially recognize the role of elite managers and to offer more favorable rewards to the contributors. Contrary to the scholarship that traces the origins of elite activism in the efforts to subdue or recover from the mid-nineteenth century Taiping Rebellion, this chapter demonstrates that the activism dates back to the Jiaqing period.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the expanded public role of Suzhou elites by examining water conservancy works and famine relief operations during the early nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century, large-scale hydraulic works and famine relief operations in Suzhou had been primarily managed and financed by the state. The Qing state during the Qianlong reign played a central role in relief efforts, pursuing a variety of approaches, such as tax exemption and the distribution of subsidies. Elite-led relief activities did occasionally occur, but they did not reach the frequency or scale comparable to those in the early nineteenth century.
Introduction

Through a close analysis of the hydraulic and famine relief projects in Suzhou from the eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, these chapters demonstrate that these projects came to be regularly financed through civilian contributions and much more frequently managed by the elites in the early nineteenth century.

Part II, comprising chapters 4 to 7, is intended to examine the effects of the ascendant elite social activism on the cultural practices of Suzhou’s elites. The central government’s monopoly over the interpretation of historical events and its severe criticisms of local literature as parochialism rapidly lost ground in the early nineteenth century. In its place, an attitude that tolerated and even embraced more diverse local voices and practices emerged, distinct from the norms prescribed by the state authority. Local elites in Suzhou began to reassert the significance of their localities on the empire’s cultural map.

In chapter 4, the state endorsement of local worthies and eminent officials is analyzed, illustrating that the number of enshrined worthies climbed in the early nineteenth century as the state relaxed its centralized decision-making process and rigid standards. Suzhou was no exception to this empire-wide trend, as the city’s enshrined worthies rapidly increased in the early nineteenth century. This chapter argues that this reflects a greater accommodation of elite interests by the central government. The total number of enshrinements for each reign outnumbered the previous one, a gradual trend that illustrates the incremental empowerment of local elites and the progressive advancement of elite activism in the nineteenth century.

Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the Suzhou literati’s collective efforts to build a shrine in 1828. Known as the General Shrine of Former Worthies of Suzhou Prefecture and devoted to the worship of more than five hundred local ancestors, this shrine was constructed under the closely coordinated leadership of provincial officials and Suzhou literati. They engraved the portraits of the local ancestors on the shrine’s walls and published them in a collective biography. Many of those worshipped might not have been included in the government-monitored official shrines of local worthies, as they had been either the Ming-loyalists or actors in the late Ming factional strife that aroused profound hatred among the early Qing rulers. At times, these local worthies had been excluded simply because the state deemed their merits insufficient to deserve recognition.
This chapter argues that the Suzhou literati’s efforts in the construction of this shrine represent a creative strategy to bypass state control and reassert local identity and the locality’s cultural supremacy. This chapter also sheds light on the significance of the return of the public display of portraits in a Confucian shrine. The use of visual images in the Confucian Temple had been prohibited by the state since the early sixteenth century, the repercussion of which had also impacted lesser Confucian shrines, such as the Shrine of Local Worthies. The return of public circulation of visual images in both engravings and printed forms in the early nineteenth century symbolizes the retreat of state power from the local cultural realm.

Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate the literati efforts to reconstruct Suzhou’s cultural tradition during the early nineteenth century. Chapter 6 chronicles the eighteenth-century measures to strengthen imperial control over the cultural practices of the literati and the dissolution of such state efforts in the early nineteenth century. Under the Qianlong Emperor, the central government initiated the pre-publication censorship of local gazetteers, as provincial officials were required not only to review gazetteers, but also endorse their publication. The government viewed local gazetteers as being fraught with parochialism, criticizing them for their exaggeration, distortion, and omission of information related to historical events and figures. These fraudulent practices, according to the government, functioned to elevate the centrality of a local place and led the narratives in gazetteers to deviate from the state’s orthodox positions. Similar criticisms were also leveled against private local histories. This interventionist policy under Qianlong prompted a decline in the number of gazetteers and local literature. By the early nineteenth century, however, private local histories once again flourished. This environment also witnessed the gradual disappearance of provincial pre-publication reviewers from local gazetteers, another sign that testifies to the retraction of the state in the local cultural realm.

In chapter 7, I turn to analysis of the discourse centering on a local hero of Suzhou, Zhang Shicheng. Zhang, who built a kingdom with Suzhou as its capital in the fourteenth century, received favorable appraisals among locals, but he was subsequently vilified in official histories due to his defeat by archrival Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Empire. This hegemonic historical perception was undermined by
the collective memory shared by locals in the Suzhou and Taizhou areas, respectively the capital and the hometown of Zhang Shicheng. The collective counter-memory, however, did not always make its presence felt. Its emergence and disappearance paralleled changes in state-elite relationships. It first surfaced in the mid-Ming period and continued to exert some influence into the early Qing period. Under the Yongzheng Emperor and the Qianlong Emperor, the local counter-memory once again became dormant. Then, in the early nineteenth century, it reemerged among the members of the Suzhou and Taizhou elite circles. The early nineteenth-century counter-memory was radical, for it challenged, subverted, and replaced the dominant hegemonic discourse that had survived the initial Ming challenge.

The conclusion places the ascendant elite activism of the early nineteenth century in a comparative perspective with the elite activism that characterized the later part of the century. In the early 1800s, elite managerial roles were generally restricted to public works for social welfare and infrastructure. Elite roles expanded into the realm of military activities for community defense, an area deemed more sensitive from the perspective of the central government, only in the mid-1800s. The public actions of elite managers in the early nineteenth century were largely confined within the boundaries of their localities, lacking the extraregional dimension of networks and activities of elite managers in the late nineteenth century. Around 1900, this activism acquired a decisively political character, as local elites raised their voices against the government to demand broader participation in national politics.

The social and cultural world of the early nineteenth century molded by elite activism should be viewed as distinct from the one in the previous century. But several of the features of that world foreshadowed social and cultural environments that would pervade the empire on a grander scale decades later. In this regard, the early nineteenth century constituted a transitional period from state control to elite activism and from a centralized cultural order to a multicentered one that incorporated stronger assertions of local identities.