5: Shuyuan and Chinese Writing Training and Practice

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Chinese writing has a long tradition, dating back to writing training and practice in traditional Chinese schools, the Shuyuan. In this chapter, we shall provide an overview of the Shuyuan, including its history, structure, curriculum, book collection, and academic activities. This overview may help readers understand what ancient Chinese students, writers, and scholars read and wrote, and the implications of this for contemporary Chinese writing.

Originating in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the Shuyuan flourished during the Song (960-1279), Yuan (1271-1368), and Ming (1368-1644) Dynasties, lasting until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). They are commonly known in English as academies or private establishments for classical learning. Over 7,000 Shuyuan or academies are recorded as existing throughout the history of China. The four best known, the so-called Great Academies, were the Yuelu Academy, the White Deer Grotto Academy, the Yingtian Academy, and the Songyang Academy. These all existed during the Northern Song period (960-1127).

According to Yang and Peng, “A Chinese Shuyuan was essentially a comprehensive, multi-faceted cultural and educational institution, and it served multiple functions, as a school, a library, a research centre or institute, and others including religious and spiritual functions” (1). There are thus many different aspects of the Shuyuan, including school education, book collection and printing, academic research, the study of the religious and the philosophical systems of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, architecture, archive-management, and cultural communication. This chapter focuses on the Shuyuan’s curricula, book collection, and academic research and study activities in relation to Chinese reading and writing.

The Shuyuan played a key role in the Chinese history of education. The historical facts and records that are presented in this chapter show that the most significant developments in ancient Chinese education, i.e., teaching and learning, knowledge creation and transmission, and academic exchange and activities during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing
dynasties, have been closely related to the evolution and development of the Shuyuan.

The administrative structure of the Shuyuan

The administrative structure of the Shuyuan reflects the structure of contemporary Chinese universities. However, the Shuyuan structure was of a much smaller scale, which, to a large extent, helped make the influence of the Shanzhang (a person similar to the contemporary chair professor, president, or vice chancellor of a university) over the Shuyuan activities and academic development much more tangible. The following is a description of the Shuyuan structure, based on Yang and Peng (5–15).

Shanzhang 山长 (a position equivalent to combining a modern chair professor, and college president) headed a Shuyuan. The Shanzhang normally had a certain social, political and academic status over the region or the nation. A Shuyuan’s educational and administrative systems centred around a Shanzhang. Under the leadership of the Shanzhang, there was a deputy Shanzhang who took care of teaching, administrative and management duties on a daily basis. Other Shuyuan employees included teaching assistants, lecturers, managers (government representatives, who audited and monitored the Shuyuan), finance and estate officers, student affairs officers, assistant president (who assisted the Shanzhang with bureaucratic chores such as file-keeping and addressing enquiries), class monitors, logistics officers, receptionists (taken up by students in turns), subject monitors or representatives, administrative officers, and student representatives. In addition, there were also cooks, door keepers or cleaners, hall men, hall administrative staff, patrol staff, pavilion and stone carving managers, librarians, and security guards (night shift only, and who were also responsible for sounding the time).

This administrative structure of Shuyuan has some semblance to that of contemporary universities. However, contemporary universities have distinct faculties, departments and research centres, and these cover a wide range of disciplines from sciences, (e.g., physics, chemistry, biology and geology), social sciences (e.g., sociology, economics, politics, cultural and media studies, and psychology), arts and humanities (e.g., language studies, fine art, and religious studies), and applied disciplines (e.g., business and management, philosophy, health, and engineering). While Shuyuan had a comprehensive structure, their disciplinary focus was more integrated than the fine disciplinary divisions we find in contemporary universities. In addition, Shuyuan focused on the training of literacy skills, e.g., reading and writing, so that the students could prepare for the imperial examinations to become government officials of various categories, including ministers of major national departments, provincial governors, education commissioners, district magistrates, and other high-power positions. Contemporary universities, on the other hand, have far wider scope, teaching and training their students to become qualified professionals in virtually all fields in society. The following discussion on the curricula of the Shuyuan shows how the literacy skills of the students were systematically taught and trained in ancient Chinese Shuyuan.

The curriculum of Shuyuan had a focus on reading and writing

The teaching and curriculum in Shuyuan usually enjoyed more freedom than in government institutions. Nevertheless, it also followed a certain model or pattern. The curriculum of Shuyuan evolved steadily alongside social, political, economic and academic developments. In the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties, the curricula of various Shuyuan were relatively rich and extensive. In general, they centred around the studies of the Jing (the Classics, e.g., the Five Classics and the Four Books) and the Shi (histories, e.g., The Book of Historical Records). (Yang and Peng 15)
The major curriculum component for the Shuyuan in the Song dynasty was the “Five Classics”. It was not until the later Southern Song dynasty that the “Four Books” (with Zhu Xi’s connotations and commentaries) took the place of the “Five Classics”. Ever since then, the “Four Books” became the required texts for various Shuyuan and schools, and they were regarded as “standard keys or answers” to the Chinese Imperial Examinations, the historical civil service examination system of China (Yang and Peng 15). The Five Classics and the Four Books include the Yi Jing (the Book of Change), the Shu Jing (the Book of History), the Shi Jing (the Book of Songs), the Li (the Book of Rites), the Chun Qiu (Spring and Autumn Annals), the Lun Yu (the Analects), Mengzi (Mencius), the Da Xue (the Great Learning), and the Zhong Yong (the Doctrine of the Mean).

The historical civil service examination system of China, known as the Keju system, is commonly regarded as originating in the year 606 and officially ending in 1905, with a total span of 1,298 years. Through the Keju exams, Chinese emperors identified individuals who would either immediately or eventually serve as grand councillors, ministers of major national departments, provincial governors, education commissioners, district magistrates, and in other high-powered positions. These positions bestowed financial rewards, prestige, power, fame, and many advantages to the official’s entire extended family, including all descendants. Additionally, within hierarchical Confucian society, overall class, power, status, and prestige were generally reflected by such official positions won through success in these exams. (Suen and Yu 48)

Given the importance of the civil service examinations in China, the Shuyuan’s curriculum played a key role in developing the reading and writing skills of Shuyuan students. Apart from the “Five Classics” and the “Four Books” being the required texts or courses, there were also elective texts or courses, including “The Thirteen Classics with Commentaries”, “The Records of the Grand Historian”, ‘The Book of Han”, “The Book of Later Han”, and “The Records of Three Kingdoms”. The students were expected to select one of these elective texts and then study it thoroughly. The learning styles, according to historical records, included reading the sentences aloud, adding annotations and commentaries, copying key selected texts, and elaborating on texts. The students were provided with a diary so that they could record what they did according to the pre-determined schedule. These learning styles show that, in Imperial China, much emphasis was laid on the relationship between reading (including reading the texts aloud), memorisation of classic texts, and writing. In other words, writing was heavily dependent on what the students read, how much they could memorise of what they had read, and how much of what they had read they could understand and elaborate on.

Since reading was so important in the Shuyuan curriculum, a detailed description of the readings is essential in helping readers understand how the Shuyuan curriculum was structured. The teaching and learning content of Shuyuan centred around the Jing (classics) and Shi (histories). There were eight major subjects in the curriculum, namely:

(i) The Jing classics: In the Song dynasty, this included nine classics, e.g., “Mao’s Poetry” (Mao Shi), “Documents of the Elder” (Shang Shu), “the Books of Rites” (Zhou li, and Li ji), “the Book of Changes” (Zhou yi), “the Spring and Autumn Annals” (Chun qiu zuo shi zhuan), “the Analects” (Lun Yu), “Mencius” (Meng Zi), and “the Book of Filial Piety” (Xiao jing). The total number of words in the nine classics is approximately 480,090.

(ii) The Shi histories: In the Qing dynasty, the study of history comprised four topics, namely biographies, chronicles, historiographies, and studies of decrees and regulations.

(iii) Classical Chinese literary studies, e.g., the study of selected works of a particular school of scholarship. For example, during the Qing dynasty, there was a school of writing, named “Tongcheng school”, in which Yao Nai—whom we shall
meet again in Chapter 8—was an influential figure. He had been a Shanzhang (Head of Shuyuan) for over 40 years, and many writers had been students at his Shuyuan.

(iv) Poetry: Shuyuan promoted poetry reading and writing. The Imperial Examination also included poetry writing. Most Shuyuan Shanzhang and their students were poets. The commonly adopted poetry books in Shuyuan included “The Complete Tang Poems” (Quan Tang Shi), “The Selected Poems of the Song Dynasty” (Song Shi Chao), “The Selected Poems of the Yuan Dynasty” (Yuan Shi Xuan) (in three volumes), and “The Total Collection of Ming Dynasty Poetry” (Ming Shi Zong).

(v) The study of written Chinese characters, their etymology and phonology: In teaching this subject, the Shuyuan would use “Erya” and “Shuo Wen Jie Zi” as key textbooks. The Erya is a dictionary or glossary. It contains definitions of abstract words and concrete words such as items of flora and fauna, including grasses, trees, insects and reptiles, fish, birds, wild animals, and domestic animals. The Shuo Wen Jie Zi is a comprehensive Chinese character dictionary from the Han Dynasty with detailed analyses of the structure of the Chinese characters.

(vi) Mathematics, Arithmetic: the key text for this subject in the Shuyuan was “The Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art” (Jiu Zhang Suan Shu).

(vii) Bagu eight-legged essays and Shitie poems: Since the Southern Song and Early Yuan dynasties, the Shuyuan had evolved towards official or government institutions in terms of providing preparation courses for imperial examinations. In the Qing dynasty, there was a shift towards an “examination-oriented” curriculum centring around the bagu essays. Bagu essays were primarily based on Zhu Xi’s Collected Notes on the Four Books. Zhu Xi was regarded as the leader of the neo-Confucian school. Scholars in those days complained about the “shift” of the teaching focus in the Shuyuan, and some Shuyuan Shanzhang even regarded the bagu as “an enemy” (吾道之敌). However, since the civil service imperial examinations required it, they had to read and write these Neo-Confucian texts. Some Shuyuan took the reading of these “contemporary texts” as compulsory. The Shuyuan promoted the reading of around 100 Qing contemporary texts and some 20-30 Ming texts to help students learn how to write bagu essays appropriately.

(viii) Natural science and technology: although the Shuyuan curriculum was heavily oriented towards the Classics and the Histories, there were also courses in natural sciences and in mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, geography, biology (including medical science and agriculture). Nevertheless, the knowledge of these disciplines was taught primarily through the learning of Confucian classics, not as independent disciplines. For example, the “Shi Jing” (the Book of Songs) provides knowledge of biology, phenology, meteorology, and agricultural science. (Yang and Peng 16–21)

The teaching of reading and writing in the Shuyuan

The Shuyuan advocated learner autonomy or self-study. Lectures were only given by Shanzhang to the students two to three times per month. The remaining time would be for the students to engage themselves in self-study. The learning activities of the Shuyuan students comprised attending lectures and self-study. One of the roles that Shuyuan would play was to monitor the students’ learning activities and progress. Unlike contemporary university students, who have more flexibility and freedom in determining their individual learning activities, the Shuyuan students had to record what they read on a daily basis into their learning schedule books. These schedule books were then carefully examined by the Shanzhang on a regular basis.
The teaching of reading and writing in the Shuyuan was arranged in such a way that progressive training was implemented in three major stages, equivalent to the contemporary primary, secondary, tertiary and postgraduate education (Yang and Peng 22). During the first stage, students between the ages of 8-15 would spend seven to eight years learning eleven course books. These included the Xiaoxue (books on Chinese characters, etymology and phonology), the Daxue (classics and biographies), the Lun Yu (The Analects of Confucius), and Mengzi (The Book of Mencius). They also included the Five Books and the Spring and Autumn Annals. It should be noted that students at this stage were exposed to the reading of the Classics, regardless of how much of them they could understand. They would be required to read the texts aloud, copy the texts, and memorise the texts. There was not much creative writing involved at this stage, with "writing" often being interpreted as copying Chinese characters or texts.

During the second stage, students between fifteen and twenty-two years of age would spend three to four years reading course books, such as Questions on the Great Learning, Collected Notes on the Analects, Collected Notes on Mencius, Questions on the Doctrine of the Mean, and the Five Classics. There were also the original classical texts that they had read during stage one, but with connotations and commentaries. Their learning styles were not very different from those for stage one, but they were required and expected to understand the major texts they were reading. They would still copy and read aloud as their major learning activities. They would then spend another two to three years (equivalent to contemporary tertiary education) focusing on the Tong Jian (Documents of Ancient Books), the Han Wen (texts and grammar), the Chu Ci (The Songs of Chu), and the Tong Dian (The Universal Encyclopedia of Statecraft).

During this second stage, the students were not only expected to comprehend the texts that they had read during stage one, but also to start writing texts based closely on what they had read and comprehended. Reading and writing at this stage were integrated. The training of writing skills was particularly evident in the reading of texts and grammar sections. This training comprised analysing and understanding the discourse patterns and rules and the lexical and sentence grammar in the texts that students read. Intensive reading, instead of extensive reading, was emphasised at this stage, where the students were required to focus on reading one or two texts, by reading them over one hundred times. This differs from the reading requirements for contemporary school and university students in that disciplinary and cross-disciplinary extensive reading is now emphasised and encouraged. One of the advantages of this type of intensive reading for the Shuyuan students, however, is that they could not only understand the content of what they were repeatedly reading, but also figure out and internalise the outline structures and the rhetorical devices through which meanings and intended meanings had been encoded by well-known and well-established authors. This process would lay a good and solid foundation for the Shuyuan students in terms of their writing output. Quality writing in Shuyuan focused both on structure and content. One of the desirable outcomes of the Shuyuan intensive reading was that the students could take the classic texts as models, and write similar well-constructed and content-rich texts with appropriately chosen or imitated rhetorical devices. Shuyuan students were well motivated because this intensive reading approach could lead to, in their own belief, achieving first-class learning, writing first-class essays, and becoming the educated elite, which would, in turn, lead them to promising and prestigious careers. The Shuyuan education had a good reputation for quality. It focused on both the process and the product in Chinese literacy development. While students at the first two stages of Shuyuan education were well trained in terms of accumulating subject knowledge for writing, they also acquired skills during the process of reading and writing process in order to focus explicitly on the writing product in the final stage of their education. This model of process- versus product-oriented Chinese writing also applies to contemporary teaching of Chinese writing, where primary and secondary school education are process-oriented while post-secondary and particularly post-graduate studies focus on writing output of the students. Students in post-graduate studies primarily learn to write, and write to learn.
Stage three was the stage where students were engaged in more advanced studies. This was also the final stage of their Shuyuan studies in the sense that the students rigorously prepared for the imperial civil service examinations. By this time, the Shuyuan students would normally be between twenty-two and twenty-five years old. The exclusive focus of this stage was on writing (learning to write), practicing contemporary writing, and practicing bagu writing, with the ultimate aim of achieving a first-class result in the imperial civil service examinations. All Shuyuan at the provincial and municipal levels became examination oriented, particularly during this third stage.

Although this third stage focused on writing, reading still occupied the majority of the students’ learning time. The usual time allocation and study pattern was that the students would read for nine days, followed by a day of writing in whatever genre they were practicing. The rationale behind this was that, by the time of the writing day, the students had already studied and internalised the writing style and the content. The reading days were seen as writing preparation time. On the writing day, when the topic was released, the students were thus usually well-prepared and confident enough to set up their theses or themes and develop the rhetorical structure, while recalling what they had read over the previous nine days. They were able to come up with a draft very quickly and to revise and fine-tune their essays. The power of brush strokes could become sharp and unstoppable, as the Chinese would say. In terms of the content, the theses and themes were expected to lead the whole text or discourse in its opening and conclusion through twists and turns. To adopt the metaphor of writing as a “battlefield”, the theses or themes were like a commander with a bugle horn. Sentences were like generals, words and characters were like soldiers. The previous readings and writing material were like weapons. The “soldiers” would centre around or follow the generals. As far as the magic key to success in writing is concerned, Su Shi, one of the eight prose masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties, suggested that “The theme is what the writing is all about. Other aspects of writing have all been scattered through the Jing classics, the Shi histories, the works of the philosophers, and collections of essays. It is only when the theme is settled, can other things then be taken up or considered” (Cheng D. 487). What leads to poor writing is that, by the time of writing, the discourse, theme and the structure are still unsettled. Then no matter how much effort and heart one puts into the writing, it will not be done appropriately.

This third Shuyuan stage was important in that it integrated the writing skills with all the previous training of reading and preliminary writing (merely in the form of copying characters and texts). According to Cheng Duanli of the Yuan Dynasty, if all the three stages were completed successfully, by the time a student reached twenty-two to twenty-three, or twenty-four to twenty-five, he should be able to have read enough to write good essays. Even if a student missed some time, or did not follow the exact sequence, he could still make it up before reaching thirty by spending two to three more years on additional reading and writing. “Writing an essay is like planting and harvesting. Haste makes waste, and the cart cannot be put before the horse” (Cheng D. 488).

The examination-oriented assessment of the Shuyuan

In later years, the examination courses of the Shuyuan laid exclusive emphasis on writing bagu essays (eight-legged essays) and shitie poems (standard exam poems). These were an indispensable part of the Shuyuan curriculum, particularly during the Qing Dynasty. However, in the earlier Song dynasty, the Shuyuan put an emphasis on the writing of prose masters or Shanzhang, and down-played the role of being examination preparation courses. The Shuyuan students studied, what were for them, contemporary essays on their own rather than reading the Classics and Histories in their preparation for the imperial civil service examinations. However, by the time of the Northern Song Dynasty in the thirteenth century, examination courses had become an essential component of the Shuyuan curriculum.
Examination courses became even more dominant in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Yang and Peng 25). Examinations fell into two types: those held by the government; and those held by the local government officials. In addition, there were also examinations within the Shuyuan and which were administered by the Shanzhang. The frequency of examinations varied from Shuyuan to Shuyuan, ranging from one to six examinations per month.

The major content of the Shuyuan examinations included one baguwen based on Four Books, and one shitie poem (standard exam poem). The examination courses were primarily to prepare students for the Imperial Examination (or Civil Service Examination). There were also awards for top achievers.

As shitie poems and baguwen essays comprised the major content of the imperial civil examinations, it is important for the readers to have some background knowledge of these unique genres of writing. We have discussed and illustrated baguwen essays in the previous chapter, so we briefly describe the shitie poem in this section. The shitie poem was a format for testing poetry writing in the imperial civil service examinations during the Ming and Qing dynasties, basically from the mid-seventeenth century until the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to the encoded and implied meanings in the poetry, the very specific requirements for rhyming, symmetry, tonal balance and couplet styles also make these shitie poems difficult to write or compose. In this, they resemble the medieval cursus. The form originated in the Tang dynasty. Like the baguwen, the format of shitie poem changed over time. In the Tang and Song Dynasties, it comprised four or six couplets, while in the Qing Dynasty, it became eight couplets to complement the eight-legged style. Each couplet contained two five-character verses, and the verses had to be rhymed in various ways. There were many other specific requirements for composing Shitie poems. For example, certain rhymes such as a repetition rhyme and a synonym rhyme had to be avoided. The titles of Shitie poems were usually taken from a verse in a classical poem, or from a proverb. Those who took the civil service examinations had to be very knowledgeable about these verses and proverbs so that they could elaborate on them, and follow the explicit regulations for shitie poem writing. This made the intensive and extensive reading in the earlier stages of Shuyuan education described earlier so essential.

The Shuyuan's collection of books

One of the major functions of the Shuyuan was to collect and print books. The Shuyuan’s collection of books fell into three categories, namely “books for the public”, “books for teaching and learning”, and “academic books”. The “books for the public” offered an extensive range, covering Jing (Confucian classics), Shi (historical records), Zi (philosophical writings), and Ji (belles-lettres). The “books for teaching and learning” included textbooks and other curriculum teaching materials and references, and they were mostly related to specific courses within the curriculum. The “academic books” included research findings of Shuyuan staff and students. The latter two categories were unique to Shuyuan, and they were accorded high value.

The “books for the public” were classified into four sections, namely the Classics, the Histories, Philosophy and Belles-lettres pieces. Even though some will by now be familiar to readers, here we give a full list of titles under the Classics and Histories categories to show how diverse these were. Section 1 included “Jing (Classics)”, and comprised the Yi Jing (The Book of Change), the Shu Jing (The Book of History), the Shi Jing (The Book of Songs), the Li Ji (The Book of Rites), the Yue (The Book of Music), the Chun Qiu (The Spring and Autumn Annals), the Xiao Jing (The Classic of Filial Piety), the Si Shu (Four Books), i.e., the Lun Yu (The Analects), the Mengzi (The Book of Mencius), the Da Xue (The Great Learning), the Zhong Yong (The Doctrine of the Mean), the Xiao Xue (The Lesser Learning); and a number of dictionaries such as the Erya.
Section 2 included Shi (Histories), comprising the Zheng Shi (Standard Dynastic Histories), the Bian Nian (Annals or Chronicles), the Ji Shi Ben Mo (Historical Events in their Entirety), the Bie Shi (Alternative Histories), the Za Shi (Miscellaneous Histories), the Zhao Ling Zou Yi (Edicts and Memorials), Zhuanji (Biographies), Shi Chao (Historical excerpts), Zaiji (Regional Histories), Shi Ling (Seasonal Ordinances), Di Li (The Geographical Gazetteer), Zhi Guan (Offices: official ranks and titles), Zheng Shu (Political Treaties and Ordinances), Mu Lu (Bibliographies) and Shi Ping (Historical Critiques).

Section 3 focused on the major philosophers including the Confucians, the Buddhists, the Taoists and a number of other sects and texts, including books on agriculture, medicine and magic and divination.

Section 4 comprised Ji (Belles-lettres) which is where the Wenxin Diaolong was found as were other books of literary criticism and general collections of prose and poetry.

The “books for teaching and learning”, included annotations and commentaries of the classics and histories by influential scholars and the final category of “academic books”, included academic works by various Shuyuan staff and students as well as famous scholars, including Zhou Zunyi, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhang Zai, and Zhu Xi. This category also includes works by Shuyuan Shanzhang, and Shuyuan masters, and also collections of well-written pieces by Shuyuan students.

The academic research of Shuyuan

As far as the academic research atmosphere was concerned, Shuyuan placed a significant emphasis on self-study and academic interaction among the staff, as well as between staff and students. Shuyuan masters would generally aim to inspire learning, rather than “duck-feed” (spoon-feed) their students. For example, they would give one example for students to grapple with and understand so that they could then come up with three comparable examples themselves. Such an atmosphere created a positive influence for the development of creative and critical thinking skills in students' writing.

There were three types of academic activities in Shuyuan: the normal day to day teaching activities within the Shuyuan (e.g., the various courses); academic exchanges between Shuyuan; and activities that were open to the general public. In the Southern Song dynasty, academic exchange activities were extremely popular. One example was the famous Neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi, becoming involved in in-depth discussions with Zhang Shi, another famous Song dynasty scholar. Records show that the two masters argued for three days and nights over the meaning of “Doctrine of the Mean”.

In some ways, the influence of the Shuyuan can be seen in contemporary Chinese universities. For example, the types of interaction between students and staff, academic exchange activities, and community service, in particular providing books and seminars for the general public reflect Shuyuan practice. Contemporary Chinese university students and staff interact in many ways, not only through lectures, tutorials and seminars, but they also engage in face-to-face and online communication. They advocate learning and teaching autonomy. They do not, of course, write poetry or baguwen as Shuyuan students did, but they read and write academically within their disciplines and follow explicit and implicit discipline-specific academic writing rules and conventions.

Contemporary Chinese university students and staff also engage in academic exchange activities. They participate in exchange programs and attend local, regional and international conferences through which academic ideas are
disseminated, exchanged and debated. Contemporary students and staff also realise the importance of serving the community and try to apply what they have learned and researched within the ivory tower to real and relevant issues of concern to the community. In this way, universities aim to make students professionals who are able to serve the society in much the same way as the Shuyuan aimed to produce literate and educated people who could take up various important social roles in traditional Chinese society.

The transformation of Shuyuan in the twentieth century

After a history of more than a millennium, the Shuyuan were abolished towards the end of the Qing Dynasty at the time of major social and political change, which we consider in detail in Chapter 8. Western influence and China’s desire for modern knowledge and science undermined the role of the Shuyuan and created an urgent need for modern schools and universities. Chen Pingyuan (63-4) lists the following reasons to account for the demise of the Shuyuan in the twentieth-century China:

1. The irresistible Western learning (to be discussed in Chapter 8). Chinese in the twentieth century were desperate to learn about science, democracy and law. The establishment and dissemination of such disciplinary knowledge required a new educational system, which differed significantly from the traditional Shuyuan.

2. The propensity for “practical science”. The Chinese education in the twentieth century wanted science rather than humanities. As we have seen, the major curricula of the traditional Shuyuan were not science-oriented.

3. Traditional Shuyuan lacked efficiency because of its high cost in terms of human resources. Western “class” teaching provided strong economic advantages.

Chen (63-4) also points out, however, that the traditional Shuyuan has contributed to the current universities in many ways. For example, the tradition of holistic and whole-person education has been inherited from the Shuyuan.

In this chapter, we have reviewed the history of Chinese Shuyuan particularly in their relation to Chinese academic reading and writing. Chinese has a long tradition of reading classics, the histories and other iconic texts in order to prepare students to write. This tradition helps explain why modern Chinese students may have a propensity to quote the classics without explicit referencing, as this shows their competence, their extensive reading, and their remarkable ability to memorise. This chapter also shows that Chinese have traditionally paid great attention to the symbiotic relationship between reading and writing, especially in terms of what, how and when to read for subsequent writing activities. In addition, while the examination-oriented bagu essays and shitie poems are heavily dependent upon form, Chinese scholars, such as Chen Kui and Su Shi stressed that the meaning or theme was important. So meaning was often the primary concern, despite the apparent rigidity of the forms. The chapter concluded with reasons for the demise of Shuyuan and the rise of modern schools and universities, while indicating certain Shuyuan influences that can still be seen in contemporary Chinese universities.

In the next chapters, we move from the historical background and propose a number of fundamental principles of rhetorical arrangement and sequencing in Chinese.