The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era


The compilation of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries (Ssu-k'u ch'an-shu) was one of the most ambitious intellectual projects of the Ch'ing dynasty. Initiated by imperial command in 1772, the project sought to evaluate, edit, and reproduce the finest Chinese writings in the four traditional categories: Confucian classics, histories, philosophy, and belles lettres. The final products, created over a twenty-two year period, were an annotated catalog of some ten thousand titles and seven new manuscript libraries of nearly thirty-six hundred titles. The project had its darker side as well, for together with the evaluation of books there developed a campaign of censorship and proscription.

Guy's study gives a balanced account of the project and its significance. Dozens of celebrated Chinese scholars willingly participated in the project, though it was sponsored by the Manchu emperor, and Guy explains their reasons for doing so. He also reconsiders the issue of censorship, arguing that it grew as much from tensions and jealousies within the intellectual elite as from imperial command. Guy's work will be useful to all those interested in the relationship between intellectuals and the state in late imperial China.

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