

*Review Article*

**RECENT RE-VISIONS OF MING HISTORY**

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Craig Clunas. *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007, 288pp. ISBN-13: 9-781-86189-331-4 (hbk); ISBN-10: 1-86189-331-0 (pbk).

The 2005 (twelfth) edition of *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, the current required text for students of introductory Art History here at Victoria University, devotes seven of its 1150 pages to the art of Ming-dynasty China (1368-1644), up from three pages in 2001 (eleventh edition), and considerably more than the one paragraph the period receives in Helen Gardner's 1926 original.<sup>2</sup> As an index of the visibility of Ming art in modern (and Western) academe this is a fairly crude tool, and it would certainly be an exaggeration to suggest that Ming China has shifted from being anything but the 'Other' by which the real artists—from van Eyck (?1395-1441) at the start of the period through to Rubens (1577-1640) at its end—are meant to be judged. James Elkins' recent survey of one of the largest databases in the discipline reveals the unsurprising result that the top ten most frequently-cited artists are without exception white European males.<sup>3</sup> And when, in the process of writing this review, I asked a group of educated friends to name a pre-twentieth century artist from China (or East Asia), most were unable to come up with even one name.

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages: An Introduction to its History and Significance* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926); Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya & Richard G. Tansey ed., *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (Fort Worth: Harcourt College, 2001); Kleiner & Mamiya ed., *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (Belmont: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> James Elkins, 'Art History as a Global Discipline' in *idem* ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007) 3-23 (16-17).

To many, then, the recent appointment of Craig Clunas, a specialist in the visual and material cultures of Ming-dynasty China, to the prestigious position of Professor of the History of Art at the University of Oxford, must have come as something of a surprise. But, as those familiar with his work will recognise, Clunas is a scholar who has based his career around challenging the discipline of Art History in new and provocative ways, and his selection for this position seems particularly appropriate (as well as providing an interesting footnote in the current debates over the internationalisation of art history as a discipline, on which Clunas has recently written).<sup>4</sup> I well recall my undergraduate bewilderment on opening his new history of the Chinese garden, only to discover that “it [was] written out of a distrust that such a thing exists.”<sup>5</sup> More recently he has examined how pictures were made and understood in the late-imperial period, issues of reciprocity within the complex social networks of the Ming, and the roles of images within these networks.<sup>6</sup> With the release of each new monograph, Clunas has forced us to think differently about the roles of art and material culture in late-imperial China, and his willingness to challenge our understanding of the Ming world will no doubt continue to encourage lively scholarship amongst the next generation of Ming specialists.

The latest of Professor Clunas’ offerings, *Empire of Great Brightness, Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644*, is a lavishly-produced volume that begins very much in the same provocative spirit. “The period to be discussed in this book was an age of discovery...,” he begins:

When fleets manned by intrepid visionaries sailed further than any ship had sailed before, and brought back to the rulers who had sponsored their voyages tales of new lands, and new peoples....It was an age of internal discovery too, when thinkers ranged more deeply than ever before into issues of what it meant to be human, what the self really was. Models from the ancient past enjoyed a renewed prestige in literature, affecting the diction of poetry and prose, but at the same time there was an unprecedented vitality to the new arts of the novel and of drama, which attracted for the first time the attention of educated men as well as the illiterate, as courtiers and the unwashed shared in

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<sup>4</sup> Craig Clunas, ‘The Toolkit and the Textbook’ in Elkins ed., *Is Art History Global?* 279-285.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996) 9.

<sup>6</sup> Craig Clunas, *Pictures & Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997) and *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

the emotions generated by the stirring and pathetic tales that were acted out before them. A vibrant printing industry got more books into the hands of more people than at any previous time in history, and extended reading beyond a tiny elite to a mass audience that was more diverse, in terms of gender and class, than at any time before....It was, of course, the China of the Ming dynasty (7).

Those who have engaged with Clunas' work previously will recognise the gag here long before the final sentence; a deliberate play on a description of Renaissance Europe of course, but also a very accurate description of Ming China. This parallel, made "more as a provocation than a serious proposition" (8), is what lies at the heart of this book, and of the author's larger body of work that has spanned the last two decades. Noting that "a view of modernity as a single phenomenon, initially globally restricted to Western Europe and its North American extensions, has therefore a particular investment in looking *away* from Ming China" (9), the author sets out to make a little less stable the foundations upon which such a view rests. The 'early modern China' tag employed "with a certain naïveté in the first instance" (230) in the titles of two of Clunas' previous monographs (and criticised by a number of scholars) may have been abandoned here, but the objective to challenge "the binary opposition of China/not-China, which has structured our understanding for too long" (15) remains.<sup>7</sup>

"To what extent, then, is it feasible to speak of Ming China as a 'visual culture', one in which the related acts of making visible and making culture were intertwined?" (11). This is the rather broad question that Professor Clunas sets out to answer in the present volume. Rather than dealing with the Ming period chronologically, he structures his study thematically, with seven chapters jumping back and forth in time to address various aspects of what he calls visual and material culture, followed by an eighth and final chapter, which addresses some of the ways in which images and objects have survived and been understood since the fall of the dynasty. The individual chapters are based on the 2004 Slade Lecture Series (indeed, at one point [17] Clunas addresses his 'listener' instead of his 'reader'), and, although they may be read independently, are presented here in the same order as that in which the original lectures were delivered at Oxford University. So, while treating many of the same issues, the book as a whole reads very differently, for

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to *Pictures and Visuality*, Clunas uses the phrase 'early modern China' in the title of his study of taste, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). Against its use, see Søren Clausen's 'Early Modern China—A Preliminary Postmortem', Working Paper 84-00, Centre for Cultural Research, University of Aarhus, 2000.

example, to Timothy Brook's excellent *The Confusions of Pleasure*, the structure of which serves to highlight some of the enormous economic and material changes that occurred between 1368 and 1644.<sup>8</sup> Clunas is sensible to the very real risk that his structure, by contrast, might present the Ming as unchanging, and wisely makes a point in his Introduction of drawing the reader's attention to some of the ways (political, economic, social) in which life in 1600 differed from that of two centuries earlier (17-18).

Many of the topics addressed in this study will be well known to readers of Clunas' earlier monographs, while the guides used to usher us through the dynasty will also be familiar: Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559) and his grandson Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645); the diarist Li Rihua 李日華 (1565-1635); the Korean shipwreck victim Ch'oe Pu 崔溥 (1454-1504), as well as some of the protagonists of the early-seventeenth century novel *Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅 [Plum in the Golden Vase]. It is a rather curious characteristic of this book that each chapter re-introduces these sources—so after the lifespan of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559, is given in the Introduction (17), it is offered again on pages 26, 57, 97, 129, 144, 174 and 188, and one wonders whether this sort of repetition might profitably have been edited out of the volume as the distinct lectures were brought together. But while *Empire of Great Brightness* does revisit topics and a certain amount of material that has previously been presented elsewhere, it also succeeds in weaving into the story some very interesting new material. The author begins by introducing the traditional divisions of Heaven 天, Earth 地 and Man 人 (rendered here as “time, space and human agency”), focussing his discussion on some of the ways in which the boundaries of dynastic and seasonal time, cosmographic, administrative and imperial space, and the ‘four classes of people’ 四民 were made visible in Ming society. These divisions, of course, were inextricably linked; Ming geographical space could be understood only in terms of its relationship to the imperial capital, itself subject to change both between dynasties and, on occasion, between reign periods (Beijing assumed the role of Ming capital from about 1420), while dynastic time was itself very much a function of Heaven's authority. The marking of ceramics and other objects with the reign titles of emperors, a practice that became widespread only at the end of the fourteenth century (22), is therefore an appropriate place for the author to begin his discussion, although it is notable that Clunas does not address the inherent instability of these written signs as temporal markers. While concern, particularly late in the dynasty, over the perceived blurring of divisions between the four classes of people—scholar 士, peasant 農, artisan 工, merchant 商 (very definitely in

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

that order)—is treated well here, the possibilities (and implications) of the blurring of divisions in dynastic time by attaching spurious reign periods to ceramic objects is not considered.

Having introduced this cosmographic framework, the study then turns in Chapter Two to the “cultures of direction and movement”; the various ways in which the visibility of position, gesture and travel functioned during the Ming. Some of this will be fairly easily absorbed by Western readers, as accustomed to the idea of height as symbolic of power as their Chinese counterparts, although one should perhaps be more cautious in using the evidence of paintings and woodblock prints (55-58) to gauge the importance of relative position and gesture in the Ming world (it seems likely to me that such physical manifestations of power would have been deliberately overemphasised in visual media). Other explications are more subtle. The complex idea of ‘roaming’ (*you* 游), “a powerful marker of elite status, since the consumption of time and space in travel for pleasure or for self-cultivation is restricted to a few” (60-61), not new to the Ming period by any means, but nonetheless a practice that increasingly shifts to the forefront of elite discourse as the dynasty moves on, is very well treated here. As Clunas notes, it had become by the turn of the seventeenth century common (almost *de rigueur*) for educated travellers to grumble about the crowds of uninformed tourists whose presence was ruining the travel experience (67), grumblings that bear no small resemblance to those that came out of the nineteenth-century onset of mass tourism in the West.<sup>9</sup> Complaints about the women of Beijing freely roaming the streets during the New Year festival at the turn of the sixteenth century reveal much about elite Ming notions of gender and mobility (66), and the author’s discussion here will add to important recent work such as that of Brian Dott, who has shown that there existed considerable anxiety on the part of the male elite about female participation in pilgrimage activities in late-imperial China.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter Three examines some of the ways in which text functioned in the public sphere of the Ming, both as an instrument of state control and as a tool in more personal or commercial transactions. Clunas argues here that what was written “can in many ways be secondary to the conveying of identities and the assertion of places in hierarchies through its material and formal aspects, when it comes to conveying meaning to group audiences” (89). One clear example of this is the surprisingly frequent presence of foreign scripts on Ming objects, not just the Latin on the tomb inscription of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), but objects whose very appeal lay

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 40-41.

<sup>10</sup> Brian R. Dott, *Identity Reflections: Pilgrimages to Mount Tai in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004) 105-49.

precisely in their illegibility, such as a porcelain screen dated (in Chinese) the Zhengde 正德 reign (1506-1521), but decorated with a text of the Qur'an written entirely in Arabic (102-3; illus. 80). Again this phenomenon should be easily understood by the Western reader—the current fashion for cushions, lampshades and other furnishings decorated with Chinese or Japanese characters (some real and some imagined) in Western design stores is a very real reminder of the capacity of text to mean something to those who cannot 'read' it in the usual sense of the word. Books were read, bought, sold, borrowed and collected in far greater numbers in the Ming than ever before, of course, but Clunas also draws attention to the significance of the 'Capital Gazette' 邸報, a news sheet produced in manuscript form to 1628 and thereafter set in moveable type, as an important if ephemeral part of the 'public text' of the period (108).

The technological advances in the field of printing that occurred during the Ming "aided and abetted a pervasive delight in list-making, ranking and classification" (111), and these practices, identified elsewhere as important elements in the development of the late-Ming identity, are the absorbing focus of Chapter Four.<sup>11</sup> Lists of gifts, inventories of property and personal wills are discussed, as is the ordering of people, including the all-important system of ranking *jinshi* 進士 examination candidates. The author observes the pleasure Ming sources seem to derive from list-making, raising the enchanting possibility that the Ming "delight in the list was itself one of the foundations of commercial prosperity" rather than the other way around (127). Such delights could themselves become subject to the ranking process, and this topic—"pleasure, play and excess"—is treated in Chapter Five. The obsessive connoisseurship that resulted in "the conversion of previously utilitarian objects into objects of amusement" (149) particularly late in the Ming period, became yet another form of amusement for some contemporary commentators. Thus we find Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672) observing:

Nowadays the world plays with inkcakes and does not grind inkcakes, looks at inkcakes and does not try out inkcakes. Wrapped in brocade bags and lacquer boxes, greased with mutton fat and tiger hide, people do not realise they are for the creation of white and black, which is an excellent joke (149).

But pleasure could always have a darker side, of course, and the author deals skilfully here with the division (probably overly romanticised) between the sanctioned, austere pleasures (*le* 樂) of the élite, and the dangerous, furtive

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<sup>11</sup> Wai-ye Li, 'The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility' in *T'oung Pao* 81 (4/5) 1995: 269-302.

pleasures that could be captured by the term *wan* 玩 (to play), often implicitly linked to ideas of sexual gratification (148-49).

Chapter Six examines cultures of violence, arms and warfare in the Ming, drawing on recent studies within this emerging area of scholarship to make some fascinating observations about violence as metaphor, as punishment and as dramatic production, although I wondered whether the author might have explored the issue of warfare a little more thoroughly. If the Ming state was engaged in so many external wars (308 throughout the dynasty according to one source),<sup>12</sup> how are we to account for the pervasive impression, which until very recently has dominated our understanding of the period, that the Ming was an age of lasting peace? Clunas is certainly correct to point out that Jesuit-influenced portrayals of a static and immobile Ming have contributed much to a Western vision of China against which a dynamic, emerging European modernity might be measured (163), but it is also true that contemporary Chinese sources, official and otherwise, have been remarkably complicit in the perpetuation of this vision. One might legitimately ask why, for example, if the Ming state during the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1573-1620) was required to deal with so many incursions into its territory (163), at one point mobilizing hundreds of thousands of troops simultaneously to engage three enemies on three fronts,<sup>13</sup> a man like Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664) might still claim a few decades later that “the Wanli reign was a time of peace within the seas.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, while military parades might have been visible to the population (172), would it, in fact, be more appropriate to talk about a culture of *invisibility* with regard to the actual acts of warfare in which the Ming state was engaged? And, if so, what does this suggest about Ming attitudes towards violence in contexts other than those explored here?

The quite staggering volume of visual and literary material that we have from the Ming period dealing with ideas about immortality is enough to suggest the importance of ageing and death, the subject of Chapter Seven, in the Ming imagination. It was well known that the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (Shizong 世宗; r. 1522-1566), having reached middle age, had become obsessed with Daoist formulas for the manufacture of an *elixir vitae*, but

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<sup>12</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism, Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), cited (misspelling the author's name) on page 163 of the present study.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth M. Swope, ‘All Men Are Not Brothers: Ethnic Identity and Dynastic Loyalty in the Ningxia Mutiny of 1592’ in *Late Imperial China* 24 (1) 2003: 79-130 (84).

<sup>14</sup> Qian Qianyi, ‘Ba Dong Xuanzai yu Feng Kaizhi chidu’ 跋董玄宰與馮開之尺牘 in Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯 ed., *Muzhai chuxueji* 牧齋初學集 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985) 3: 1788-89.

Clunas provides a refreshing corrective here by citing his ancestor the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (Chengzu 成祖; r. 1403-1424), who thought longevity techniques “the height of idiocy” (200). Some of the most interesting few pages (205-7) of the book are those that deal briefly with the material culture of death—objects with which people in the Ming chose to be buried (or at least for whom that decision was made by a relative). It does not seem strange that a man like the art collector Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525-1590) would be buried with a printed copy of a Buddhist sutra, but the diversity of objects—from calligraphy, plays and almanacs to textiles and medical accoutrements—found in Ming tombs is quite fascinating, and certainly adds to the overall picture of cultural diversity Clunas paints with this volume.

To all this is added an eighth and final chapter, ‘Remnant Subjects: Afterlives of Ming Visual and Material Culture’, perhaps the strongest section of the book. As Clunas notes in his Introduction, it is impossible to approach the Ming without taking into account the ways in which “Ming images and objects have been redeployed and reimagined over the past 350 years” (17), and yet this is an area that can be neglected by Ming specialists. The author is right to point out the significance of the Qing emperors’ conscious maintenance of visible Ming monuments for their own empire-building projects (212-14), and, drawing on the recent work of Jonathan Hay, to highlight the importance of the visible decay of the former imperial palace complex in Nanjing as a demonstration of the passing of the Mandate of Heaven from the Ming to the Qing.<sup>15</sup> The nostalgic literary and visual responses of some of the seventeenth century’s ‘remnant subjects’ 遺民 to the passing of the Ming are not only some of the more interesting works of the period, they also provide a far from politically-neutral lens through which the dynasty is still sometimes viewed. Nostalgia for the fallen dynasty continued elsewhere too, and it is remarkable that as late as 1736 a Korean epitaph could still be dated “109 years from the first year of the Chongzhen reign” 崇禎紀元後一百九年, relating a material object to the Ming of the past rather than to the contemporary Qing (219).

Clunas argues that the eighteenth-century imperial art collection “has had the strongest possible effect on canon-formation in Chinese painting’s history, pushing certain figures and certain manners into prominence at the same time as it relegated others to the shadows” (218). One of these figures pushed into prominence was the late-Ming official Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), on whose style the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor’s (Gaozong 高宗; r. 1736-1796) own calligraphy was modelled, helping to fix Dong’s theory and

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Hay, ‘Ming Palace and Tomb in Early Qing Jiangning: Dynastic Memory and the Openness of History’ in *Late Imperial China* 20 (1) 1999: 1-48.



practice as the orthodox tradition of Ming art by the second half of the eighteenth century (218). Elsewhere, Clunas has noted that available written evidence argues strongly against the identification of Wen Zhengming as an important artist in his own lifetime, despite the fact that by most modern accounts he is one of the canonical artistic figures of the period.<sup>16</sup> In this sense the defining, sorting and judging of visual art during the Qianlong era was similar in effect to that of the monumental *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete Library of the Four Treasuries of Literature] project initiated in 1772, which, although not mentioned in the present study, might well be seen to have been instrumental in the creation, and in some cases in the destruction, of the material culture of the Ming.<sup>17</sup> Finally, I enjoyed the author's brief but thoughtful comments on the "process in which 'the Ming' as the most authentic and most Chinese of dynasties comes to stand as a synecdoche for China as a whole in [W]estern eyes" (224).

*Empire of Great Brightness* represents an important addition to the growing body of existing English-language scholarship on Ming-dynasty China, one that, if it does not present anything particularly ground-breaking in the way of a theoretical position, certainly makes a significant contribution to those arguments already advanced by Clunas' earlier monographs and the recent work of other scholars. The author has succeeded in the difficult task of producing an extremely attractive volume that will appeal to expert and novice alike, although inevitably the book will not please everyone. I must admit here to being one reader who finds the lack of Chinese characters in the body of a work such as this a little irritating. While I can recognise the publisher's desire to make the study accessible to non-specialists, it is not at all clear that providing the title of a book or essay in romanised form is any more instructive to a reader with no knowledge of the Chinese language. Similarly, by consciously focusing on English-language sources, the author (laudably) opens up fields of enquiry to scholars of other disciplines, but some readers will probably regret the lack of attention paid here to Chinese and Japanese source materials.

What the book does well is constantly to challenge the idea of 'Ming culture'; reminding those of us who know, or think we know what Ming society was like just what a complex and diverse place it could be. It is well

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<sup>16</sup> 'How Wen Zhengming Became an Artist', Sussex History of Art Research Papers (2000), published online at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/arthist/sharp> but now apparently no longer viewable. The argument is picked up again in Clunas' more recent monograph *Elegant Debts*.

<sup>17</sup> On the *Siku quanshu* project see L. Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien-Lung* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966) and R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

worth remembering, for example, that Korean and Vietnamese students were among the candidates for the dynasty's first *jinshi* examination in 1371, and that Mongol immigrants, the feared invading hordes of folklore, were in fact readily incorporated into society in large numbers at various times during the dynasty (73). In 1467 the Government moved to prevent staff of the Translation Bureau 四夷館 from privately taking on pupils for foreign language study (100), suggesting something of the growing importance of foreign tribute and trade missions in the Ming imagination. By 1579 the Ming state was (theoretically, at least) able to carry out diplomatic correspondence in Mongol, Jurchen, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Persian, Shan, Uighur, Burmese, Babai and Thai (99). Whether such a cosmopolitan state amounts to 'early modernity' is a question the author, perhaps wisely, declines to answer, but the question lingers unspoken throughout the study.

The issue of dynastic exceptionalism is one that perhaps requires a comment here, being an area for which the author has previously attracted criticism.<sup>18</sup> As historians of China we are probably all a little guilty of working too much within dynastic boundaries, in part because of the way Chinese source materials, not to mention the mechanics of our own discipline, are arranged. In the case of the Ming-Qing transition we are also forced to deal with the vociferous anti-Manchu nationalism of the early twentieth century that has continued to shape our perceptions of life in seventeenth-century China until very recently. One imagines that the emergence of more nuanced treatments of the period, like those of Tobie Meyer-Fong, who notes of the early Qing: "the (re)creation of a new, broadly inclusive community of elites, in some cases along the lines of preconquest friendship networks, preceded, and even facilitated, political accommodation that gradually took place between Han elites and the new Qing order" will do much to curb the tendency to view 1644 as an impenetrable barrier beyond which a continuation of late-Ming cultural life seems unimaginable.<sup>19</sup>

The difficulty with a study such as this one is that by its nature it tends to overemphasise the distinctiveness of its focus period in relation to other dynasties. The very act of producing a cultural history of 'Ming China' implies a certain cultural uniqueness of that period that may in many cases be quite misleading. While Clunas is very much aware of this challenge, and wishes to see "the cultural history of the Ming as an archive of practices and statements with a fluid boundary" so that he may "escape a charge of overly fetishizing 1368 and 1644 as limits, within which 'the Ming' is totally

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 19-25.

<sup>19</sup> Tobie Meyer-Fong, 'Packaging the Men of Our Times: Literary Anthologies, Friendship Networks, and Political Accommodation in the Early Qing' in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 64 (1) 2004: 5-56 (6).

different from what went before and what came after” (15-16), I wonder if there is something of a paradox in his approach here. Certainly he is happy to note that “not every phenomenon I describe for the Ming period has its origins then” (19), but by highlighting at the outset the fact that “the Ming dynasty is the first dynastic formation in China to be named for what is essentially a visual quality” (11) he establishes, perhaps unwittingly, an argument for the visual pre-eminence of that period that would be difficult to sustain. While it may well be true, for example, that “things with writing on them often possessed real power in the Ming” (91), or that “as late as the 1620s emperors still wanted to be taken seriously as calligraphers, or at least they still understood the significance attached to possession of products of the imperial brush” (94), it would be a mistake to think that these notions were particular to the Ming context. However embellished the often-cited story of Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037-1101) inscribing a set of fans to clear a poor man’s debts may be, nobody was confused about *why* an object bearing the calligraphy of the famous poet should be highly valued in the Song era.<sup>20</sup> The Kangxi 康熙 (Shengzu 聖祖; r. 1662-1722) and Qianlong Emperors of the Qing dynasty knew as well as anyone the ability of written characters inscribed at Taishan 泰山 to symbolise imperial power.<sup>21</sup> I am not sure that a great deal is added to this already fascinating study by rather tentative claims such as “it is not just the survival of evidence from a period relatively close in time that gives the impression that there was more writing on more things than at any previous point in Chinese history, it probably was indeed so” (91).

*Empire of Great Brightness* is another outstanding contribution to our understanding of Ming history and culture by one of the foremost experts in the field today, and I would not want the minor reservations I have expressed here to deter any prospective readers. There is no doubt that this volume (which, incidentally, is another product of Chinese material culture; being published in London but printed and bound in China before being re-exported) will engage scholars of a number of inter-related disciplines in some very useful ways. Indeed, I do not hesitate in recommending Professor Clunas’ entire body of work as some of the most important, challenging, thought-provoking and enjoyable studies of Chinese visual and material culture I have ever had the pleasure to read.

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<sup>20</sup> See for example Lin Yutang, *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (New York: The John Day Company, 1947) 302-3.

<sup>21</sup> Robert E. Harrist, Jr., ‘Reading Chinese Mountains: Landscape and Calligraphy in China’ in *Orientalisms* (Dec 2000): 64-69.