

BOOK REVIEW

The Inscription of Things: Writing and Materiality in Early Modern China

By Thomas Kelly. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.
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Material culture and materiality have been buzzwords in Chinese studies for a while. Looking back, one might point to the 2003 edited volume in celebration of Patrick Hanan's work, *Writing and Materiality in China*, as a paradigm-setting moment whose impact has been felt in general historiography beyond literary criticism. Highlighting the entangled relationship between textuality and materiality, Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu as editors, together with an assembly of scholars then the avant-garde of the field, insisted on de-centering the expressive voice of the author. Two decades on, Thomas Kelly's new book can be read as a summation of the material turn with clear echoes to the Hanan volume in its subtitle, but also presents intense and fresh challenges to its established framework.

Specifically, *The Inscription of Things* takes as its central subject of inquiry not only the materiality of writing itself, but "writing upon writing tools" (31). The book is chiefly concerned with inscriptions (*ming*) engraved upon the surface of the mundane objects that rendered the very act of writing possible: brushes, inkstones, ink cakes, and other stationery objects one might find littered about in a literatus's studio. Reading the inscriptions both as authorial acts of naming and a reciprocal space for objects to "talk back" to their users, Kelly urges renewed attention to inscriptions as meta-level reflection on the materiality of writing in early modern China, chiefly concerning the time period between 1550 and 1800, straddling the late Ming and High Qing.

Furthermore, Kelly argues that such critical awareness of writing as a material act, evident in the fashionable practice of inscribing on writing tools, emerged out of Ming–Qing authors' grappling with relentless upheavals in their life and their reflections on the impermanence of words. In this way, *The Inscription of Things* can be read as a cultural historical rejoinder to the popular belief in the magical and everlasting power of writing in Chinese civilization, a myth perpetuated not least by leading Sinologists including Frederick Mote and Simon Leys (35–36). To put it crudely: late imperial inscription-makers could contemplate the impermanence and instability of meaning, subjecthood, and seemingly durable surfaces, just like literary scholars today. Attending instead to the "contingent structures of attention and care" (6) immanent in the reciprocal exchange with inscribed objects, late Ming and early Qing authors coped with the colossal loss of meaning across the Ming–Qing transition.

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The book consists of four chapters in addition to an introduction and an epilogue. The Introduction opens squarely with a close study of Wang Fuzhi, “remnant subject” (*yimin*) and Ming loyalist, through his inscriptions on his brush and inkstone. Chapter 1 examines a group of inscriptions composed by Zhang Dai, memoirist *par excellence* of late Ming grandeur, on elegant objects and family friends known and lost after the Qing conquest. The remaining three chapters each examine a type of inscribed artifacts and inscription-makers, namely inkstone engravings made by Huizhou merchants self-styled as “Confucian knights-errant” (Chapter 2), ink stick molding fashioned by artisanal entrepreneurs (Chapter 3), and lastly seal-carving and the poems written to commemorate them by Qing antiquarians (Chapter 4). The epilogue, which at times reads like a fifth chapter, examines inscriptions made by Ming loyalists such as Qu Dajun (1630–1696) and Gao Fenghan (1683–1749).

On the surface, the book is organized around the macro-historical event of the Ming–Qing transition, where the question of loss and durability can be most explicitly grasped through inscriptions made by self-professed Ming loyalists. Deep down, however, another set of core material revolves around the figure of Wang Daokun (1525–1593) and his followers, whose cultural activities were largely untouched by the mid-seventeenth-century upheavals. Using an impressive assembly of sources including carved objects—Wang’s biographical accounts of calligrapher-carvers and letters and ephemeral notes compiled by his retainer, Huizhou pawnbroker Fang Yongbin (1542–1608)—Kelly reveals the ornate, playful, and meaning-laden quotidian life that these late Ming actors strove to build for themselves. The pseudo-stele advertisements for tea (in the Fang Yongbin collection now housed at the Harvard-Yenching Library), meticulously discussed in Chapter 2 (128–132), fit somewhat awkwardly with the general contextualizing statement about the “upheavals of the late sixteenth century” (130). To a historian’s eyes, therefore, one could question to what extent the macro-historical framework of the Ming–Qing transition proves useful and unifying for this study, and whether career frustrations and whims of the marketplace should be considered together with dynastic decline and regime change in one breath.

Such quibbles aside, the detective work necessitated by the cultural biography of inscribed objects have indeed made valuable contributions to our understanding of the Ming–Qing transition: in contrast to the conventional narratives of rupture, passion, and intellectual discontinuity, Kelly’s research presents a different facet of early Qing elite culture, in which pivotal figures such as Zhou Lianggong (1612–1672) and Zhu Yizun (1629–1709) quietly commemorated late Ming cultural artifacts and enabled a kind of diachronic continuity through the preservation of inscribed objects. In Chapter 4, for example, we follow the extraordinary fate of a set of late Ming carved rhinoceros cups into the Qing, culminating in spectacular antiquarian poetry composed by leading official-scholars such as Weng Fanggang (1733–1818). Aside from the hermetic reflections of “remnant subjects,” the making of High Qing learning and antiquarianism was therefore also enabled by this kind of continued cultural entrepreneurship and literati sociality in the open, notwithstanding the trauma of regime change.

The Inscription of Things is not an easy read for the uninitiated, yet it will richly reward those who pay close attention. Digging into challenging prose-poetry laden with obscure references and insider puns, Kelly heroically renders them into lucid and elegant English. Overall, the text requires a general familiarity on the reader’s part with Ming and Qing literary figures such as Xu Wei, Wang Shizhen, and Ruan Yuan, without pausing to explain who they were and what they did. The book also

mostly dwells in the rarefied world of elite literati, with occasional forays into the artisanal and entrepreneurial exploits of the main actors' associates. If the culture of inscription indeed became more widespread and popular during this period, then one would also expect some discussion of "bad" or "vulgar" inscriptions down-market used by rustic teachers and failed examination candidates, which perhaps requires a different kind of study. Lastly, I regret to say that photographs of inscribed inkstones and ink sticks make for very poor illustrations in a printed book as required by our present academic norms. One could imagine this study conveyed through more dynamic, even tactile, media that would better communicate the embodied experience of inscribing and conversing with one's writing utensils.

In sum, Kelly's book will leave many durable marks (pun intended) on China scholars' collective understanding of late imperial Chinese literary culture. Going back to the paradigm-setting moment of the Hanan volume I mentioned at the beginning of this review, *The Inscription of Things* interrogates the entanglement of textuality and materiality beyond a mere acknowledgement of the latter's importance. Grasping the epic through the mundane, this book teaches how inscribed things constituted speech and realms of literature for those who sought to talk through them. In fact, one might bring the question of subjectivity back into the mix and interpret the prevalence of inscriptions in early modern China as an excess of expressive agency, not its post-modern negation.