

PATRICIA BUCKLEY EBREY and SUSAN SHIH-SHAN HUANG (eds):

Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China.

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Originating from a conference on Middle Period China, this collection of papers represents a delightful departure from connoisseurial approaches and provides more hands-on engagement with objects of visual and material cultures. A quick glance at this collection of papers suggests that, by and large, the authors work with the same material that is discussed in many other books on Chinese art history of that period: handscrolls, hanging scrolls, murals, calligraphy, bronze mirrors, ceramics, etc. Yet, as the title indicates, this volume is not predominantly concerned with aesthetic evaluations, but with the realm of visual and material cultures.

This volume is divided into four parts and starts with a detailed survey of visual and material cultures of Middle Period China (defined on p. 1 as “from the mid eighth through the mid fourteenth century”). In part 1 (Making art in funeral and ritual contexts), Fei Deng discusses modular design and masonry regionality in tomb constructions and provides plenty of visually similar examples. The second paper, by Phillip E. Bloom, focuses on three Buddhist paintings and delineates the visualizing strategies applied in them to make the invisible supra-mundane realm accessible to the mundane viewer. In part 2 (Setting a scene), Fan Jeremy Zhang explores visual sources reflected on more affordable daily objects such as pillows and mirrors to discuss the influence of popular theatrical performances. Xiaolin Duan deals with popular culture regarding sightseeing in Hangzhou. She investigates how paintings contribute to the popularity of sightseeing centred on ten scenic views which came to shape visitors’ expectations and perceptions of the landscape. Part 3 (Appreciating the written word) focuses on calligraphy, especially its reception in history. Hui-Wen Lu investigates the prevailing belief in the authenticity of Wang Xianzhi’s 王獻之 (344–386) “Baomuzhi” 保母志 up to the eighteenth century and interprets it as a twelfth-century attempt to rectify the contemporary craze for the “Lantingxu” 蘭亭序. Patricia Buckley Ebrey’s paper presents an eminent figure that is rather indifferent to calligraphic aesthetics. Her analysis of Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) colophons as a response to calligraphy expands our understanding of the social function of calligraphy beyond aesthetic appreciation. Part 4 (Cross-cultural transfers) reflects two directions of cultural exchange. Focusing on paintings of birds at basins, Jie Liu illustrates how this pictorial theme drew inspiration from Central Asian cultures, gained popularity during the Tang and Song dynasties, and then lost its appeal by the Qing. Yiwen Li looks in another direction: how Chinese-made objects were adapted and used in a different cultural context in Japan. She suggests that exchanges relating to sutra containers happened not just between the Song and Japan but also between the Liao and Japan via the Korean peninsula.

These eight papers explore not just “behind the scenes” but also “beyond the scenes” pictures, providing reflections on production procedures, compositional strategies, social contexts and historical reception of a selection of objects in visual and material cultures.

Despite the stimulating topics, readers might find the translations in this volume generally disappointing. Suffice it to list three categories of problems with a few examples:

- 1) It is not uncommon to find words or passages omitted in the translations, e.g. 平話 (p. 127), 春時, 亟, 而文未具 (p. 195), 恍然 (p. 231), 以使事 (p. 232). The absence of 永錫爾類 from the translation (p. 235) suggests a failure to identify this expression as an allusion to the *Shijing*.
- 2) We find mistranslations such as “the third piece has been recovered from the trash” for 一棄之他處 (one [of the aforementioned three pieces] has been abandoned in another place) on p. 195, “vary” for 無不同 (to have no difference) on p. 218, “grandson” for 來孫 (great-great-great-grandson) and “the night of the full moon in the eleventh month” for 臘月既望 (the night after the night of the full moon in the twelfth month) on p. 235.
- 3) Rather than staying true to the original texts, translators tend to provide summaries and/or explanatory paraphrases. In some cases, the disregard for the original diction and syntax results in a rephrasing that would hardly constitute a “translation” even in the most tolerant eye. The way in which the passage 至於心畫之妙, 刊勒尤精, 其凜然不可犯之色, 尚足以為激貪立懦之助 is worked into the translation (p. 234) is just one such case in hand. Among all the genres of texts dealt with in this volume, poetry suffers the most. On p. 160 we encounter another example of perplexing disregard for structure and diction of the original work.

Clearly, the focus of this volume is not on texts, and contributors mainly approach them for the sake of their content. In most cases, the aforementioned translation problems would not materially undermine the arguments, but sometimes a better translation and more respect for the original text would have been beneficial. For example, had Duan Xiaolin not applied Lee Hui-shu’s translation uncritically, the parallel structure of 兩峰插雲 (rendered as “twin peaks piercing the clouds”) and 三潭印月 (rendered as “three stupas and the reflected moon”) could have been brought out much more clearly and thus better support her argument regarding rearranging the order of the “ten views” (pp. 158–9). On another occasion, 磚作賈博士 (p. 53) and 砌匠人張卜 (p. 63) are rendered indiscriminately as “mason” Jia and “mason” Zhang. They were indeed both masons, but when neglecting the difference in their titles, we miss the opportunity to note the social and psychological mechanism behind the practice of imitating the intellectual world in the hierarchy of manual labourers.

In sum, the papers in this volume, richly referenced and generously illustrated, open up various avenues for the study of visual and material cultures. However, a closer and more precise rendering of primary texts would have been desirable.

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