The Promise and Peril of Things: Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China

By Wai-yee Li. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 362 pp. $140 (cloth), $35.00 (paper), $34.99 (eBook).

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Wai-yee Li's study looks closely at the tensions around the ownership, accumulation, and transmission of valuable things in the late Ming and early Qing, with a particular focus on objects highly esteemed by, or with deep personal and shared meaning for, male literati. It combines close readings of texts in multiple genres—fiction, drama, poetry, and occasional prose—with discussion of the wider sociocultural setting within which real objects changed hands and human lives were shaped by the trajectories of the things in question.

After an introduction, the book is divided into four longish chapters, each covering one major theme. "People and Things" examines how human actors related to things they owned, sought, and lost, as well as how people and things could be exchanged, literally and conceptually. Chapter 2, "Elegance and Vulgarity," starts from the categories of *ya* 雅 and *su* 俗 that defined many elite ideals of proper person–thing relationships and that grounded models of taste and proper consumption by which things and people were judged. "The Real and the Fake," the theme of the third chapter, was a ubiquitous but unstable dichotomy in the period, with fakes and other kinds of copy being a frequent worry but also an accepted part of the material legacy of the past, while those who created them were derided or celebrated, depending on context. The final chapter, "Lost and Found," examines the mediation of historical and personal memory through things, whether these were real and accessible or lost and preserved only in the mind and on the page—a mode that became particularly prominent following the fall of the Ming, as loyalists and others struggled with the trauma of dynastic loss and the paradoxes of survival.

The themes of the book permeate Ming-Qing literature and reward the sustained engagement with them here. The texts engaged with include both familiar ones such as *Jinping mei* and *Honglou meng* and a range of lesser-known poems, stories, and *biji* writings. The objects on which these texts hinge include many of the most valuable things that the elite prized in the Ming-Qing period: calligraphy, paintings, porcelain, jade, stationery, musical instruments, clothing, as well as a few more mundane and even perishable items such as foods and flowers. In that sense, the topic of the book is not "material culture" in full, but the subset of it that circulated as luxury goods or that took on heightened symbolic value in literary expression.

The ordinary things that form the infrastructure of daily life are thus largely unremarked upon in the sources the book draws on. Even when quotidian minutiae are inventoried, in a work like *Jinping mei*, they are usually markedly extravagant versions of necessities like clothing and furniture. By the same token, the analysis here is driven

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by what things do, and principally what people do with and about them, in written texts. Occasional mention is made, especially in Chapter 3, of the fact that for many Ming and Qing writers things had a force, sometimes a destiny, perhaps even a will and a mind of their own. However, Li's readings of texts and history do not forefront the agency of things, at least not beyond the confines of the diegetic worlds they inhabit. The book is thus an analysis of things *within literature*, rather than of material culture and of literature interacting with it. This distinguishes it from some other recent studies that consider how things, and people who did not write but who produced and otherwise interacted with things, could create new possibilities for themselves and for people. For example, the now well-studied interest in optics and *trompe-l'œil* visuality that spread from eighteenth century court culture, embodied *inter alia* in the description of Jia Baoyu's quarters in *Honglou meng*, can be seen as more than just a new topic of literary description (155–57, 209–11). New things (lenses, plate-glass mirrors) and new material techniques (single-point perspective, realist painting) made possible new modes of perception, presentation, representation, and misrepresentation, both visual and verbal. It would add a further layer of meaning to read some of the sources in light of how the historical or fictional things in them, and the real things in the world of their creators, helped bring them about.

Li's analysis instead traces the concepts named in her chapter titles to their origins in earlier periods of Chinese history, as far back as the Warring States—Chapters One, Two, and Three all open with etymological inquiries into the origins of their central keywords, each following the development of the terms up to the Ming. Li goes on to explore how the complexities of these ideas were worked out by Ming-Qing writers. For example, "real and fake," at first blush the most straightforward of these pairings, turns out in Chapter Three to be full of ambiguities: some spurious copies were authorized, or recognized *post facto*, by their putative creators. The same polarity, in history and fiction alike, applies to the human side: Li draws out the interplay of fake and genuine in both people and things in the *chuanqi* play *Yi peng xue* (*An Offering of Snow*) by Li Yù (ca. 1610–after 1667), in which people take one another's place in a tragic sequence of events set off by the infamous rapacity and corruption of Yan Song (1480–1565) and his son Shifan (d. 1565), whose pursuit of a jade cup leads to several deaths—including, eventually, his own (183–91).

An even more intricate plot links a larger cast of objects and people in *Yizhong yuan* (*Ideal Matches)*, by the better-known and unrelated Li Yu (1610–1680). Two literati men (Chen Jiru and Dong Qichang) are paired with two courtesan artists (Yang Yunyou and Lin Tiansu) who are their matches because of, not despite, their careers as forgers of the two men's work. But the couples can be united only after a series of maskings and unmaskings that sublimate, or even sublate, tensions over the self-interested economic logic of the fake and turn it into a form of genuine self-expression. Li notes that in this dramatized context, as in many others, the act of faking does not become a moral or political issue (191–209).

The book as a whole offers a wealth of examples and close readings, though some may be harder to follow for those not immersed in the sources (portions on *Jinping mei* and *Honglou meng*, in particular, may be opaque to readers unfamiliar with these novels). The book is well-produced by Columbia University Press, reading smoothly and without typographical errors. One limitation is in the printing of Chinese characters, which appear sparingly in the main text (for terms discussed but not for proper names, which are thus difficult to identify without access to the sources), systematically in the bibliography, and not at all in the index.

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Li has published extensively in both English and Chinese on collecting and connoisseurship in the Ming-Qing period and on the literature of the time more broadly. This volume brings the two together seamlessly, framed by questions about how the human and the material interacted and how things still acted as sources of meaning even when they outlasted the world to which they belonged (for instance the vanished Ming, in early Qing memory) or when they themselves were gone, surviving only in memory or in writing.

The Cambridge Economic History of China. Volume II: 1800 to the Present

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This volume of *The Cambridge Economic History of China* covers roughly the last 200 years—a huge undertaking, although still smaller than the task of the first volume (which covers everything before 1800). Roughly two-thirds of the volume covers the period 1800–1949; most of the last third covers the Maoist period, although two essays are primarily concerned with events since 1978. Like all the Cambridge Histories, it is primarily a reference work, prioritizing synthetic overviews of what we know about various topics over strikingly new interpretations based directly on primary sources, or a single consistent interpretation spanning all the chapters. As such, it will probably be most useful to people seeking a general orientation to the topics covered: faculty and graduate students focused primarily on some other time and/or place, or on some different aspect of late imperial and modern Chinese history. Meanwhile, the editorial choices about what to cover and how are useful for thinking about the state of Chinese economic history as a sub-field: a sub-field which (like economic history generally) has since the "cultural turn" of the 1980s periodically been proclaimed to be disappearing. In fact, the field's productivity has been so great as to make it hard to cover, even in twenty-one substantial essays.

The editors mostly opted for thematic essays, with a few (mostly post-1949) chronological ones. The volume includes very little on what we might call the penumbra of economic history: topics such as environment, labor history, and demography and migration that have obvious, material, links to economic activity. The only two chapters on specific sectors of the economy are a very helpful chapter on pre-1949 agriculture (by Debin Ma and Peng Kaixiang) and another good one on industry, including both handicrafts and mechanized production, by Linda Grove and Tōru Kubo; there is none on any specific sector—such as steel, housing, or textiles—for the period

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