

The Culture of Language in Ming China: Sound, Script, and the Redefinition of Boundaries of Knowledge. Nathan Vedal.

New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. x + 322 pp. \$140.

Scholars in Chinese studies tend to think of the early modern study of language in China as primarily the purview of the evidentiary scholars of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), whose ideas about language were rooted in minute observation of the historical use of language in very early texts. It is common to view the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as a wasteland of linguistic thought. Nathan Vedal's *The Culture of Language in Ming China* offers a much-needed corrective to this ossified thinking. He shows that the study of language flourished in the Ming through a set of epistemological frameworks disparaged, and then eventually largely forgotten, by the Qing philologists whose work is now so influential.

Vedal begins his book by laying out dominant trends in Ming language study, noting that a central idea in Ming discourse was the “self-so 自然” nature of language; the fundamental rules of language and phonetics emerge from the nature of the universe and exist outside of local and culturally specific instantiations. Scholars linked language with other self-so concepts such as cosmology, music, and numbers. Evidence for such connections was derived in part from the connections between sound, *qi*, and mathematical calculations used to tune instruments. This infusion of mathematical and cosmological thinking into linguistic study led to several important ideas about phonology: there were a finite number of possible sounds in language and not all were present in Chinese. Some scholars thus attempted to develop universal systems of phonetic representation that abstracted away from the *fanqie* 反切 system, in which sound is represented by two characters indicating initial and final sounds, using numbers and phonographic scripts such as Sanskrit (creating a link between philology and Buddhism that many scholars in the Qing found distasteful).

Written Chinese, which unlike phonographic scripts directly represented meaning, presented another set of challenges. For thinkers influenced by Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) “Learning of the Mind,” which focused on moral cultivation via internal reflection, Chinese characters were imbued with rich meaning. Wei Jiao (1483–1543) argued that characters offered a valuable window into the minds of the sages who created them. Understanding characters facilitated the cultivation of morality, and the key to this understanding could be found in the components that composed archaic forms of characters.

Vedal continues by examining the relationship between language and literary culture. Ming opera formed one locus for linguistic debate; appreciation of opera was difficult given regional differences in pronunciation and how important rhyme was to operatic aesthetics. Thus, arguments for using contemporary or historical dialects as a universal pronunciation became common. Beyond opera, Ming scholars found linguistic study valuable in understanding literature more broadly, leading to an efflorescence of scholars engaging in literary study of the classics.

Vedal concludes his book in the Qing by exploring the continued development of Ming philological approaches and showing how emerging intellectual lineages prioritized evidentiary scholarship. Contrary to the common view, methods popular in the Ming did not die out in the Qing but instead continued alongside other approaches. While the narrower approach of centering linguistic study on important historical texts was more popular, many scholars remained interested in cosmological arguments. Yet official compendia often made Ming approaches hard to find: the imperially sponsored *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* was quite influential in the effacement of Ming linguistic study, and the scholars who produced its annotated catalogue disparaged Ming philology.

Given the richness and complexity of Ming linguistic thought, it leaves the reader wondering why many view the Ming as an era of stagnation. Vedal counters this dominant view by moving us away from the idea that Ming scholarship was merely “philosophical speculation in pursuit of moral improvement” to be contrasted with the Qing “philological study of texts and language” (217). He instead argues that the shift should be understood as a change in the evidentiary basis of philological study: for Ming scholars, language obeyed rules of cosmological significance, while Qing evidentiary scholars depended on historical analysis. In all, Vedal’s book provides a compelling view into an under-studied and unjustly sullied aspect of Ming intellectual culture that will be of interest to anyone working in Chinese studies or the history of linguistics and philology in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

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Japan on the Jesuit Stage: Transmissions, Receptions, and Regional Contexts.
Haruka Oba, Akihiko Watanabe, and Florian Schaffenrath.
Jesuit Studies 34. Leiden: Brill, 2022. viii + 342 pp. \$139.

This collection of essays, edited by Haruka Oba, Akihiko Watanabe, and Florian Schaffenrath, offers a new, multifaceted view into studies of *Kulturkontakt* (cultural contact) between Europe and Japan, with particular emphasis on Neo-Latin drama performed in Jesuit schools. The contributions originate from a conference which took place in Vienna, Austria in 2018. Building upon the work of Adrian Hsia and Ruprecht Wimmer’s *Mission und Theater: Japan und China auf den Bühnen der Gesellschaft Jesu* (2005), which opened avenues for philologically deeper and more geographically diverse studies of Jesuit plays about Japan, the scholars in this volume deliver three sets of interventions: first, further elucidation of broad questions on early modern European-Japanese interactions, such as news transmission, or the meanings of martyrdom; second, further clarity on the representation of Japan on Jesuit stages within particular national contexts—e.g., France, the Netherlands, Croatia, and