

second by Seth Swanner (on nonhuman voices in *Macbeth*). Beckjord's chapter on Oviedo's description of Nicaragua is welcome and, building beyond Antonello Gerbi's foundational *Nature in the New World* (1975, trans. 1985), shows the complexity of Oviedo's self-aware practices. McFarland's study of *The Suicide of Saul* and *The Conversion of Paul*, paintings in which "the landscape itself becomes almost a protagonist" (160), such that the "immensity of the settings . . . dwarfs the subjects" (161), is carefully argued and teeming with eco-lessons: "The mountains loom over the human beings until they seem crushed by the power of a God who seems not to care about the puny dramas of these pitiful protagonists" (169). Tiffany's chapter on Shakespeare's savage trees pushes past a certain notion that Shakespeare's woodlands might be "benevolent places" to realign them more with the "threatening woods of European folk tales and medieval romance" (197), a thought to be set aside Vin Nardizzi's *Wooden Os*.

For the most part, *Reading the Natural World* is not—and does not claim to be—a volume in urgent dialogue with contemporary ecocriticism, and the editor's passing comment that one chapter takes up the "*relatively recent* field of animal studies" (xvi, emphasis mine) indeed suggests just such a distance from present theoretical debates. This distance in no way minimizes the interest and importance of the contributions, however, all of which shed new bright light on the literary and artistic works they study.

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Religion and Prison Art in Ming China (1368–1644): Creative Environment, Creative Subjects. Ying Zhang.

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"Clouds swooping across the sky, wind blowing, dirt spiraling. . . . The minister walked over and turned himself in." But just three days later, "A piece of paper arrives, restoring the minister the next day. Just like that, Heaven reverses the gust" (2). Ying Zhang's *Religion and Prison Art in Ming China* begins with this poem, written by an imprisoned official in 1638 when his senior colleague, the Minister of Punishments, was also thrown in prison for displeasing the emperor. In many ways, this poem is highly typical of literati art—its oblique commentary on contemporary events, its use of "moral meteorology" to draw correspondences between celestial phenomena, like weather, and human events, like imperial censure. But in other ways, it was the product of an exceptional context—the seemingly arbitrary imprisonment and then release of an otherwise powerful figure.

A political historian by training, Zhang reminds us that "imprisonment was a much more common phenomenon among Ming officials than we think" (7), but does not

dwell on the political or sociological aspects of imprisonment. Instead, *Religion and Prison Art* uses this exceptional context—and the limitations it placed on creators—to observe the embeddedness of art and religious observance within literati life. Zhang builds on a range of prior scholarship to argue that close connections between areas as distinct as visual art, music, religion, and medicine transcended not only modern disciplines and the traditional parsing of Chinese religion into Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, but also analytical frameworks like visual or material culture. Zhang chooses to analyze “the creative process of life rather than the product of this process”—a framework she follows her early modern informants in terming the “art of living” (9).

The format of this short study is an experiment, alternating between empirical research and literature review. Zhang intends this as an exercise in defamiliarizing the familiar, not as comprehensive coverage of either the Ming prison or the interplay between religion and art. Part 1 begins with a chapter on the use of the calendar in prison poetry, including the events of the agricultural, social, and personal calendar. Zhang showcases how the environment of the prison led writers to consider both the regularity of the seasons and their own separateness as prisoners from the usual social and ritual happenings that accompanied this cycle. A literature review, “The Self in Nature, Ritual, and Poetry,” follows in the second chapter. Part 2 turns to the “art of living.” Chapter 3 considers how imprisoned elites reflected on forms of self-cultivation that were now less accessible to them, including zither music, garden culture, and visual art. The final chapter returns to the central point of the volume: “the understanding of the cosmos as creative and constantly changing requires the human subject to be creative and grounded in life” (81). Here, Zhang reflects on how members of the elite used particular aspects of the art of living to distinguish themselves from less cultivated individuals, even as they theorized these practices as cosmically interconnected.

Zhang’s analytical framework is both powerful and convincing. She shows that the unfamiliar context of the prison and the arbitrary and uncertain nature of imprisonment led Ming officials to reconsider their places in the cosmos. This sort of self-cultivation and self-realization were core to elite conceptions of religion, art, and indeed life. The setting of prison, by limiting officials’ mundane experience, engendered further reflection on how they were both embedded in and transcended the rhythms of time and the experience of the material world. There are several paradoxes that remain unresolved: how did literati reconcile the premise of universal patterns with the discrete and specific practices of self-cultivation; how did they reconcile the distinctiveness of elite taste with the universality of cosmic principles? The experimental format is a mixed success, yielding insights but lacking an overarching sense of structure. Ultimately, this short, insightful book is a provocation rather than the last word on the subject. I hope readers will respond with further thought on both the Ming prison and the broader intellectual context of art and religion in early modern China.

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