

confusion in these chapters suggests a possibly bizarre problem with this volume overall: It will at certain points be too elemental to academic readers and at others too complex for the uninitiated.

This book has caught on in a big way with the wider public, acquiring far more reviews than your average academic book. What can be the causes of such success? Aside from an active agent and a motivated trade press, part of the answer is the mixture of explanations of common events and trends in modern Chinese history aimed at educated non-specialists. The fact that the author is Chinese herself and a professor at Yale certainly enhance the appeal to that audience. I would argue, though, that a major share of the attraction in the wider educated community of readers is what has become known as “Orientalism,” a term I personally despise but which seems to capture the exoticization of all things intellectually Chinese (and Japanese, by the way). Those of us who have spent the lion’s share of our lives working with the Chinese language have long ago overcome this infatuation, but for those who see Chinese as infinitely complicated and a wonder to behold, a book like Tsu’s poses as simultaneously authoritative and explanatory.

The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775

By Sophie Volpp. *Premodern East Asia New Horizons*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. x + 245 pp. \$140.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper), \$34.99 (eBook)

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In her second monograph, *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775*, Sophie Volpp focuses on the objects depicted in late imperial Chinese fiction, shedding new light on the material turn in the study of Chinese literature since the 1990s and arguing for an alternative way of approaching these objects that goes beyond locating their historical counterparts. If the keyword for her first book, *Worldly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China*, was “theatricality,” the keyword for *The Substance of Fiction* is “fictionality,” which she holds in a significant, if not superior, position to argue against the myth that there exists a historical condition prior to the creation of a fictional world. Focusing on the often-overlooked inconsistencies in the descriptions of the same objects, Volpp argues for the importance of readers’ imagination and engagement in bridging the gaps between fictionality and the material world, which will eventually lead to an understanding of the illusory nature of not only the literary texts but also our quotidian existence.

Each chapter of the book discusses one canonical text that has been widely used in classrooms, such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* 金瓶梅, Ling Mengchu’s (凌濛初) vernacular fiction, Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 story of Du Shiniang 杜十娘, Li Yu’s 李漁 short story “A Tower for the Summer Heat” 夏宜樓 and finally *The Story of*

the Stone 紅樓夢—all of which contain elaborate depictions of material objects. Engaging in both historical research and literary analysis, Volpp endeavors to initiate conversations with existing scholarship by presenting factual evidence and new angles for reading the source materials. In her last chapter on *The Story of the Stone* and the Qianlong Emperor's studio (*Juanqinzhai* 倦勤齋), Volpp states that the panoramic paintings (*tongjing hua* 通景畫) in *Juanqinzhai* cannot be regarded as exact historical counterparts to the illusory paintings depicted in *The Story of the Stone*. She specifically casts doubt on Kristina Kleutghen's statements and argues that the *tongjing hua* paintings probably did not simply follow the tradition of *trompe l'oeil*, which creates illusion by depicting objects as if they were three-dimensional, but more likely adopted a specific Italian painting style called *quadratura*, which extends the existing architecture into an imaginary space and aims to create an illusion of recession. In *Juanqinzhai*, the painted partitions, railings, lattices, and windows are mirror images of the actual architectural elements. The point of putting those paintings on the walls was not so much to fool the eye into considering them to be real, but to place them in parallel with the real architecture to create a pair to be read simultaneously. Volpp also mentions that the display of multiple identical copies of the paintings in the Forbidden City reduces court viewers' chance of being fooled. Therefore, contrary to previous interpretations, the experience of Grannie Liu 劉姥姥 from *The Story of the Stone* encountering a life size painting of a beautiful woman on the wall is not applicable to the discussion of imperial design, because Grannie Liu is intended to be a rustic character who is not accustomed to this kind of painting.

We can spot a strong continuity between this book and Volpp's previous book on theatricality, especially in the last two chapters on *The Story of the Stone*, when she mentions the distinction between naïve viewers and sophisticated viewers. According to her discussion of theatricality, a sophisticated viewer should be able to recognize the illusory nature of performance while at the same time willingly engaging with the spectacle to enjoy the illusion. Discussion of the borderline experience between the real and the illusion treasured by the late imperial Chinese elite enables her to pay attention to the paired installation of *tongjing hua* paintings and the actual architecture in *Juanqinzhai*. Considering the fact that the emperor's seat was placed right in the middle of the room with one side facing the illusory painting and the other side facing the real architecture, Volpp argues that what the emperor enjoyed was not being fooled by the painting, as Kleutghen previously claimed, but intentionally holding the real and the illusory in tension, staying in "a state of suspension between investment in illusion and disinvestment from it" (p. 165). In Volpp's opinion, these aesthetic practices, whether watching theatrical performances or viewing images in the mirror and in the painting, all have the same goal of reaching an in-depth understanding of the illusory nature of the entire world, which ties back to the key idea of fictionality in all these literary texts.

Volpp's argument is solidly based on the restoration of the historical context of late imperial China. To determine the connection between *quadratura* and Qing-Dynasty China, she not only teases out the *quadratura* training background of European painters like Gherardini and Castiglione, who ended up serving the Qing emperors, but also quotes both a missionary's letter mentioning the Beitang 北堂 Church and Chinese literati's writings on the Nantang 南堂 Church, both located in Beijing, to present eighteenth-century Chinese viewers' first-hand experience with *quadratura* paintings. In addition, the photos of *Juanqinzhai* inserted in the book provide convincing visual evidence to support her arguments about the adoption of *quadratura* style in the imperial context, particularly the images of the two doors with framed plate-glass mirrors and

the ones taken from unique angles on the second floor of *Juanqinzhai* which is inaccessible to the general public. Incorporating both rare textual and visual materials, Volpp successfully grounds her literary analysis in historical research, so as to go further in viewing historical exemplars from the perspective of fiction and imagination.

Volpp also constantly draws our attention to the misunderstandings caused by English translations of these Chinese texts. When discussing the robe that the protagonist Ximen Qing 西門慶 wears in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, she mentions that the translation by David Tod Roy as “flying fish-python robe” is problematic. A more accurate translation would be “a flying fish, or perhaps even a python robe” (p. 33), which implies Ximen’s more severe arrogance. In Du Shiniang’s story, the conventional translation of “jewel box” might lead readers to consider the box to be tiny, but Volpp clarifies that it should be much larger and multilayered based on both detailed descriptions in the texts and historical sources. In the case of *The Story of the Stone*, Volpp points out that David Hawkes’s translations of Grannie Liu’s reactions to her mirrored image and the illusory painting on the wall are misleading. In the first case, Hawkes’s translation gives the impression that Grannie Liu comes to understand that there is a mirror but not a real person standing before her by reaching out her hand to touch it, whereas the original text states the opposite: Grannie Liu conceptually realizes it is a mirror before she touches the surface. In the second case, when realizing the beauty in front of her is not real but a painting, instead of “turning from it with a sigh and a shake of her head,” as Hawkes translates, Volpp indicates that a more literal translation should read “she nodded her head and sighed twice” (p. 148), which refers to the idiom “the rocks nod their heads” and implies a moment of enlightenment. These two cases completely change our assumptions about rustic viewers like Grannie Liu’s encounter with new technologies such as the mirror or *tongjing hua* paintings, as the original text renders these viewers’ response much more sophisticated than previously thought. Through close reading of the Chinese text, Volpp challenges modern readers’ habitual ways of thinking and offers innovative interpretations.

One key argument Volpp makes concerning the relationship between literary objects and fiction is that these objects provide space for experimenting with techniques of narration and often guide our reading of the texts through their material properties. For example, the large and seemingly useless shell in Ling Mengchu’s story unexpectedly contains valuable pearls, indicating that readers are only able to apprehend a partial reality interior to the text. For Du Shiniang’s story, Volpp demonstrates how the physical structure of the jewel box and its problematic naming teach us how to read the narrative: on the one hand, the sequential unveiling of each drawer of the box containing jewels of ascending value advances the story by raising the readers’ expectations and evaluation of Du; on the other hand, the historically undetermined naming and interchangeable usage of the box for holding jewels and for storing documents deem the metaphorical mapping of courtesan and box “both agglutinated and imprecise” (p. 73). For Li Yu’s story featuring the telescope, Volpp contends that the use of a monocular telescope makes possible the story’s narration of a single character’s extended and uninterrupted train of thought and expression of subjective experience. As for *The Story of the Stone*, both the double-sided plate glass mirror and the *tongjing hua* paintings on the walls provide a dynamic experience of lingering between the reality and the illusion, eventually revealing “the illusory quality of the everyday world” (p. 142). These analyses highlight the intricate constructions of late imperial Chinese narrative literature and call for in-depth investigations of the material properties and changing usages of the objects highlighted in the texts.

By emphasizing the central position of fictionality, particularly in relation to the study of material culture, Volpp's study approaches, or in a sense returns to, the study of literature as treating texts as self-contained creations, as opposed to viewing them as merely providing historical evidence or cultural contexts. Her successful reexamination of canonical literary texts demonstrates the possibility of yielding exciting findings even in frequently discussed fields, not only by engaging in dialogue with previous scholarship but also through meticulous observations guided by new perspectives.

A New History of the Song Dynasty

La dynastie des Song

By Christian Lamouroux. *Histoire générale de la Chine (960–1279)*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2022. 816pp. 36 colored illustrations, 25 maps, chronology, bibliography, index. €35.00

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With *La dynastie des Song*—the culmination of over three decades of research on the Song dynasty—Christian Lamouroux of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris (EHESS), has written a comprehensive, meticulous, and authoritative history of the dynasty. A prime example of the unique French genre of *haute vulgarisation*—high-level popularization—this book achieves a major miracle: while the informed public will discover in its pages a reliable, accessible introduction to the dynasty, the professional historian will find on these same pages sharp summaries of top scholarship in the field, new insights into old arguments, and fascinating perspectives that arise from Lamouroux's unique juxtapositions of issues and sources. One could argue that *La dynastie des Song* develops the full potential, first seen in the pioneering work of Étienne Balazs (1905–1963) and Herbert Franke (1914–2011), for a distinctive European approach to Song studies. In short, *La dynastie des Song* is at the same time the best one-volume, general history of Song in any language and also a work of major scholarly importance that every serious student of Chinese history should study carefully. As such, given the international community of sinologists' ever dwindling ability to read French, the book is a prime candidate for translation into both English and Chinese.

Lamouroux's book constitutes the fourth volume to appear in the projected ten-volume *Histoire générale de la Chine* under the direction of Damien Chaussende.¹ Whether intentionally or not, this title echoes that of the monumental *Histoire générale de la Chine ou annales de cet empire traduites du*

¹In addition to *La dynastie des Song*, the series to date includes *Les dynasties Qin et Han* by Marianne Bujard and Michèle Pirazzoli-terSerstevens (2017), *La république de Chine* by Xavier Paulès (2019), and *La*