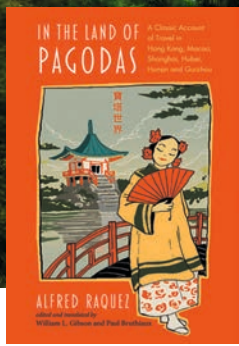


The Faces of the Unknown: A Frenchman's Adventures in Late Imperial China

Aliz Horvath



In the Land of Pagodas: A Classic Account of Travel in Hong Kong, Macao, Shanghai, Hubei, Hunan and Guizhou

Alfred Raquez. 2017. Edited and translated
by William L. Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux

Copenhagen: NIAS Press
ISBN 9788776942014

Multifaceted – this is perhaps the first word that may come to mind upon reading through Alfred Raquez's (or, using his real name, Joseph Gervais) account on his travels around China during the last years of the 19th century. The book, translated and edited exquisitely by William Gibson and Paul Bruthiaux, provides a curious mixture of genres, impressions, and experiences that may be of interest to a broad audience. The term 'complexity', however, does not only characterize the text, but can be used to describe the author as well who, according to the translators' introduction, possessed an equally complicated background.

The material can be situated in the abundant range of personal accounts created by previous foreign travelers, such as those produced by Marco Polo in the medieval period or Ennin who had penned a multi-year diary in as early as the 9th century. These works all provide interesting insights into the current state of China, but unlike most cases, where the authors' personal circumstances are fairly clear (Ennin, for example, was initially part of a diplomatic envoy and intended to gain more in-depth knowledge on Buddhism), Raquez seems more of a mystery, due to the lack of information regarding his status and the purpose of his travel to Asia.

Despite the fog around the author's persona, the tone of his book consistently

represents a French perspective, which itself is relatively rare in relevant source materials. This approach, accompanied by his numerous references to certain foreigners who served in China in various capacities and his often vivid criticism of other nations, fits organically into the existing scholarship in multiple ways. More specifically, it can enrich the field of microhistorical research produced by, for example, Jonathan Spence, whose work, *To Change China: Western Advisers in China* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), covers the operations of influential figures (such as Inspector General Sir Robert Hart) who are also mentioned by Raquez, demonstrating his privileged status as an individual with special connections. His distinctly French voice, on the other hand, can be juxtaposed with the available studies on the operations of 'Westerners' in late-imperial China, represented by scholars, such as James Hevia, whose major contribution, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in 19th Century China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), explores Western colonial endeavors in Asia through specifically British lens, thus shedding light on the distinction between the intentions and practices of different countries. Raquez's account reinforces the idea of heterogeneity, while also showing examples of unexpected collaborations between certain Chinese (or 'Celestial', as he calls them) and

foreign groups, whose mutual interests pushed them on the same 'side'. In this sense, Raquez's *In the Land of Pagodas* unequivocally adds to our understanding of the complexities and the chaotic nature of China's late 19th century history that cannot be characterized simply through the 'China vs the West' binary.

This peculiar point of view is accompanied by an interesting intertwinement of various styles which may perhaps bring us closer to the author's persona. As I mentioned earlier, the book does not include precise information on Raquez's identity, but the rapid shifts between genres, occasionally even within a single paragraph, demonstrates the different 'masks' that he takes on throughout the story. Within the framework of a diary-type structure, Raquez appears in at least three distinct roles which, I believe, are directly related to the stylistic variety of his work: as a tourist, he lists a variety of practical information for future travelers while attracting the reader's attention to the wonders he experiences by providing vivid and almost literary-style descriptions about his urban impressions, the sequence of banquets he attends, and the changing scenery around him. In the course of his kaleidoscopic adventures, the only constant element is the sight of pagodas that he never neglects to mention. In Raquez's mind, these buildings seem to be the symbols of China's

old, traditional, or even authentic side amidst all the novelties and drastic changes that their encounters with foreigners entailed – this recurring motif may be the underlying reason behind the author's choice regarding the book's title.

Furthermore, it is also of importance to point out that Raquez makes great efforts to delineate the nature of French presence in China through the examples of mining, education, politics, etc., which clearly exceed the boundaries of a simple travel guide and make him also a sort of reporter or even 'intelligence agent' who informs his compatriots about future possibilities for France to strengthen its position in the region.

Finally, his references to other primary materials and his critical attitude towards their merit (or the lack of it), the abundance of excerpts from journals and legal documents, numerous photographs, and his precise observations on local customs seem to testify his desire to consider his experience through scholarly lens as well, thus adding another layer to his account.

In scholarly works, there is a tendency to have a relatively ambiguous attitude towards diary-type materials due to their highly subjective nature that may cast doubt on their reliability as primary sources. In the present case, however, the large number of supplementary details, quotes, and translations provided by Raquez, as well as the foreword, written by a Chinese individual, appear to serve as means to enhance the credibility of the material. With all this in mind, we might consider this book a hybrid, 'in-between' work that tells us 'Raquez's truth' through the intertwinement of original texts and the author's personal experience.

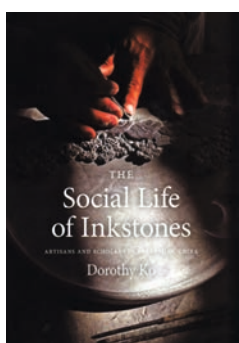
In terms of significance, the text can be interesting not only to China scholars but also to those focusing on European (especially French) history and international relations, since the book provides insights into both the French perception of China and the Chinese view of Westerners, thus serving as a mirror for all parties to face their own realities.

Ultimately, as I mentioned earlier, the quality of the translation is excellent and includes an abundance of well-researched footnotes as well, which certainly facilitate the understanding of Raquez's French references, making it easier for the reader to follow the rich, but at times confusing, narration without major difficulties. The text mentions that the original edition contained an addenda section, but the current version uses footnotes instead both in the case of Raquez's remarks and the additions provided by the translators. Although Raquez's name is included in the relevant notes in square brackets, perhaps a clearer distinction between the original and the later contributions or a note in the introduction about the reasons behind the editors' typographical choices would be helpful. Otherwise, the book can serve not only as a novel and useful material for a broad audience, but also as a highly entertaining read for anyone interested in foreign encounters in the late 19th century.

Aliz Horvath University of Chicago

The Social Life of Inkstones

Simon Wickhamsmith



The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China

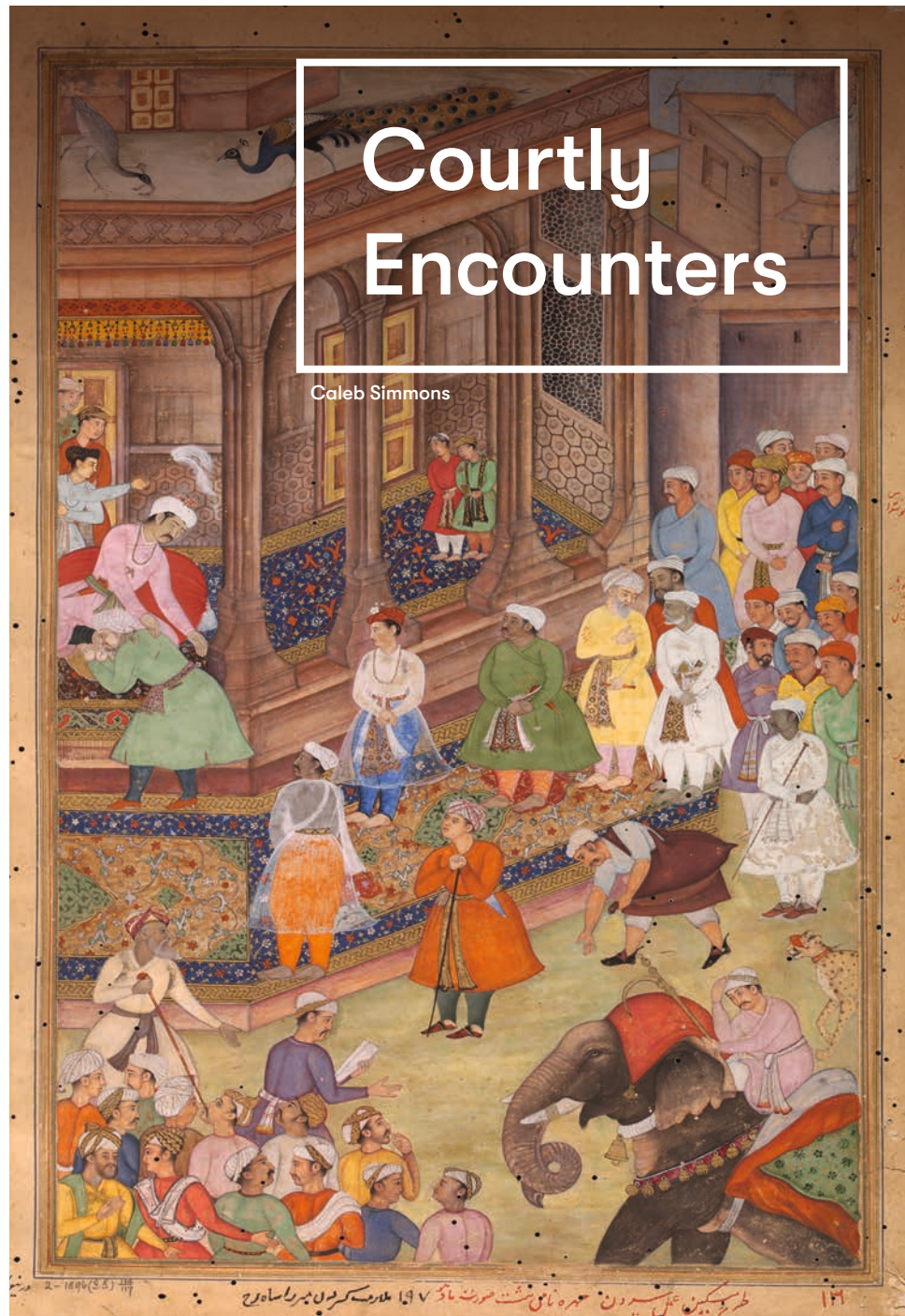
Dorothy Ko. 2017

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When Manchu forces from the northeast conquered the Ming Empire in 1644, they, having had a script for writing their own language for less than 50 years, suddenly became the rulers of a culture whose written legacy stretched back more than 2000 years. The practical concerns of government, as the Empire developed and its need for administrative efficiency and cultural power grew, meant that the rulers felt the need to have access to, and a benign control over, the material and intellectual expression of their people.

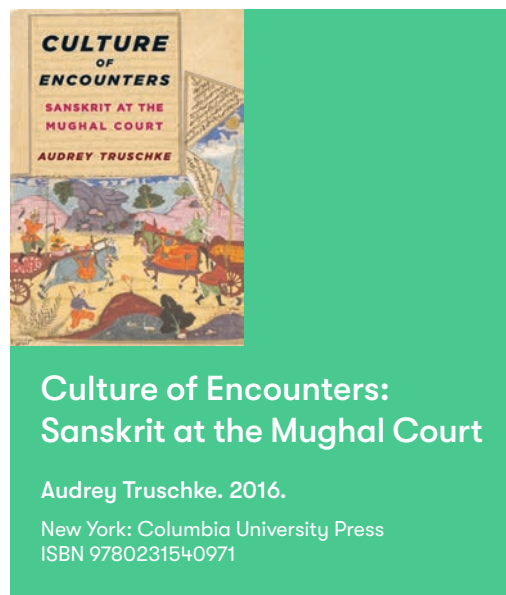
Dorothy Ko's engrossing new book, while clearly showing how 'the Qing leaders expressed their interests in artistry and technology by being attentive to the making of each individual product' (p. 11; italics in the original), reveals more importantly the social import of creating, receiving and appreciating the inkstone, in which rested, ready for use, the vital fluid of administration and literary culture. The 'social life' of the inkstone indeed, is its cultural capital: it is noticeable how little of Ko's book is actually devoted to its use in the actual process of writing, and how central are its aesthetic and tactile qualities.

During the first 150 years, during the reigns of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Emperors, the Palace workshops were the tastemakers and focal points of inkstone appreciation, and it was against the subtle artistry and technical design of the workshops' products that the carving of inkstones was judged, and collections assembled. Ko begins her book with an extensive and intricate tour of the



Courtly Encounters

Caleb Simmons



Culture of Encounters is a groundbreaking study of Sanskrit in the Mughal Court from 1560-1660 CE. In this book, Audrey Truschke argues that ‘the Mughal imperium ... was defined largely by repeated engagements with Sanskrit thinkers, texts, and ideas’ (p. 2) that embedded the court in the ‘intellectual landscape of South Asia’ (p. 4). The author uses the information to problematize our received narrative of Indian history, particularly related to the Mughals, and its implication on contemporary politics in the subcontinent. One of the things that sets this book apart is the author’s command over both Persian and Sanskrit, a rare and enviable quality, that allows her to expertly examine literature across Islamic, Jain, and Brahmin traditions. The work is truly novel, impeccably researched, and very well written. It will inevitably have great influence in the field and is a ‘must-read’ for historians and

religious studies scholars working on early modern, modern, and contemporary India. This book is extremely rich and is important on many levels, but for the purposes of this review I will limit my discussion of *Culture of Encounters* to sovereignty, a thread that runs through the entire book.

Legitimation theory and sovereignty

Truschke’s discussion of sovereignty begins from a critique of legitimation theory in her introduction. Following Sheldon Pollock (*Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) and Daud Ali (*Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), the author highlights the simplistic perspective of old models of legitimation theory and argues for a more nuanced understanding of the function and role of courtly aesthetic culture in the imperial project. She pushes this forward by adopting Rodney Baker’s work and arguing for a form of ‘inward-turning’ legitimation that sought to define the Mughal ‘unique political self’ (p. 19). Interestingly, she argues that in this unique political self ‘the Mughals also wished to see themselves as Indian kings and pursued this desire by appropriating a culture deeply grounded in South Asia’s pre-Islamic past’ (p. 19).

While this is certainly undeniable and richly demonstrated throughout the volume, my interest in political theology in early modern India led me to wonder how this relates to broader issues of sovereignty in premodern India. I kept thinking that instead of once again highlighting the perils of the oft-critiqued legitimation theory, it could have been productive and interesting to connect this material with work on the nature of sovereignty, e.g. Giorgio Agamben’s *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) or Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (ed. and trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and *The Concept of the Political* (ed. and trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Sovereignty in the Mughal court

A specific example of where this could have been helpful is in the third chapter when Truschke turns her attention to the construction of sovereignty in Persian renderings of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. This chapter is perhaps the most intriguing of the entire work as the author explores the multiple valences between Islamicate and Sanskrit traditions in the texts and the processes of translation. Particularly interesting is the way the author expertly navigates between politics and aesthetics in order to show how the divide is arbitrary and meaningless in this case. She argues instead that the Persian *Mahābhārata* tradition sought to redefine sovereignty

by articulating a history of kingship and by forming a new Indo-Persianate aesthetic. The chapter is thoroughly convincing in its argumentation against legitimation theory and its call to consider the role of knowledge systems and aesthetics in the construction of imperial power; however, in this discussion the implications of these translations on Indian political theology was perhaps downplayed a little too much in order to emphasize the aesthetic literary interactions. Specifically, I am thinking about the discussion of Abū al-Fazl’s preface to the *Razmnāmah* (though to be fair the author returns to this subject in brief repeatedly, including a great discussion in Chapter 6, p. 218). Akbar’s struggles to seize authority from the ulama and the declaration of the king’s authority in al-Fazl’s preface would have been an interesting place to discuss sovereignty and the role of aesthetics in the state of exception. This could have also set the stage for the fourth chapter in which Akbar’s ‘universal kingship’ and ‘comprehensive sovereignty’ were discussed (p. 143).

While the book was overwhelmingly convincing in its overall goals, this reviewer was left with many questions regarding sovereignty in the Mughal court: What are we to make of sovereignty and the Mughal unique political self as ‘Indian kings ... deeply grounded in South Asia’s pre-Islamic past’ in the interaction of Persian and Sanskrit courtly cultures? What implications does this have for our understanding of sovereignty in Indian kingship more broadly?

The author deftly shows that the interactions between the Sanskrit and Persian literary traditions was dynamic, but it was clearly also a generative one beyond its aesthetic innovations, and limiting the discussion of sovereignty to legitimation theory brings up larger questions related to political theology and sovereignty within India that are left unaddressed. One can hardly fault the author for not treading into these discussions further given the robust manner with which she navigates so many difficult academic terrains within the book. Perhaps it will even encourage those of us interested in sovereignty and political theology to look more closely at the Mughals in the future.

Conclusion

In that regard, I highly recommend *Culture of Encounters* as not only an innovative study of Mughal courtly aesthetic culture but also for its ability to foster a greater interest in questions of the construction of sovereignty and political theology in early modern India. Libraries at any institution of higher education need to have this book on its shelves. It would be ideal reading for a graduate course on modern Indian history, religion in South Asia, Islamic history, and/or Indian Islam (and surely many others). It is probably too advanced for most undergraduate students; though it is well-written enough for bright, engaged students in upper division seminars.

Caleb Simmons University of Arizona

workshops through the first three imperial reigns, including an account of the master-craftsman and designer Liu Yuan. This material on how the Empire contributed to the aestheticization of the inkstone, its reframing as an objet d’art, elegantly contextualizes the remainder of the book. Ko’s analysis of Liu’s contribution to what she suggests as being a secondary reframing, of the dragon as a traditional symbol of imperial power as is one of the book’s art historical highlights. From the Imperial Palace, the book moves first to the Yellow Hill villages in Zhaoqing, Guangdong province, where the precious Duan stone were mined and carved. Perhaps this book is actually more about the Duan stone than about any product made from it, for it is the color and the weight and the luster of the stone which gives it the quality which rendered the inkstones so desirable to collectors. As with a sculptor of marble or wood, the importance to a carver of inkstones of sourcing just the right stone, of creatively

envisioning its application, is vital to the refinement of the finished work, and Ko’s treatment of the mines around Yellow Hill is exemplary in showing both how the physical landscape produced stones, and also how the stonecarvers themselves developed precision tools with which to extract and subsequently carve the stones. The two chapters which concentrate on the carvers of inkstones emphasize the importance of skill even over gender. Gu Erniang, who functions as the central character of this story, was the leading carver of inkstones in her time, but also an entrepreneur and designer who, to use Ko’s words, expertly promoted her own brand. Yet, while Gu’s artistry and her brand became famous, the details of her life remain hidden. Ko clearly wants to explore the artisan as a biographical subject, as well as a cipher for his or her art, and yet like the subtle elements concealed (or restrained) within the carved inkstone often the individual is expressed through the voices of second-hand accounts,

or art historical research. The character and historical development of Gu’s brand, then, is an indication of how connoisseurship and cultural power worked in the Qing Empire during the 18th century, the subject of Ko’s concluding chapter about the collectors of inkstones and their collections. As a woman, Gu’s gender seems to have been (or to have become) of little import in the light of her art. However, inkstone carving and inkstone appreciation remained masculine preserves, and while women could use inkstones to write, and to write poetry of great beauty, circles of collectors were limited to men. But, as the evidence of Ko’s painstaking research shows, there were women who collected and appreciated inkstones for just the same reasons, and in just the same ways, as did the men with whom they lived. One of the principal qualities of Ko’s work is in revealing the influence which women exercised from their ‘occluded’ position, and I feel that there is a sense in which their marginality, as with

so much in the way in which Chinese aesthetics is studied and framed and repackaged, makes their influence –yet not, of course, the recognition accorded them in life –all the greater. This is in almost every sense an excellent book. It is full of information and of historical and art historical analysis, and its illustrations –notwithstanding that the subject matter might not always be easy to photograph successfully –are frequent and clear. Physically weak readers should note however, that it is a very heavy book, due to the quality and weight of its paper and binding. That said, the University of Washington Press has produced a fascinating contribution to the study of the art and aesthetics of writing in China, and to the cultural history of the Qing. Dorothy Ko is a talented scholar, but she is also a most alluring writer, and I look forward to reading her other books.

Simon Wickhamsmith Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey