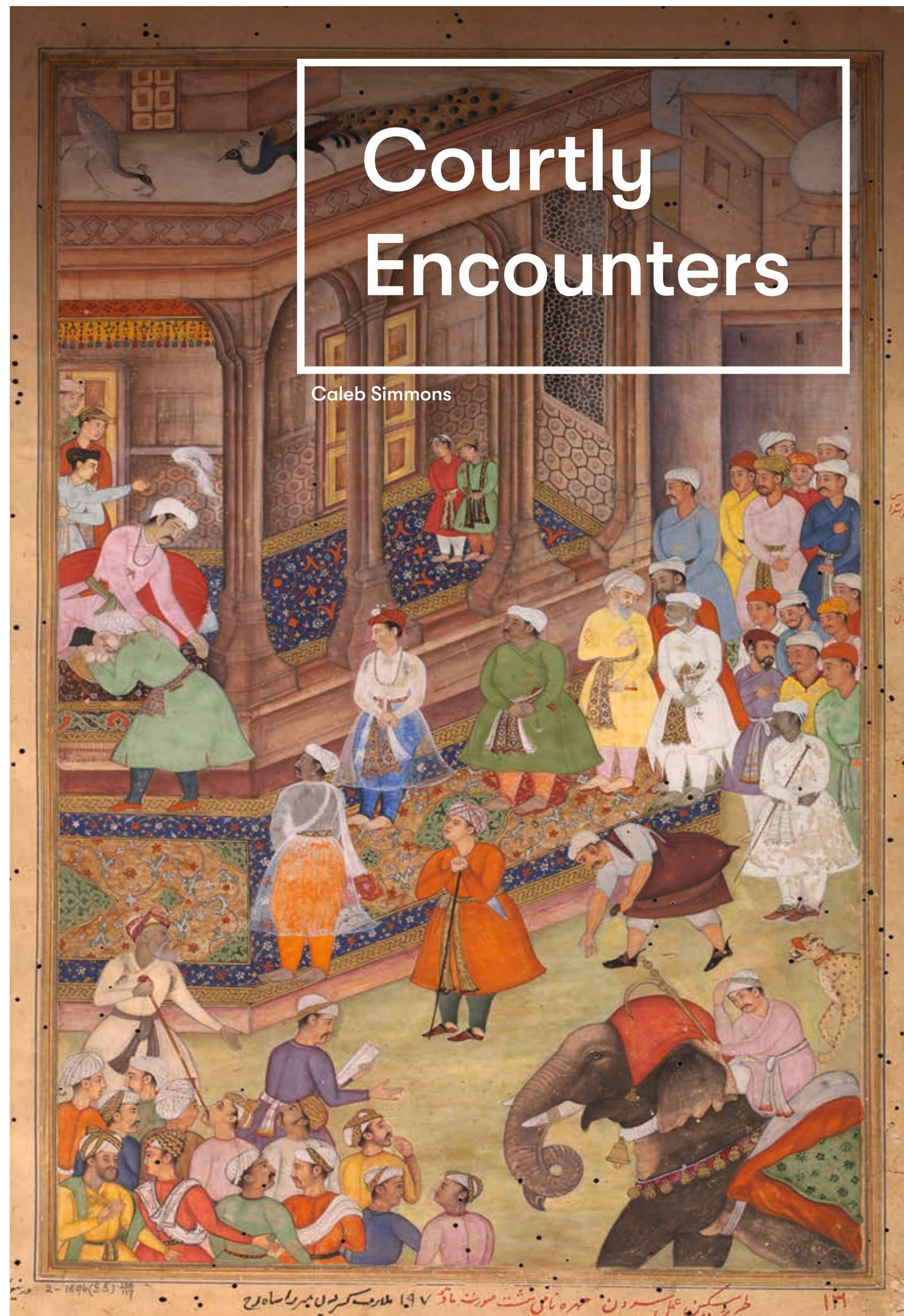
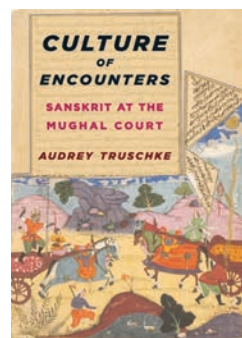
Courtly Encounters

Caleb Simmons





Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court

Audrey Truschke. 2016.

New York: Columbia University Press
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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.

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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 a standard indicator of the power of the Qing, 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.

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