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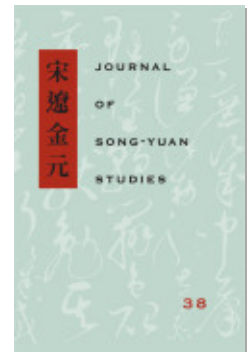
*Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics
of Culture and the Culture of Politics (review)*

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BOOK REVIEWS

Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, eds. *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006. Pp. xx + 625. \$59.95 (hardcover). ISBN 0-674-02127-4.

In contrast to other troubled times in Chinese history, relatively little research has been done on Emperor Huizong of the late Northern Song Dynasty and his reign (1100–1126), probably because of the scarce documentation about the period. Chinese-language publications include a few research papers and several books on Emperor Huizong but few academic research monographs.¹ *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, is a genuine effort to overthrow the image of a fatuous emperor and to bring a new perspective to his reign.

This paper will analyze a few topics, looking at the differences of approach between the essays under review and Chinese-language scholarship. *Emperor Huizong* preserves the varying opinions of its thirteen contributors without forcing a consensus. It is not hard to glimpse the editors' intention from the book's subtitle. The book aims to reconsider the relationship between "the Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics" during Huizong's reign. The volume actually covers many aspects of that period, including politics, military

1. Ren Chongyue's 任崇岳 *Song Huizong Song Qinzong* 宋徽宗宋欽宗 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1996), an expanded version of his *Fengliu tianzi Song Huizong zhuan* 风流天子宋徽宗传 (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1994), provides a detailed introduction to Huizong and his reign. The book combines a traditional analysis of the historical background with a narrative account of the events of Huizong's reign. Its analysis is based largely on the comments by the writer of Huizong's biography in the *Songshi* 宋史 and on the *Songlun* 宋論 by the Ming observer Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692). See also two anonymously published biographies entitled *Song Huizong* in the series *Zhongguo huangdi dazhuan* 中国皇帝大传, ed. Feng Guochao 冯国超 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 2000); and *Zhongguo huangdi huanghou baizhuan* 中国皇帝皇后百传, ed. Zhu Xueqin 朱学勤 (Huhehaote: Yuanfang chubanshe, 2005).

affairs, culture, medicine, fine arts, people, ideology, and historical sources. Although the authors address many different aspects of Huizong's reign, they also are all concerned with a few common issues, as Patricia Ebrey explains in her introduction. Let me focus on three points.

First, the authors have put considerable emphasis on the continuation of the New Policies after Shenzong's reign through the Zhezong 哲宗 and Huizong reigns. They take seriously Zhezong's and Huizong's stated commitment to "continue the legacy" of the New Policies. John Chaffee seeks the reasons behind Cai Jing's long survival at court. As an advocate of the New Policies, Cai Jing always had a large party of supporters. Even though he was out of power from time to time, he commanded Huizong's wholehearted support for long periods. Paul J. Smith traces the reasons for the continued military campaigns in the reigns of Zhezong and Huizong. The author points out that Zhezong and Huizong both had a strong sense of filial obligation to their father, so they continued Shenzong's expansionist campaigns to redefine the international map (p. 125). The factional battles caused by zeal for war in the northwest not only accelerated the fall of the Northern Song but also negatively affected the Southern Song political arena (p. 130). Ari Daniel Levine examines the political language used in factional discourse during the late Northern Song. During the thirty years from Shenzong's to Huizong's reign, the content of political conflict took on different forms while the "language" of factional discourse remained relatively stable. As a result, political rhetoric was an important dimension of the political practice that had defined the reigns of Shenzong and his sons for three decades. Peter K. Bol tries to understand the transition of ideology through the study of thirty years' palace examination questions from Shenzong's to Huizong's reign. The author points out that all the questions were aimed at stating the policy ambitions of the regime by means of the paradigm of antiquity and sagely Former Kings. Even though Tsuyoshi Kojima mainly focuses on the theory of court music during Huizong's reign, he approaches the topic from the angle of the New Learning School's impact on musical theory, an approach that reveals the author's understanding of political networks during the reigns of Shenzong, Zhezong, and Huizong.

Some authors, however, also observe differences in the political structure of the Northern Song from the time of Shenzong's reign. John Chaffee notices that the dynamics at work in Huizong's reign were universalistic, a quality that differed from the New Policies that addressed social ills directly (p. 60).

Chaffee's approach echoes Peter K. Bol's discussion of Huizong's attempts to emulate the sagely Former Kings as the model for governing the empire. The major difference between Huizong and his father Shenzong was that Huizong insisted that the emperor was an agent capable of producing change in society and the natural world. Also, Huizong became increasingly concerned with how the ruler's behavior could achieve harmony in the world. As a result, the realm of politics and economy no longer satisfied the reformers, who turned to embrace the cultural level of ritual and music. Tsuyoshi Kojima's discussion of music, Patricia Ebrey's study of calligraphy and steles, Shin-yi Chao's research on the Divine Empyrean Palace Temple network, and Joseph S.C. Lam's analysis of the "Music of Great Brilliance," all reflect different approaches to the belief in the sagely Former Kings.

Unlike the contributors to the volume, many Chinese publications perceive the patterns of court politics as inconsistent from Shenzong to Huizong's reign, and Chinese authors emphasize the qualitative changes that occurred under the same label of the New Policies during the last three decades of the Northern Song. Ren Chongyue takes Zhezong's renewal of Wang Anshi's New Policies as an ostensible attempt to address fiscal, political, and cultural ills, yet when the orders were carried out, they were misinterpreted and twisted to represent the interests of landowners of vast farming estates.² Similarly, Luo Jiaxiang 羅家祥 and Zhang Qifan 張其凡 portray Zhezong's reforms as contrary to Wang Anshi's initial intentions.³ Qi Xia 漆俠 went further in depicting the "continuing legacy" in Huizong's era as a cover for fundamentally overturning reform from inside.⁴

Generally speaking, historical records resoundingly back up this view. In July 1126, when Cai Jing was demoted and sent to Qiongzhou, Cheng Yu 程瑀 again blamed Cai in court, stating that Cai was claiming to revive the New Policies of the Xining and Yuanfeng eras (1068–1086), but his measures actually ran contrary to them.⁵ An unbiased observer, Wang Fuzhi of the Ming dynasty, once remarked that the measures taken by Huizong and Cai Jing

2. Ren Chongyue, *Song Huizong Song Qinzong*, 3.

3. See Luo Jiaxiang, *Beisong dangzheng yanjiu* 北宋黨爭研究 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993), 238–39, 308; Zhang Qifan, *Songdai shi* 宋代史 (Macao: Macao and Asia Publishing House, 2004), 1: 107.

4. See Qi Xia, *Wang Anshi bianfa* 王安石變法 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1959), 216–18.

5. *Sanchao beimeing huibian* 三朝北盟會編, comp. Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 370.

differed from the reforms of Shenzong's reign.⁶ Viewed from another angle, Wang's observation overlooks the logical connections between the reigns of Shenzong and Huizong and may reflect the political struggles of his own time, leaving some room for reinterpretation.

Second, in order to highlight Huizong's identity as an emperor, the third and fourth parts of the book analyze his political behavior and his attitudes towards fine art, culture, and religion. Huizong arranged to have his own calligraphy displayed on steles erected throughout the country, Patricia Ebrey notes, as a gesture to communicate with his people. Asaf Goldschmidt stresses Huizong's personal interest in medicine and his influence on medical reforms. Shin-yi Chao discusses Huizong's religious policy. Part Four especially concentrates on Huizong's palace poems, the "Music of Great Brilliance," and painting, in an effort to illustrate the same argument: by manipulating culture and the arts, he was consciously paving his way to the apex of political power. Culture and art would naturally influence the way that people perceived the relationship between Huizong and his close ministers. As Patricia Ebrey has contended in an earlier paper on the relationship between Cai Jing and Huizong, literature and the arts, especially calligraphy and poems, are the key to understanding Huizong and Cai Jing's connection.⁷ Cai Jing encouraged Huizong to approach culture, not the other way round. So rather than the traditional portrayal of Huizong as a self-righteous emperor who diverged from the right path and trusted treacherous court officials, he was in fact a ruler endowed with great political finesse and skill. Meanwhile, the stereotype set by traditional historians that Huizong was only obsessed with petty little things instead of national affairs also needs to be adjusted accordingly.

Whether Huizong perfectly fits the volume's depiction that he was actually manipulating culture, art, and religious beliefs of his own may be discussed later, but we cannot deny that Huizong cast his unique shadow on court politics by reaching out in these various fields and implementing measures. For instance, Huizong ordered steles with his own calligraphy to be erected throughout the country, which no doubt affected his subjects greatly. His passion for art influenced his choice of close subordinates. It is not hard to conclude that he would be drawn to those with a shared interest in art, and

6. Wang Fuzhi, *Song lun* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 148.

7. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Wenren wenhua yu Cai Jing he Huizong de guanxi" 文人文化与蔡京和徽宗的关系, in *Songshi yanjiu lunwenji* 宋史研究论文集, ed. Qi Xia 漆侠 (Baoding: Hebei daxue chubanshe, 2002), 156, 157.

the calligrapher Cai Jing was exactly a case in point. Compared to the traditional approach that is so critical of Huizong's involvement in arts, the new one proposed by this volume sparks creativity and freshness.

Emperor Huizong also stands out for its effort to analyze the narrative methods of the historical record and for probing the hidden message behind the text so as to embrace the reality, which is demonstrated in Part Five. It is especially significant during Huizong's reign because the system of recording the official history was seriously compromised by factional battles. Both Charles Hartman's analysis of the formation of the "nefarious minister" stereotype and Maggie Bickford's interpretation of the autograph, authenticity, and authority of Huizong's paintings emphasize the importance of deconstructing the original texts. When Stephen H. West cites the *Nanjin jiwén* to conclude that traditional Chinese historians sometimes placed more importance on creative emendation of the original wording than they did on the source material, he is clearly taking textual deconstruction to an extreme.

The watershed between truth and fiction is hard to distinguish because surviving records are polarized, as Ari Daniel Levine's paper on factional rhetoric demonstrates. Our attempt to deconstruct certain texts faces the same problem. Charles Hartman cites edicts (contained in *Song zaifu biannian lu* 宋宰輔編年錄 by Xu Ziming 徐自明) that appointed Cai Jing and described him as a paragon of ability and virtue. These are totally at variance with the *Songshi* portrait of him as malevolent (p. 520). Since these edicts were written when Cai was at the peak of his bureaucratic career, we must consider their authenticity. Apart from the edicts in the *Song zaifu biannian lu*, there are few examples of the original appointment edicts with which to compare them. The *Song da zhaoling ji* 宋大詔令集 includes a series of original appointment and demotion edicts for Cai Jing, with the new appointment edicts couched in positive language while the demotion edicts are critical. For instance, in the fifth month of 1110, a censor impeached Cai Jing on the pretext of an ominous appearance of a comet. As a result, on the 26th day of the same month, Cai Jing was demoted to Hangzhou as a prefect. The demotion edict attacked Cai Jing particularly for his venality and corruption and for committing robbery, which fundamentally accords with what was written in his biography in the *Songshi*.⁸ Apart from a few history officials' remarks, his

8. *Song da zhaoling ji* (Xuxiu Siku quanshu ed., vol. 456; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 212: 694.

Songshi biography was largely based on the memorials from court officials. The general attitude toward Cai Jing depends on the selection of data and materials, which only reflect the history office's personal decision to praise or blame. So we can hardly assume that the positive or the negative language in the record is totally reliable.

In studying the historical records of Huizong's reign, to label the tendency of any given text, to determine the genre of a piece of historical narrative, or to discuss the formation of the notion of "nefarious ministers," as Charles Hartman has done, we cannot deny the importance of close comparison of the polarized texts. Still, if we want to approach the true figure behind the veil—whether Cai Jing, Huizong, or others—we should probably conduct in-depth analysis of the political reform and policies of that period instead of narrowly focusing on the differences among some subjective remarks. Because extant documents are lacking, deconstructing texts poses an even more painful academic challenge than traditional approaches.

The most intriguing points in this book lie in the differences between the Chinese and Western approaches. Almost all Chinese scholars share a common understanding that the emperorship and autocracy reinforced one another from the Tang dynasty to the Song dynasty. Peter K. Bol rebuts this argument from another angle, by comparing the palace examination questions from the reigns of Shenzong, Zhezong, and Huizong. His argument hinges on his understanding of the political ideology of the New Policies as implemented in the late Northern Song. Architects of the New Policies, Bol suggests, advocated an activist and interventionist approach to governing in an attempt to achieve a powerful and flourishing country, with the paradigm of antiquity underlying all of their activities. If we consider that Wang Anshi's objective of being a sage lay behind the New Policies of Shenzong's reign, then Huizong aspired to be a sage-king (p. 178). The earlier reformers envisioned a limited government staffed by an oligarchy of families who would maintain social order, while the New Policies represented another possibility that the government could take charge of all human activities and ensure the top-down transformation of society. The blueprint paradigm of antiquity included a competent sage-king who served as a role model for administration. By this measure, the ruler was not an autocrat (p. 201).

In Chinese, the word "autocracy" (*zhuanzhi* 專制) can carry the meaning "to act arbitrarily." In the *Shiji*'s "Basic Annals of Emperor Wendi," (孝文本

紀; Wendi ruled 180–157 BCE), the official Song Chang 宋昌 condemned Empress Lü 呂太后 as “appointing three kings from the Lü family in order to achieve autocracy 擅權專制.”⁹ Because the word *zhuanzhi* can also be understood as a synonym for “acting arbitrarily,” the original text did not necessarily refer to a specific political system.

Ever since Western political science was introduced into China, the scholarly world has translated the Chinese word *zhuanzhi* as “autocracy,” referring specifically to absolutism, and the word came to refer to a specific political system. In Western languages, “autocracy” refers to a form of oligarchy in which a ruler took direct control of administrative power. Western absolutism differed from the traditional Chinese form of government, in which the throne did not directly manage state affairs. This was especially true of Huizong, who has been long known as the emperor of fatuity (*daiqi guozheng* 怠棄國政). That is why Peter K. Bol feels the judgment that autocracy had been reinforced during Huizong’s reign is “counterintuitive” (p. 178).

Still, in Chinese, the political system denoted by “autocracy” is actually the imperial system, prevailing throughout the entire imperial period (221 BC–1911 AD). Even in the times when the aristocratic clans held great power in the Northern Wei, Jin, Sui, and Tang dynasties, these periods were still not seen as falling outside the boundary of autocracy.¹⁰ The scholarly world emphasizes the reinforcement of autocratic power from Tang to Song that accompanied the changing organization of officialdom and administrative restructuring, and this reinforcement gave the emperor even greater authority in court policy-making processes. This seems unrelated to the political idea of the New Policies that sought to restore the government of the ancient sage-kings. To be emphasized here is that this had to do with a change in the mechanics of decision-making; it had no connection to the social, economic, and policy changes of the Tang *juntian* 均田 system or the Song decision not to regulate agricultural land.

9. Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 10: 414.

10. Two examples: “In the nearly 400 years of the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties periods, a major change in politics was the gradual reinforcement of centralized feudal autocracy” (Huang Huixian 黃惠賢, *Wei Jin Nanbeichao* 魏晉南北朝, vol. 4 of *Zhongguo zhengzhi zhidu tongshi* 中國政治制度通史, ed. Bai Gang 白鋼 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1996), 17); “On the establishment of the Tang dynasty, the 123 years from 618 to 741 were a period of consolidation, development, and prolificacy of the feudal autocratic state” (*Zhongguo tongshi* 中國通史, ed. Shi Nianhai 史念海 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1999), 6: 362).

Terminology in modern Western scholarship changes when translated into Chinese. Words have evolved to take on a unique Chinese flavor. The seeming counterparts of specific words in Chinese differ in meaning from their Western brothers, the most typical of which is the well known example of “feudalism” (*fengjian* 封建). When Chinese and Western scholars try to talk to each other, it is definitely essential to pay attention to these critical differences.

In discussing Huizong’s work in the field of arts, literature, religion, and so on, scholars assign themselves a task as difficult as interpreting the mental activities of Huizong and other people. Records revealing such mental activities are rare, and for that reason the authors of these essays have to sometimes rely on deduction to develop their arguments.

Ronald Egan, for example, finds that Huizong’s 300 palace poems barely dwell on the lassitude and loneliness of the palace ladies. Chinese scholars would take it as self-explanatory that each poem is an outpouring of the author’s sentiment and could represent the feelings of no one but the author. Huizong, as sole master of the palace, would never have experienced the bitterness of those famed beauties, let alone represented their feelings of hopelessness as his main theme. Ronald Egan adopts a more complex approach to reach the same conclusion. First, the author points out that Huizong tried to depict near-ideal palace life to his successors by writing his palace poems. Then Egan infers that Huizong sought to avoid having people later describe his own palace life, in a kind of tactic to forestall enemies. For this reason, the absence of palace women’s laments in Huizong’s poems reveal political motives. Compared with the relatively direct “theory of literary reflection” (*wenxue fanyinglun* 文學反映論) on which most Chinese scholars insist, Ronald Egan’s explanation is logically intricate.

Patricia Ebrey’s argument about Huizong’s unique Slender Gold calligraphy is another example. The ultimate goal of Huizong’s creation of Slender Gold and erecting stone steles across the country, she contends, was to demonstrate his originality. The Slender Gold served as a means to convey a distinctive image: that he was not only capable of method, precision, and discipline but also of elegance, style, refinement, and flair (p. 265). In this light, Huizong’s penchant for sending rubbings of his calligraphy to prefectures and counties was politically astute. He sought recognition from his people that he was the leading actor on the political stage (p. 272). When the deep originality of

Slender Gold commanded almost unanimous assent, the deduction at the political and cultural level is an assumption of the author's own.

Patricia Ebrey adopts a similar argument to demonstrate that no evidence shows how Huizong's favor and support for Daoism threatened rival religions (p. 20). In keeping with the contributors' concern about the reliability of the historical data surviving today, we may note that it is quite doubtful that anyone would record dissent from other religions, such as Buddhism, when the court issued hand-drafted edicts from the imperial brush in favor of Daoism.

Scholars have to rely on their understanding of historical records to rebuild history, but further deduction based on these "understandings" is not as powerful as the first hand materials, and indirect step-by-step reasoning is even more weak. If the authors of *Emperor Huizong* hope to make their arguments more persuasive, further evidence might be needed.

A still fascinating topic about Huizong and his reign would be their impact on the Southern Song dynasty, which some of the papers in *Emperor Huizong* mention and discuss. There are still many unanswered questions in the study of Huizong and his reign awaiting further research from scholars both from China and the Western world working together. We noted at the outset of this review that documentation about Huizong's period is scarce, and so it would be arbitrary to declare that we have already exhausted all the records about this period. The huge archival compilation *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 and the numerous collected works of Southern Song scholar-officials are certainly the major data bank for us to search for unnoticed records. Institutional evolution and the decision-making process during Huizong's reign should be one of our major concerns. Historical figures will always be poorly understood if we cannot dig up enough information about them from the extant historical literature.

In closing, allow me to note that I have the most reservations about the probings and conjectures in Parts III and IV of the volume. For me, this type of probing is extremely exploratory and by reason should be circumspect.

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