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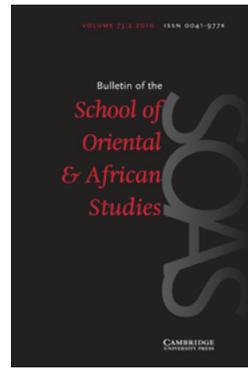
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Joanna Handlin Smith: *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China*. xiii, 405 pp. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2009. £24.95. ISBN 978 0 520 25363 6.

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JOANNA HANDLIN SMITH:

The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China.

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In 1590 Yang Dongming, a mid-level official from Henan province, founded the first documented benevolent society in his native town of Yucheng. Bored by the pointlessness of the existing poetry club where the educated elite gathered to share the joy of wine and poetry, and motivated by the experience of the aftermath of a severe drought in 1588–89, he transformed the “Society for sharing pleasure” (*tonglehui*) into a “Society for sharing goodness” (*tongshanhui*) whose purpose was to contribute funds for “repairing roads, fixing bridges, helping with marriage and funeral expenses, and aiding the poor and sick” (p. 46). While Yang’s society remained an elite affair, the concept became more inclusive when it spread from the central plains to the Yangzi Delta, where it continued to flourish right up to the end of the Ming dynasty. Unfortunately, along the way this new practice of institutionalized philanthropy seems to have been discontinued in its place of origin. In 1614, Gao Panlong, a scholar of national renown famous for his leading role in the Donglin Academy and a *xiangyue* lecturer in Wuxi, gave the subject a solid place in the written record when he wrote about the benevolent society he sponsored in his home town (p. 57). In 1637 Chen Longzheng from Jiashan, Zhejiang, in continuation of family traditions, brought the noble cause to its bloom, and opened the society to include every man who would be able to make even the smallest contribution. The role of lesser men in these associations is illustrated impressively by the more humble literatus Lu Shiyi from Taicang, whose diary of 1641 provides a rare alternative glimpse into the world of these outstanding philanthropists about whom we mostly know only from their own writings. Most prominent among these, because he left a substantial diary that documents his tireless commitment to famine relief work, is Qi Biaojia from a wealthy Shaoxing gentry background, the hero of the second part of this summa of two decades of research. The story told in this book unfolds through the lives of these five people. The first part of this extraordinarily fine-grained study traces the development of these new charitable routines that started not during the time of severe famines and epidemics in the final decades of the Ming, but with the formal organization of societies for the saving of animals that are documented from about a decade earlier. The second part then shows how these routines were enacted in situations of crisis.

The question this study seeks to answer is essentially: what explains this surge of private charity, and why did voluntary charitable institutions arise at exactly this time (p. 4)? What made social conditions ripe for societies “that functioned outside the formal government structure and outside religious institutions” (p. 46)? The exploration of the inner worlds of late-Ming people, much to our surprise it seems, reveals that Chinese people are capable of genuine compassion and that they do value life. They were even able to give their desire to help indigent or vulnerable people a solid institutional basis. They sponsored and managed voluntary associations, even though, because of the educated elite’s orientation towards the state, the distinction between the governmental and non-governmental spheres remained somewhat blurred. Finally, this is not a story about dynastic decline. It was precisely the presence of the state, and not its absence, that encouraged private, local activism. Moreover, according to the author, famines and epidemics, though omnipresent in her account, play but a marginal role in the quest for an answer to

her question. The crises of the last decades of the Ming are not a safe guide, as there have been other periods of severe crises that did not see a comparable surge of interest in doing good.

Instead, the answer lies in the extraordinary accumulation of wealth that characterized the latter half of the Ming. It brought about not only a culture of conspicuous consumption, but also a culture of conspicuous charity, perhaps to some extent to offset the former. So in the final analysis this is an only too familiar story about a widening gap between rich and poor. We find the super rich Qi Biaoqia spending fortunes on his garden (5,000 taels as opposed to his charitable donations ranging from 10 to 300 taels, pp. 110, 114) and the desperately poor struggling to survive the agricultural slack season, even in years with normal harvests. It is equally a story about increasing literacy and the flourishing print culture of the time, making available knowledge, in particular medical knowledge, in an unprecedented way and, equally crucial, facilitating the dissemination of the morality literature that promoted the value of charitable acts. This does not exactly read like an account of decline.

This is an extraordinary book which, in addition to adding a wealth of detail on life at the local level to the existing literature on the late Ming, also offers sophisticated analyses of the diaries on which it is largely based, including interesting reflections about how to read these texts as historical sources (pp. 124, 130). It is, however, essentially a Jiangnan story, even though it starts in Henan. It is also, owing to the limitations of the available sources, essentially a story about those in a position to give rather than those at the receiving end of the philanthropic endeavour. Reading the revealing analysis of Lu Shiyi's diary one wonders to what extent the beneficiaries of these good deeds really were at the other end of the social ladder (pp. 143 ff.). In other words: who were the "deserving poor" (p. 91)? And finally, as every single example was prompted by the consequences of disasters (the most penetrating perhaps being Chen Longzheng's encounter with the people who tossed their babies over a bridge into the river during a famine (pp. 74, 259), but also the riots of 1641, which were perhaps almost as crucial for Qi's commitment to famine relief as his father's death for the organization of medical relief) one wonders whether these disaster experiences are not relevant in ways more substantial than just having "turned up some material relating to the subject of charity" (p. 279). At the very least it was these extraordinary situations that demanded the capacity to set up larger projects than was possible through the informal giving practised until then (p. 83).

Andrea Janku

IMRE HAMAR (ed.):

Reflecting Mirrors: Perspectives on Huayan Buddhism.

(Asiatische Forschungen.) xxi, 410 pp. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007. €74. ISBN 978 3 447 05509 3.

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This volume is a welcome contribution to the field of Huayan studies. The papers collected here grew out of a conference organized by Imre Hamar at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, in 2004. It contains nineteen papers (plus an excellent introduction by the editor) on a wide variety of topics by sixteen different scholars deploying a diverse range of approaches. One of its major achievements is that it