

BOOK REVIEW

Middle Imperial China, 900–1350

By Linda Walton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.
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Linda Walton's *Middle Imperial China, 900–1350* is an impressive synthesis of previous scholarship that offers a well-balanced survey of China's mid-imperial period. It sheds light on historical developments both in China proper and in its surrounding regions. In addition to the thirteen-page introduction, the book consists of thirteen chapters, starting with a political history of the tenth century and ending with the impact of the Mongol Empire on East Asia and beyond. No careful reader of this book would fail to notice the comprehensiveness of topics covered, the author's exhaustive survey of Anglophone scholarship, and her consistent focus on the diversity within given subjects.

As Valerie Hansen and Charles Hartman write in blurbs on the book's back cover, *Middle Imperial China* seems to be designed for classroom use. Like other conventional history textbooks, the book offers a balanced account of the politics (chapters 1 and 2), education and social elites (chapter 3), the economy (chapters 4 and 5), religion (chapter 6), intellectual and artistic culture of the time (chapters 7 and 8). What makes Walton's book stand out, however, is that the author pays almost equal attention to topics such as the built environment (chapter 10), food and medicine (chapter 11), and women and children (chapter 9), which have been downplayed, if not completely neglected, in other textbook-like studies. The author's preference for comprehensive coverage goes beyond the variety of topics. In each chapter and section, Walton makes a deliberate effort to introduce underrepresented topics. For example, her discussion of historiography, in addition to introducing the transformations of history writing represented by prominent literati historians such as Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang, also includes Buddhist and Daoist historiographies (189–190). Likewise, in offering reliable accounts of such familiar topics as painting and fine literature, "The Arts of Culture," the book's chapter on cultural history, offers sections on their development in the Jin, Liao, and northern parts of the Yuan, not just in the Song. Moreover, this chapter also includes a section on music and theatrical performance, and here too the author sets aside space for theatrical performance in northern dynasties (201–205). In a similar vein, the chapter on the built environment not only focuses on imperial architecture but also introduces Buddhist architecture and tombs (259–268). When dealing with food and wine, the author makes a point of providing an account of the food and dishes of the Jurchen (283–285).

The exhaustive and up-to-date bibliography of *Middle Imperial China* lists as many as 673 works (by my count). Although Walton does cite early twentieth-century scholarship such as Michael Hagerty's 1923 *T'oung Pao* article, as well as the classic studies by Edward Kracke, throughout the book she extensively consults and benefits from most recent scholarship in the field. Out of the 673 works cited, 379 (56 percent) were published after 2000. Providing a reliable guide for graduate students in preparing for their general examinations,¹ works listed in the bibliography help make the author's narrative rich and complex. Her account of Buddhist and Daoist historiographies, for example, is based on works by Yun-hua Jan (1964), Judith Boltz (1987), and Koichi Shinohara (1999); and the section on women in the Liao and Jin dynasties is furnished with episodes from Linda Johnson's 2011 monograph. The author's introduction of Naixian (1309–1368), a poet of Qarlug origin who was active in Ningbo during the Yuan dynasty, is based on Yuan-chu Ruby Lam's 2009 article (314), and her comparison of Qubilai's successful subjugation of Dali to his failure at Dai Viet draws on James Anderson's 2014 study (328). More importantly, the author also draws on the latest scholarship to qualify, if not directly challenge, the prevalent interpretation of certain topics. Citing the 2015 article by Xin Wen, for instance, the author introduces a new interpretation of the Jurchen examination and proposes that translation projects from Chinese into Jurchen under the Jin was not the promotion of an ethnically distinct Jurchen culture but a "distinctively hybrid Sino-Jurchen" one (87). Such challenges are unusual for textbook-like studies.

Throughout the book, the author pays particular attention to bringing to light the diversity in middle imperial Chinese society. For instance, in examining the religious history of the period, Walton covers such diverse topics as the imperial patronage of Buddhism in Song, Liao, and Xi Xia; sectarian developments in institutionalized Buddhism and Daoism; and the diversification of popular religion. She then goes on to devote a section on "Religions from the West" in which she discusses Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam in China (164–166), thus showing a truly "multivalent religious universe" of the period. The chapter on women and family, in addition to explaining women and marriage in the Liao and Jin (240–242), also introduces alternative paths, outside the family, that were available to and chosen by some women (242–244).

As a work of synthesis and a textbook, *Middle Imperial China* extensively draws on authoritative studies on specific topics. At the same time, it questions the applicability of such studies' main arguments by introducing compelling critiques of other scholars. For instance, while subscribing to the still prevailing interpretation of the Northern–Southern Song transformations articulated by Robert Hartwell and Robert Hymes, the author is cautious to not draw too clear a demarcation between state and society in the period and to call our attention to "the variability of local conditions" and "temporal circumstances" (82–84, 89). Likewise, after providing a neat account of marriage and women's property rights in the Yuan dynasty based largely on Bettine Birge, Walton alerts readers' attention to Joseph McDermott's 2004 critique, which highlights vast regional differences in practices (307n38). In fact, the author's tendency to mention various scholars' names, introduce their main arguments, and put them in conversation with each other in the main body of the text makes this book a state-of-the-field survey.

¹One notable omission from the bibliography is Jacques Gernet's classic study of Song urban life, *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion 1250–1276* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

It is hard to quibble with this superb introduction to the history of Middle Period China and how it is understood by Anglophone scholars today. As a reviewer, however, I still feel obliged to point out a few issues. First, a section's title does not always do justice to its contents. For example, "Regional Differences: Kinship, Land, Labor," a part of the chapter "Gendered and Generational Lives," stresses the need to pay attention to regional differences in probing institutions of village life but does not introduce actual cases of regional differences (223–224). Second, the author's almost exclusive reliance on Anglophone scholarship has its inevitable "downside." As the author notes, it is undeniable that "relevant scholarship in the English-speaking world is vast enough" (xv) to make a work of synthesis possible.² At the same time, we cannot deny the unevenness in topics thoroughly studied in the West. For example, the socio-economic history (Ch. *shehui jingji shi*; Jp. *shakai keizai shi*) of the period, thoroughly studied in East Asia, has not been popular in the West. Although we do have excellent studies by Joseph McDermott, Richard von Glahn, and Shiba Yoshinobu in English, their works fall short of covering important topics extensively studied by such influential socio-economic historians as Sudō Yoshiyuki, Yanagida Setsuko, Qi Xia, Wang Zengyu, or Takahashi Yoshirō.³ As a result, Walton devotes three pages to the agricultural economy and land (93–95) while devoting nine pages to handicraft and industrial production (98–106) of the period: a less significant sector of the economy in this period, but one that has aroused more interest in the West. Finally, I have found only a couple of editorial mishaps: on pages 188 and 369. Undergraduate and graduate students seriously interested in this important period, as well as educators at all levels, will find this book invaluable.

²The only non-English study I found in the bibliography is Pierre Marson's *La steppe et l'empire: La formation de la dynastie Khitan (Liao) IVe–Xe siècle* (Paris : les Belles lettres, 2011).

³See, for example, Sudō Yoshiyuki, *Sōdai keizaishi kenkyū* 宋代經濟史研究 (Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai, 1962); Yanagida Setsuko, *Sō Gen shakai keizaishi kenkyū* 宋元社会經濟史研究 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1995); Qi Xia, *Songdai jingjishi* 宋代经济史, 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987–1988); Wang Zengyu, *Songchao jieji jigou* 宋朝阶级结构 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996); and Takahashi Yoshirō, *Sōdai Chūgoku no hōsei to shakai* 宋代中国の法制と社会 (Tokyo: Kyūko shoin, 2002).