Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

_The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China_ by
Cynthia J. Brokaw
Benjamin A. Elman


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example, when he considers lists of high-status articles in seventeenth-century China, he compares them to similar lists in Italy. This represents a break from sinological studies inspired by the social sciences, where early periods in China typically are compared to something called "the West." Since "the West" is an ahistorical construct (eternally democratic, scientific, and individualistic), not surprisingly, few sinologists have found significant parallels between it and pre-modern China. Clunas's book eschews such abstractions and, along with some other recent publications (Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* [1989]; Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* [1991]), suggests the need for a revision of our familiar constructions of Chinese culture. As Clunas's book clearly shows, any reconstruction of our view of China will surely require a reassessment of ideas about Europe and the modern world.

**MARTIN J. POWERS**

*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*


Cynthia J. Brokaw begins her study by reviewing the early development and evolution of the concept of moral retribution from ancient China to the late empire and delineates the two chief views of fate that emerged: first, a system of merit and demerit that human agents can influence; and second, a framework of meaning beyond human influence. Through the efforts of sixteenth-century literati such as Yuan Huang, the chief example in Brokaw's study, the Chinese increasingly turned to merit accumulation in the moral realm as a system homologous with worldly benefits. In her resentation of the seventeenth century to a conservative ideology, the ledgers were ubiquitous throughout elite and popular culture. Brokaw notes, however, how these moral tracts were appropriated differently by Confucian elites and popular folk. Differences in material resources between elites and nonelites did not prevent the sharing of moral visions in late-imperial China. Differences in practice, however, depended on the higher or lower location in the social hierarchy where people created and used the ledgers to measure their moral worth.

Brokaw's study of previously overlooked or undervalued Chinese ledgers of merit and demerit is an important contribution to both the intellectual and social history of late-imperial China. She successfully relates the forces of commercialization in Ming China to the changing nature of Confucianism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her discussion of how an increasingly monetized economy was interpreted by gentry elites and assimilated into Confucian life by the eighteenth century is a major addition to our understanding of late-imperial intellectual life, enriching and modifying those earlier interpretations of Confucianism in Ming and Qing that were based on a formalist history of ideas approach, which over-determined the role of neo-Confucian philosophy in Chinese cultural history. Brokaw deserves credit for bringing together into a coherent and convincing narrative the interdependent aspects of social change and moral order during the Ming-Qing transition. Moreover, her account moves from elite intellectual events to popular culture and mentality fluidly, revealing the historical context within which commoners and gentry had to redefine their moral ideals and the measures of those ideals during a time of remarkable social change.

**BENJAMIN A. ELMAN**

*University of California, Los Angeles*


This volume, edited by Joseph W. Esherick and Mary Backus Rankin, is part of an influential series that resulted from workshops sponsored in the 1980s by the Joint Committee on Chinese Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and Social Science Research Council. The essays here can be seen as emblematic of the welcome replacement of the state-oriented picture of a homogeneous "gentry" by a local perspective that emphasizes more diverse and contentious "elites" in the field of Chinese social history.

The construct of "the Chinese gentry," arising from a perceived similarity between the educated...