



**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

*The American Historical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 1. (Feb., 1993), p. 216.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-8762%28199302%2998%3A1%3C216%3ATLOMAD%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C>

*The American Historical Review* is currently published by American Historical Association.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/aha.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

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. *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1991. Pp. x, 287. \$42.50.

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 material benefit. In her presentation of the seventeenth-century debate between moral purists, typically neo-Confucians, who thought fate beyond human influence, and those like Yuan, who favored promotion of merit accumulation among elites for success in civil examinations and among common folk for personal self-improvement in daily life, Brokaw guides us through the creation of a moral vision for those in late-Ming society aspiring to social mobility and material success.

According to Brokaw, such fluid aspirations, which were at first written into and later read out of the ledgers by an upwardly mobile elite, shifted in the late seventeenth century to a conservative ideology, whereby the records of merit and demerit became tracts depicting the paternalistic responsibilities of elites to maintain their leadership in local society and to guide the lower classes. In the eighteenth century, the era of social and moral confusion that had marked the late Ming had ended, yielding instead a social vision of money and moral capital that rein-

forced social stasis and promoted Confucian cultural hegemony. 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 overdetermined 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

JOSEPH W. ESHERICK and MARY BACKUS RANKIN, editors. *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance*. (Studies on China, number 11.) Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 1990. Pp. xvii. 450. \$55.00.

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