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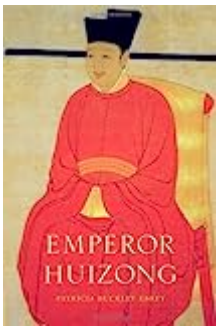

Patricia Buckley Ebrey. *Emperor Huizong.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 696 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-72525-6.

Reviewed by Sukhee Lee (Rutgers University)

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Song Emperor Huizong

âDramaticâ is probably an understatement for describing the life of Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1237), whose sense of self-aggrandizement as an accomplished monarch and whose miserable life as a war captive in the barren enemy territory would be matched by few other emperors in Chinaâs long history. A careless and credulous ruler who was blindly committed to Daosim and extravagant palace life and relentlessly expanded the troubled New Policies, Huizong has been traditionally accused of having ruined his country and eventually lost the Central Plain to the âbarbaricâ Jurchens. As the author Patricia Ebrey points out, however, few have paid attention to how Huizong âdeveloped his failingsâ (p. 512). That is, Huizong has been described as a one-dimensional figure for moral ridicule, whose rule was more or less doomed from the beginning. Huizong and his reign have not been fully historicized. Instead of attempting a naÃ¯vely sympathetic reading of Huizongâs acts and decisions, Ebrey sets out to approach Huizong from multiple angles to do justice to him and his period in a disinterested manner.

Emperor Huizong is a massive biography that is nearly six hundred pages long, plus a six-page list of main characters. Taking a form of chronological narrative of Huizongâs life, the book adeptly weaves together many different threads that informed it. In addition to covering in great detail such famous topics as his patronage of arts, commitment to Daoism, and backing up of the âreformers,â the book also brings to light Huizongâs personal life before and after he ascended the throne by touching on his education and his relationship with palace women. In this sense, *Emperor Huizong* is much more than a biography. It is also a well-grounded political and cultural history of the last several decades of Northern Song China, Huizong being its clear focus.

Thanks to Ebreyâs superb skill as an engaging storyteller, this thick volume reads extremely well. Any reader of this book will quickly agree that Paul Smithâs praise on the back cover that the book has âall the power of a great novelâ is far from hyperbole. Besides its great readability, the book has many strengths. First, it puts Huizong and his reign in much-needed historical perspective by

showing how important political decisions came into being and what kinds of agency Huizong and his ministers exerted in the process. Through Ebreyâs careful reconstruction, not only Huizong but also those who have been labeled as villainous ministers such as Cai Jing are given life as complex historical figures who, for all their human frailty, act out of their own sense of political responsibility and moral integrity. Cai Jing, for example, is absolved from the charge that it was he who drove the Song into an adventurous military alliance with the Jin. Second, the book extensively and masterfully draws on a wide variety of sources, from dynastic histories to private literary collections (*wenji*) to miscellaneous writings (*biji*), that can shed light on Huizong the person and Huizong the emperor. The book is full of rich details often embroidered with extensive translations of primary sources, including Huizongâs poems and inscriptions, which allow historical actors to speak for themselves. Given that the vast majority of extant sources for Huizong and his rule are heavily biased against them, both an extensive and close reading of available sources, thus âcarefully weighing evidence from often biased sourcesâ (p. 100), is an imperative in reaching a balanced evaluation. Third, it sheds positive light on Huizongâs pursuit of imperial magnificence by putting it in a comparative perspective, arguing that his genuine interests in the Daoist religion and palatial extravaganza need to be understood as an âexpression of sovereigntyâ (p. xii). According to Ebrey, Huizong was not a gullible emperor who was duped by a wicked and ambitious Daoist priest (e.g., Lin Lingsu), but a monarch who, based on his firm belief, consciously tried to tap religious force into his rule.

Telling a nonteleological story about a ruler like Huizong, however, would certainly be a daunting task. Oneâs narrative and analysis, for all the effort not to describe the monumental collapse of the Northern Song as inevitable, still need to quench readersâ thirst for understanding how exactly things went astray, which is an immovable fact. Although Ebrey certainly brings to light complex historical contingencies, aside from botched military decisions made at the peak of desperation, we are not given a new set of answers to the lingering question: who or what is to blame for the fall of the Northern Song? This seems to have much to do with the way Ebrey tells her story. Only at the end of each section or chapter does she ask questions that interest historians. Certainly, she does not want to restrict the scope of her narrative to preconceived questions that might not have been important to Huizong and his contemporaries. At the same time, her rich narrative itself does not always answer the interesting historical questions she raises.

A way of avoiding ad hominem criticism against a ruler (or influential ministers) would be to evaluate the visions, the process of implementation, and the effects of important policies adopted under his rule, especially if those policies were controversial. A focus on Huizongâs commitment to Daoism and arts is certainly a good way of drawing a more complex and nuanced picture of the man himself. As for Huizongâs fascination with Daoism, Ebrey argues that a religious reading is more persuasive than political reading, a point with which I cannot agree more. According to her, one of Huizongâs religious goals was to make both the state and the religion stronger (p. 370). What is not totally clear here is what exactly it means to become âstronger.â Adding somewhat divine power to the state? Or tapping the manpower of pro-Daoist people into the state? Ebrey speculates elsewhere that the emperor âwas attracted to the political potential of Daoist cosmology and wanted to strengthen the powers of the throneâ (p. 368). Were Huizongâs legitimacy and authority challenged so that he felt it necessary to âstrengthenâ them? Even so, was it worth a try, considering possible criticism and reservation about his indulgence in not so respectable religious pursuit?

What I found striking in this otherwise comprehensive account of Huizong and his rule is the authorâs relative lack of interest in Huizongâs economic policies and their impact on society, as we can hardly do justice to Huizongâs reign without engaging head-on the unfolding and impact of his much-blamed economic policies. Ebrey points out Cai Jingâs administrative acumen, even calling him âa financial whizâ who knew how to raise revenue to fund important state policies. âHow could the government pay for such wide-ranging welfare measures?â Ebrey asks this fundamental question, but her answer that âCai Jingâs financial wizardry seems to have made it all workâ (p. 107) is certainly not sufficient. As she hints, citing Wang Zengyuâs article, Cai Jingâs economic policies could have seemed extortionate at the local level. Was this really the case, however? Do we see a noticeable increase in tax revenue during Huizongâs reign? If so, what was the main source for such increase? Did Cai Jing (and Huizong), for example, raise the tax rate in general? Did they create a new source of revenue by setting up a monopoly on new items? Or did the central government extract more from the local government, but not necessarily from the local population? Ebrey briefly touches on these questions where she examines the debate over and the impact of the issuance of 10 *qian* coin in âPolicy Making and the Issue of Currency,â but nowhere

else.

In a similar vein, it is also interesting to note that the notorious âFlower and Rock Network,â which âcaused much resentment and proved good rallying cries for the rebels,â is mentioned only in a passing way (p. 398). For example, it is indexed only three times. Moreover, one of the page citations (p. 506) does not actually lead to the term. The Flower and Rock Network was one of the first things to be abolished in response to the Fang La rebellion, which suggests that it was indeed considered an important factor that estranged many commoners. Writing a biography of an emperor who rarely left his imperial palace, Ebrey made a reasonable choice to focus more on sources from the center. Nevertheless, we can cautiously hope to find relevant information about the impact of Huizongâs expansion of the New Policies and his peculiar love of fine flowers and rocks on society from local sources such as local gazetteers. Were taxes under Huizong really extortionate when compared to previous and later reigns? How many problems, both administrative and financial, did the network cause for local governments and the people? If we were fortunate enough to have answers to these questions, we would be able to distinguish ideologically charged finger-pointing from reasoned critique of Huizongâs rule.

Ebrey deserves credit for having expanded our understanding of the âexpression of sovereigntyâ that she finds in Huizongâs pursuit of magnificence, which, as she argues, should not be seen as exceptional when compared to cases of European monarchs. One cannot still deny, however, that Huizongâs pursuit of magnificence was rather unusual, if not totally unacceptable, in Chinaâs long tradition of monarchical bureaucracy undergirded by Confucian ideology. Did Huizong (and his ministers) see any tension between his fascination with imperial grandeur and the time-honored ideal of Confucian kingship? As is well known, Huizong made deliberate efforts to continue and expand his fatherâs and older brotherâs activist legacies and was far from blind to the controversy they had elicited in court politics. It would have been interesting to see how Huizongâs pursuit of magnificence was justified in more traditional terms, that is, in the realm of political thought and statecraft.

Given its length, the book has only a few typos, which I list here. On p. 53, âa principle reasonâ should be âa principal reason.â Likewise, âthe principle sourceâ on p. 91 should be âthe principal source.â æç¨½å¿ is *Kuaiji zhi*, not *Guiji zhi*, thus its abbreviation should be *KJZ,* not *GJZ* (p. 601). Finally, the compiler of *Yanyou Siming zhi* å»¶ç¥åæå¿ was Yuan Jue è¢æ¡ • , not Yuan Tong è¢æ¡¶ (p. 605).

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