

Wu Gou 吳鈞, *Fengya Song: Kan de jian de da Song wenming* 風雅宋: 看得見的大宋文明 [*The Elegant Song Dynasty: The Visible Civilization of the Great Song*]. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2018. 590 pages, ISBN: 978-7559800817.

The Elegant Song Dynasty: The Visible Civilization of the Great Song, by Wu Gou 吳鈞, is a beautifully printed book that attempts to combine paintings, visual culture, everyday activities, and material culture of the Song dynasty [960–1279] in one work. A similar book with a similar title, *The Elegant Song: A Visual Record of the Song Dynasty Everyday Life* [*Fengya Song: Songchao shenghuo tuzhi* 風雅宋: 宋朝生活圖志], was written by Liang Zhibin 梁志賓.¹ The two books have a small amount of overlap, however, Wu covers more aspects than its predecessor.

The book title is a double entendre. On one level, the phrase *feng ya song* represents the three main types of songs in the *Book of Odes* [*Shijing* 詩經]: “airs of the states” [*guofeng* 國風], “elegantiae” [*ya* 雅], and “eulogia” [*song* 頌]. At the same time, *fengya* is a modern expression meaning “elegance.” So, by placing this word before the name of the Song dynasty, the title becomes *Fengya Song*, “*Elegant Song*.”

Instead of focusing on one area of research about the Song culture, this book explores a vast array of captivating cultural and social aspects of the dynasty, including everyday life, high culture, society, cities, commerce, and etiquette. It is a lively introduction to the general culture of the Song. Scholars of classical culture will enjoy the wide variety of source material that Wu uses to paint his grand picture of Song life. Although he lacks an official academic affiliation, Wu has tremendous knowledge about the Song dynasty – equal to that of many credentialed scholars in the field.

In his preface, Wu discusses his methodology in using the materials to write his book. He meticulously draws information from Song paintings that might not be apparent at first glance. If the author of a work of art and other background information are unknown, it could be open to misinterpretation. For example, to demonstrate how scholars can interpret the original painter’s intention from completely different perspectives, Wu brings up the Northern Song painter Zhang Zeduan’s 張擇端 [1085–1145] “Along the River during the Qingming Festival” [Qingming shanghe tu 清明上河圖], which he calls “a documentary of the Song.” This painting, which is among the best-known

1 Liang Zhibin 梁志賓, *Fengya Song: Songchao shenghuo tuzhi* 風雅宋: 宋朝生活圖志 [*The Elegant Song: A Visual Record of the Song Dynasty Everyday Life*] (Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 2014).

Chinese paintings, is the subject of a tremendous amount of scholarship. However, Wu points out that it is dangerous to speculate about the original intention of the artist based only on the painting, claiming that we need more substantial and direct documentation and records. From the perspective of modern literary theory, the authorial intent might be difficult to identify or interpret. For example, as Wu describes, Yu Hui 余輝, a contemporary scholar of history, believes that the fire observation tower in that painting appears to be used for leisure, and the fact no soldiers are present indicates that the Song administration was quite lax about fire control (p. 340–41). However, Wu disagrees with Yu's opinion, based on a text about construction during the Song; it displays an illustration of a fire observation tower, which looks very different from the one in Zhang's painting. Thus, the tower in the great painting is likely to have been depicted for effect and not as a representation of reality.

How can we obtain correct information from Song paintings? Wu adopts the method called “illustrating history with pictures” [*yi tu zheng shi* 以圖證史], in which paintings are used to verify statements about the Song. He observes that, in general, Song painters paid a great deal of attention to realistic detail. Therefore, their works provide more historical information than artworks in previous dynasties. He then proposes that useful messages can be discerned from these works of art at three levels. At the first level, the painter consciously communicates a message in his work through the text written at one edge of the scroll [*tiqian* 題簽]. Usually, the *tiqian* directly expresses the artist's intention, which makes it a reliable piece of information for scholars to investigate further. At the second level, the artist imparts a historical message about the “traces of social life” unconsciously. For example, the “Han Xizai's Evening Banquet” [Han Xizai yeyan tu 韓熙載夜宴圖], instead of offering a realistic scene depicting life in the Southern Tang [937–976] dynasty, shows the furniture, screens, beds, frames, and so forth from the Song era. Song painters may not have been serious about achieving historical accuracy in their rendering of a Southern Tang banquet; rather, they used the background and cultural items with which they were familiar. At the third level, Song paintings are full of realistic representations, the *zeitgeist* running through them. This realism can be regarded as the spirit of Song art. Wu thinks that this spirit may have come from the Confucian philosophy “to investigate things in order to obtain knowledge” [*ge wu zhi zhi* 格物致知], which was highly revered in the Song dynasty. Indeed, it is not easy to identify the origins of a period's style in literature or art. There is certainly more than one reason, and the author gives his opinions, but this complicated issue remains open to further discussion.

Wu displays a sophisticated understanding of how visual artwork can be used to reveal historical meaning.

Because this is a large book, in the following I list only the main points in each chapter.

Chapter 1 deals with daily life in the Song dynasty. How did the people in that period raise cats and dogs as pets? Wu talks about the minutia of everyday life, such as fishing rods, toothbrushes, the use of ice cubes, candles, and children's toys, which are particularly interesting to anyone studying everyday life and material culture in that era.

Chapter 2 covers the fine arts, including flower arrangements, personal portraits, incense burning, collecting antiques, the art of tea, and elegant furniture. This discussion should appeal to connoisseurs of high culture, scholars, and anyone interested in the art and leisure of the upper classes.

Chapter 3 discusses social and leisure activities in the Song, including games of chance, carnivals, female chefs, women's clothing, divorce documents, and the twelve signs of the zodiac. Through this discussion of facets of everyday life, the Song dynasty emerges from history books and is put into a context that is familiar and relatable to the modern reader.

Chapter 4 discusses Song cities, such as the urban revolution, the city depicted in the "Qingming shanghe tu," public facilities, running water, public royal gardens, and municipal gardens. This section will appeal to readers eager to learn about urban life and governance.

Chapter 5 takes as its subject commerce during the Song dynasty. The author discusses geisha houses (high-class brothels [*qinglou* 青樓]), advertising, boats and ships in Zhang's painting, and hydraulic engineering. These brothels are a popular topic of discussion in classical literature. The way in which Wu combines this subject with other aspects of commerce will be of interest to scholars.

Chapter 6 deals with official etiquette and ceremonies, such as how an official in the Song was appointed. Did commoners have to kneel in front of a judge when they went to court or when they met the emperor, as often shown in TV dramas? Finally, Wu discusses how chairs, which gradually became a regularly used item in the Tang to the Five Dynasties, became more popular in Song society.

Wu has thus tried to give a holistic picture of a Song city using a collection of paintings as well as many other sources. The one drawback is that it does not have detailed footnotes. Nevertheless, we applaud the author's tremendous achievement in producing this lavish, well-organized work, which showcases a wide variety of visual artwork, objects used in everyday life and material

culture, personal insights, and rigorous scholarship. I strongly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Song history and culture.

Su Jui-lung 蘇瑞隆

Associate Professor of Chinese, National University of Singapore, Singapore
chssujl@nus.edu.sg

Work Cited

Liang Zhibin 梁志賓. *Fengya Song: Songchao shenghuo tuzhi* 風雅宋: 宋朝生活圖志 [The Elegant Song: A Visual Record of the Song Dynasty Everyday Life]. Beijing: Zhongguo caizheng jingji chubanshe, 2014.