1-1-2015

[Review of] *The Annals of King T'aejo: Founder of Korea's Choson Dynasty*

Michael Wert  
*Marquette University, michael.wert@marquette.edu*

which, nonetheless, the Jews interacted. Rich notes and a bibliographic essay complete this surprisingly readable and important scholarly book. Summing Up: ★★★★ Essential. Upper-division undergraduates and above.—B. Weinstein, Howard University


Whittaker (Univ. of Gothenburg, Sweden) covers the era of roughly 2000 to 1500 BCE in this study of religion and society in the Middle Bronze Age on the Greek mainland (MH); she also includes the early Mycenaean period (LH I) and begins with the last phase of the Early Bronze Age (EH III). Recognizing and interpreting ritual activities from archaeological remains (not very abundant in MH) is difficult, but the author contends that the appearance of burial tumuli in this period has religious significance. She provides a detailed table and appendix documenting these tumulus burials. Grave Circle B at Mycenae still has MH graves; Circle A is the type-site for Early Mycenaean. Both have graves that display warrior ideology, and Whittaker sees the ritual involved with these graves as evidence for the militarization of religion supporting the development of an elite. Her discussion of the contents of the Mycenaean Grave Circles, supported by tables and drawings, is a useful reconsideration of this famous material. The bibliography is thorough and up-to-date. Summing Up: ★★ Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above.—C. King, Wright State University

Asia & Oceania

52-2704 DS913 2013-40219 CIP The annals of King T’aejo: founder of Korea’s Choson dynasty, tr. and annot. by Choi Byonghyon. Harvard, 2014. 1,028p bibl index ISBN 9780674281301 cloth, $55.00

Byonghyon (Honam Univ., South Korea) helps fill one of the most unfortunate lacunae in the teaching and writing of East Asian history—the lack of primary source material about Korean history in English. This monumental tome is a translation of the first 15 of the 1,893 volumes of The Annals of the Choson Dynasty. These annals are a monthly and sometimes daily compilation of memorials, meetings, and major events of each Korean king in the Choson dynasty (1392-1910). King T’aejo is the posthumous name of Yi Song’gye, the founder of Choson Korea; the text under review covers his reign from 1392 to 1398. The Annals of King T’aejo is essential for Korean history but is equally helpful to non-Korean specialists for at least two reasons. First, it is a fascinating lens into the international relations of 14th-century northeast Asia. This includes relationships between Korea and Ming China, Japan, the Ryukyu kingdom, and the Mongols. Second, it provides historians with case studies of issues facing all pre-modern East Asian states, such as tension between a rising Neo-Confucian political statecraft and Buddhism, and problems with Japanese pirates. Summing Up: ★★★★ Essential. All academic levels/libraries.—M. J. Wert, Marquette University

The popular press of late-19th-century Japan depicted men who wore Western dress and conformed to Western norms of behavior as effeminate. Only men who hewed to traditional standards or acted in the heroic mode deserved to be called men. Conversely, women who rejected maternity by coming to Tokyo to attend secondary schools or work as cafe waitresses were deemed degenerate and dangerous. Because Westernization was so closely tied to the goals of the Meiji state, these tropes of masculinity and femininity represented a severing of the state from the nation. In Karlin’s view, popular nationalism thus defined bears as much responsibility for Japan’s turn to fascism as the efforts by the governing elite to impose the emperor system from above. Characterized by a desire to return to the eternal past, nostalgia for a pristine Japan uncorrupted by foreign influence, and a search for enduring values in rural communities, the gendered discourse of popular nationalism permeated newspapers and magazines. By turns insightful and impenetrable, Karlin’s analysis draws on theories from Sigmund Freud to Judith Butler to address political problems through the lens of cultural history. Summing Up: ★★★ Recommended. Upper-division undergraduates and above.—A. Walthall, University of California, Irvine

52-2706 DS750 MARC Li, Chuntang. The urban life of the Song dynasty, tr. by Liu Chuan, Qiu Yun, and He Qiuhua. Paths International, 2014. 391p ISBN 9781844643530 cloth, $120.00

[Reviewed with The Urban Life of the Qing Dynasty, CH, Feb’15, 2708.] These two books on Chinese cities in different eras were published in Chinese in the 1990s in a series of history books designed to appeal to a broad readership. They focus on daily life in Song (960–1279) and Qing (1644–1911) cities, respectively, and are full of entertaining stories about merchants, beggars, prostitutes, and emperors. The organization is topical, with a goal of making readers feel immersed in urban life, particularly the life of the dynastic capitals (Kaifeng and Hangzhou for the Northern and Southern Song, Beijing for the Qing). They now appear in English editions. Unfortunately, however, it seems that no native English speaker was involved in editing them. The prose is usually awkward and sometimes incomprehensible. The level of detail is calculated to appeal to an audience already familiar with—and interested in—the nitty-gritty of Chinese political and administrative history. There are no illustrations. Scholars are not well served by the books, because they lack full citation of sources. In short, it is hard to see who would find these books worthwhile reading, except people seeking to collect interesting anecdotes about Chinese urban life in past centuries. A much-better-written English-language book of urban anecdotes from the Song period is available: Jacques Gernet’s Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion, 1250–1276 (1962). For Qing cities, many scholarly works have been published in English, but among the most engaging of the popular histories that offer portraits of Beijing in the Qing era (and later) are George Kate’s The Years That Were Fat: Peking, 1933–1940 (1952; Oxford reprint, 1989) and Michael Meyer’s The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed (2008).

Summing Up: Not recommended.—K. E. Stapleton, State University of New York at Buffalo


[Reviewed with The Urban Life of the Song Dynasty, CH, Feb’15, 52-