
In *Empresses, Art, and Agency in Song Dynasty China*, Hui-shu Lee recovers evidence of the patronage of painters, artisans, and architects by empresses and other palace women, as well as evidence of their own accomplished endeavors in literary composition and calligraphy. The first chapter of the book describes the efforts of Empress Liu 劉皇后 (969-1033) to secure the inclusion of the late Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 (r. 997-1022) and of her own likeness into the religious iconographies of the Song imperial temples. Lee surmises that the famous lifelike statues in the Sage Mother Hall of the Jinci 晋祠 Shrine in Shanxi province may have been modeled on the court of Empress Liu, to strengthen the legitimacy of her prolonged regency during the childhood years of Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (r. 1022-63). The second chapter gathers documentary and physical evidence of the literary talent and calligraphic skills of Song palace women. Lee shows that the dedicated study of shared models reduced differences between the handwriting of emperors and their palace women, to the extent that the calligraphy of female ghostwriters became indistinguishable from that of the emperors they served, and a uniform transcript of varied hands issued from the inner court. The second chapter also assembles painted images of writing women, to support the argument that during the Song dynasty literary ability, if confined to legitimate fields of learning, could contribute to a woman’s virtuous reputation. The third chapter celebrates the accomplishments of Empress Wu 吳皇后 (1115-97), who matched Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127-62) in the elegance of his calligraphy and in the refinement of his tastes, and who devised an aesthetic of yielding worthiness that afforded her an enduring legacy of political and artistic influence at court. The fourth chapter analyzes Empress Yang’s 杨皇后 (1162 or 1172-1233) collaborations with the court painter Ma Yuan 马远 (fl. 1190-1230): a series of album leaves, fans, and hanging scrolls with generic scenes and vignettes that Empress Yang, by a combination of calligraphic skill and literary allusion, turned into personal messages and political warnings. The epilogue briefly considers the legacy of Empress Wu and Empress Yang in the latter years of the Southern Song, notably possible collaborations of Empress Xie 謝皇后 (1208-82) with the painters Xia Gui 夏珪 (fl. 1200) and Ma Lin 马麟 (fl. 1215-56). In every chapter, Lee supports her arguments and identifications with close, detailed analyses of individual
works, and with a full complement of illustrations. The comprehensiveness of Lee’s recoveries and the high quality of the reproductions make this an important, valuable book.

Readers of Nan Nü will be interested in the book’s broader arguments about gendered agency and subjectivity, but in its treatment of these matters of theory and methodology Empresses, Art, and Agency is less certain. Rather than placing the patronage and artistic practice of Song palace women within the specific, intricate context of the inner court, the book proposes to regard their endeavors as instances of “women’s creativity in China” (p. 4), in the context of “the patriarchal values that dominated traditional Chinese society” (p. 9). The book “focuses on imperial women, rather than those of other social strata, simply because information exists about the role women of the palace played as artists and patrons” (p. 9). But the attempt to reconstruct the genuine intentions and real actions of historical women promises a closeness to empresses and palace ladies that the sources will not allow. Because the sources participated in the economy of inscribed, gendered surfaces that circulated in the imperial city, and because their authors intended by their writing to affect the value of other objects and persons participating in that economy, the conversion of those written and painted surfaces into actual persons and physical actions yields a loss of historicity rather than a gain. The transfer of the subjectivity and agency of inscribed surfaces onto conjectured persons requires a determination of authenticity in terms that the sources themselves do not support. As a result, Lee’s determination to conjure real women from the transmitted documents repeatedly forces her to accept interested discourses as historically accurate, and causes her to create circular arguments. The passages in Empresses, Art, and Agency that try to reconstruct the early careers of the various empresses, for example, judge the accuracy of anecdotes in official histories and notebooks (biji 筆記) by criteria of historical and psychological truth rather than by examining the discursive context of those anecdotes and the particular historiographical sensibilities that inform different genres. The analysis of Twelve Scenes of Water, a gift from Empress Yang to her adoptive nephew Yang Gu 楊谷 (fl. 1233), plausibly connects the depictions of water in its varied states with Yang Gu’s biography in the Songshi 宋史(History of the Song) which teaches that kinsmen of an empress can hold onto their power only by learning to yield. But to conclude that “Obviously, long before she died, Empress Yang recognized Yang Gu’s tendency to assume the honors that were offered to him and his brother” (p. 218) introduces a concern with psychological realism that fuses texts of different dates and different genres in a circular argument and reduces their historical value rather than enhancing it. The determination to discern real women in gendered discourses creates a similar risk of raising historical phantoms. Lee recognizes that traditional historians were predisposed to finding dominant palace women during the latter years of the Song dynasty—an excess of yin 陰 that corresponded to the Mongol invasion from the north—but she nonetheless appears to accept this discourse as a commentary on real “failures of male leadership” (p. 238) and as evidence of an ascendancy of capable women.