The Ming Prince and Daoism: Institutional Patronage of an Elite, by Richard G. Wang. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xxx, 301 pp. US$74.00 (cloth).

Richard Wang's book is a veritable treasure trove for scholars interested in the deep-rooted institutional ties between Daoism and an overwhelming majority of the princes who were born to emperors during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). It is a book that will acquaint many historians of late imperial China with a range of novelties, first and foremost the enduring and structural support offered by the extended Ming imperial family to Daoist institutions, Daoist ritual activities, Daoist masters, and, in general, all kinds of Daoist fashions at the courts of the princes. To ensure that the scope of this support is clear right away, it suffices to point out that Wang identifies Daoist sponsorship by literally *hundreds* of princes, and shows that these aristocrats continued their patronage far into the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The book's argument works in two ways: it presents a significantly new understanding of the religious activities of the Ming imperial clan, and it redefines the role of Daoism as a major player in imperial politics and its princely economy.

It is obvious that the author is motivated to correct a mistake that remains common in the field of Chinese history—although nowadays less overtly—namely, the tendency to read a modern "secular" mentality into Chinese governance, with Confucians representing the rational guardians of an other wise superstitious China. Wang explains the relevance of this distortion to the historical understanding of the Ming princes, stating that "Confucian scholars and historians had a bias against the Ming princes because the latter did not share with the former the route to success by studying the Confucian curriculum and passing the official examinations" (xxv). If Wang's study makes one thing clear, it is that figures such as the Jiajing emperor (1522–1566) no longer deserve to be denounced with the disparaging label of deluded adepts of Daoism—a political verdict imposed on them by frustrated Confucians at court. From now on, it will be feasible to understand the proclivities of so-called Daoist emperors within the

common stock of activities practiced—and even promoted—among the members of the Ming imperial clan.

This motivation has resulted in a fascination with the truly unbelievable wealth of data regarding Ming princely involvement in Daoist affairs. Wang has divided his book into seven chapters, each covering a particular category of princely patronage of Daoism. A prologue and an epilogue lay out the main issues in a clear and orderly way. The book oozes enthusiasm for what must have been a tantalizing journey through a vast array of sources that crystallize into an increasingly solid picture, and Wang has succeeded in presenting his rich data in a more than palatable way.

Chapter 1 offers a survey of the history, dynamics, and networks within which the princes and their principalities were embedded. This chapter provides first glimpses of the pivotal role played by Daoists at the princely courts. In addition to the relatively well-known military powers the princes received from the emperor, "the state also provided each principality with Daoist ritual performers known as *yuewusheng* 樂舞生, and each princedom employed nearly three hundred such performers" (14). The implications of these ritualists are further spelled out in chapter 2, which analyzes their Daoist training center, known as the Abbey of Divine Music (Shenyue guan 神樂觀), in Nanjing (later in Beijing) (34). Indeed, all the state rites—even at the central imperial level—were conducted by Daoist acolytes.

Further forays into princely ritual activities are offered in chapter 3. Here we learn that not only was it common among Ming princes to commission Daoist rituals for important occasions (including local spells of drought), but it was also not uncommon to find Daoist initiates among the princes themselves, some of whom did indeed carry out Daoist rituals.

Chapter 4 explores the interaction between the Ming princes' practices of self-cultivation and their "making and consumption of Daoist books" (61). Printing and reprinting of Daoist books for use in the principalities was widespread not only in the case of the Daoist Canon, but also for a whole set of other Daoist books and scriptures. Interestingly, many princes themselves wrote Daoist treatises and manuals conspicuously "aimed at the emperor, their

imperial relatives, and acquainted literati" (81).

Chapter 5 presents a large range of temples that were commonly sponsored by the Ming princes. Most of these were dedicated to martial divinities. There are twenty-two examples of patronage of temples dedicated to Zhenwu 真武, the True Warrior; and twenty-one of patronage of temples dedicated to King Guan (i.e., Guan Yu 關羽, the military hero of the Three Kingdoms).

Chapter 6 surveys various forms of literary patronage, including the writing of Daoist poetry and the chanting of the Dao in salons. Finally, chapter 7 examines two popular fashions of Daoist patronage, namely "clerical contacts and the adoption of Daoist names by Ming literati" (140).

One of the weaker points of Wang's study is his unwillingness to attempt any interpretation of certain important historical circumstances. For example, while he establishes the fact that military defense was among the main functions of the principalities that were established by the Ming founder, and although we have seen that the foremost type of Daoist divinity to be sponsored by princes was martial, nothing is said about the possibility that there existed a meaningful relationship between the authority that Daoists exerted over martial divinities and the patronage offered by princes who were, after all, military commanders. Historical records repeatedly state that Daoists were expected to defend the borderlands by means of their martial rituals. Wang merely suggests that the princes "took refuge" in Daoism (21)—a concept that still leaves Daoism shrouded in a mist of mystery and marginality.

Notwithstanding this minor critique, Richard Wang's book is essential reading for any historian of Ming China. His insights will call into question the received wisdom that the study of Daoism can shine no light on historical research on the late empire, other than on the private concerns of benighted monarchs who neglected their governmental responsibilities. In China, religion was hardly ever private, and certainly not for this enormous princely aristocracy that publicly supported Daoism.

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