

Joanna Handlin Smith, *The Art of Doing Good, Charity in Late Ming China*, University of California Press, 2009. pp. 403.

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Several books have recently been published showing that charity was not absent in the long history of China. Sometimes the authors of these scholarly works criticize Westerners, mainly missionaries, who were fond of reporting on the low level of charitable work in that country. To be sure these critics were quite unjust, but that does not help much in understanding what was really done by the Chinese. Perhaps, such negative remarks are a reminder to scholars that, although it is impossible to be completely free of preconceived ideas, a serious study must strive to understand a situation from inside, on its own terms. In the introduction of her book Joanna Handlin Smith underscores what the correct attitude should be. But then she completely omits any appreciative references to Chinese charity by Westerners when she writes on the subject she has chosen for her long, precise, complex study of charity in late Ming China. This she examines mainly through the activities of five men, Yang Dongming, Gao Panlong, Chen Longzheng, Lu Shiyi, and Qi Biaoqiao, who left sufficient writings to allow us to analyze their deeds and perceive what their motivations were.

Yang was a literatus and mid-level official, who, in 1590, took temporary leave of his post in Beijing to return to his home in Henan (p.45). He belonged to the national elite, but was deeply rooted to his home-town. Gao was an “affluent owner of two hundred *mou* of land” (p.62). Chen, a late starter who passed official exams at the age of 49 (p.64), was also a great personality and fine scholar (p. 44). Lu Shiyi, at the beginning of Ch. 5 devoted to him, is described as a small player, whose economic status was that of a member of middle class (p. 123). Qi, from Shaoxing, was a former official from an eminent family (p.160). So many other actors also intervene in the book in charitable programs that the reader is easily lost, and actually does not remember who they are; only perhaps to which category of players they belong.

In the main five characters that form the book, it is difficult to gather details of the biographies of the main protagonists, scattered here and there in these chapters. It was not, of course, the purpose of the research to write the life of those remarkable people. All the same, it would have been a service to the reader, who is not necessarily a specialist of the period, to have short portraits of the main protagonists, with the essentials of their life journey in one or two pages. Fortunately a detailed index helps to return to pages connected to this or that person, activity or topic. This is to say that the book is very rich with many detailed analyses, leading to important conclusions summarized in the last pages of the book, to which readers may be tempted to jump because they have difficulties following the descriptions and

explanations given through the chapters. Because of this they may miss much that would otherwise help them to understand interesting aspects of Chinese society at the fall of the Ming dynasty.

What are these conclusions? The anxiety so clearly present in many people at the end of the Ming dynasty was mainly due to the end of an era, to what the writer calls “capricious social mobility” (p. 282) and to the extreme competitive examination system. But, Smith has shown that the elite of Jiangnan appreciated the non-agrarian laborers, a fact that helped to stabilize the population. It is also noted that the scholars who did not succeed in the official exam, and were under-employed, were a pool from which members of benevolent groups could be recruited and given a sense of achievement in their personal life. Above all, defining experiences, particularly of loss, were characteristics of most of the great leaders of charitable campaigns.

A kind of civil society emerged, but not according to the frequent understanding of the idea in present times; in this regard the author states that, “ during the late Ming, regardless of the motivation involved, the rhetoric of doing good, of undertaking the indisputable worthy and urgent goal of saving lives, had become the lingua franca for negotiations among various constituencies and between high and low” (p.281). It is also interesting to note that discourse on charity was not inspired by any kind of Christian influence (pp. 253-254). Some recent converts of high social standing participated in charities, but Christianity was certainly not preeminent among these charitable undertakings. China therefore had developed its own tradition in the domain of mutual-aid. Distribution of food, charitable schools, medical services, beside burials and liberating animals, were all concrete results of high moral meditations, and not only directed towards family or clan members.

The very last lines of the book announce the disappearance of late Ming charity, or better its transformation under the influence of merchants, with the sponsorship of the Qing state. Moral education, one of the most important aims of the great protagonists presented in the book, was replaced by the merchants’ propensity to advertise their own respectability; but this is a different topic altogether. Smith has stated that her work was not intended to demonstrate anything about what charity ought to be. She writes as an historian, and gives justice to high personalities and many of those around them. With the inclusion of all possible quarrels, disagreements and various views on charity among those involved, she convincingly proves that charity was a vibrant motivation for many in that period. Beyond her program she also helps the reader to reflect on the meaning and content of “doing good”, since many difficulties and their various practical solutions seem very much the same to today’s charitable undertakings.