

Timothy Brook Writing of History

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ABSTRACT. Doctor Timothy Brook once studied at Harvard University and learnt after Professor Benjamin I.Schwartz . After graduation, he taught at Stanford University and the University of Toronto. He is now a professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Canada and one of the most influential Chinese sinologists in Canada. This paper is to analyze and compare several works of bu zhengmin, and to explore the historical writing mode and characteristics of bu zhengmin.

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1. An overview of the confusion of pleasureion

Doctor Timothy Brook once studied at Harvard University and learnt after Professor Benjamin I.Schwartz. After graduation, he taught at Stanford University and the University of Toronto. He is now a professor of history at the University of British Columbia in Canada and one of the most influential Chinese sinologists in Canada. In 2004, his book *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* was published by Life · Reading · Xinzhi Sanlian Bookstore. In 2016, it was reprinted by Guangxi Publishing House. *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, another book of him which is comparable to *The Confusions of Pleasure* was published by Hunan People's Publishing House in 2017. These two books won the "Levinson Award" and the "Mark Linton History Award" respectively. In recent years, Brook books have been successively published and reprinted. The enthusiasm of the mainland academic circles towards him is seen rising. Brook influence also touched on many other disciplines, such as Buddhist history, economic history, and art history. Perhaps, it is the perfect combination of his unique research perspective and simple and smooth writing that attracted a big number of readers.

Timothy Brook is famous for his study of Ming history, especially the study of Late Ming history. As an overseas sinologist, Brook research, of course, has a perspective of the Western context. He uses a historical writing model which is different from the traditional historical historiography in China. Brook likes to find intersections between two different disciplines for new interpretations. We can also see this characteristic from research of *The Confusions of Pleasure*. The book explores cultural changes caused by the development and prosperity of commerce in a perspective of economics. It seems to writing about the business of the Ming Dynasty, but it is actually concerned about the cultural connotation behind the business. As Brook stated in an interview: "My idea is to write a cultural history that describes a country where great business changes are taking place, a book about the role of business in Ming society, and reveal the joy that wealth brings and the puzzle that it triggers. "Who was indulging in pleasure four hundred years ago? Who was confusing? Brook opened the curtain for us through the book *The Confusions of Pleasure*.

The story originates from the founding of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, which lasted for 267 years, until the collapse of the Ming Dynasty in 1644. The book will be divided into four stages, corresponding to the four chapters named "Winter", "Spring", "Summer", "Autumn". Seasons are used to symbolize the atmosphere of the four stages of the Ming Dynasty: the quietness of winter, the resurgence of spring, the noise of summer, and the depression of autumn. This metaphoric model was not created by Brook, but was originated from *Shexian County annals* written by Zhang Tao, the leader of County Shexian in the Ming Dynasty. Zhang Tao was an insignificant and inconspicuous person who lived during Wanli years. In 1607, he was appointed as the county leader, but Zhang Tao did not like this small town which bears a strong commercial atmosphere. Zhang Tao believed that the development of commerce caused social disorder and people's moral degradation. Everything around him confused him. He yearned for the stable and orderly life under the rule of Emperor Hongwu in the early Ming Dynasty. Is the society of the late Ming Dynasty really like what described in Zhang Tao's book? Brook used Zhang Tao as a guide to re-discover this complex and diverse era. *The Confusions of Pleasure* is a historical dialogue between Brook and Zhang Tao which spanned time and space.

The Confusions of Pleasure is the Ming Dynasty in Brook eyes. Using Brook light and calm writing style and

prose style, he leads us back to 400 years ago and show us the daily life of people in that era. How did people travel, how did they deliver letters, what kind of clothes did they wear? What they use? What kinds of books they watched and other problems. What Brook is concerned about is not just a class group, but various classes including bureaucrats, literati, merchants, weavers, craftsmen, prostitutes and vagrants. He is more concerned about how people in the middle class and at the bottom of the society lived. As Brook said, he writes this book not because of any grand theories, but because he wants to know how ordinary people lived at a time when there were so many difficulties and challenges. He is really looking at the development of history from the bottom of the society.

2. Compared with Other Works

There is always an unique perspective in Brook historical writing. When we look at the catalogue of *The Confusions of Pleasure*, “economy”, “trade”, “market” and “consumption” that we can see make us think this book is another economic book written in the western context, but if we watch carefully, we will know the author’s idea. Although most of the articles focus on the business discussion, they extend to the issue of culture in the end, so the book can also be regarded as a history of commercial culture in the Ming Dynasty. Since the 1950s, studies on the commercial and social influences of the Ming Dynasty have been carried out with many successful works by the Chinese historian Fu Yiling. But it wasn’t until the 1980s that the issue of culture was raised and the early attempt to examine it in terms of economic relations was Craig Clunas *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Clunas discusses the appreciation and use of articles by the literati of the Ming Dynasty and then extended the material culture and consumption concept of the Ming Dynasty. What he discusses is how cultural consumer goods circulate in the society as commodities and how they are consumed by different classes. He focused on the Ancient literati. However Timothy Brook *The Confusions of Pleasure* not only focuses on the cultural consumer goods as commodities, but also focuses on the commercial society in the whole Ming Dynasty, including currency, production, consumption, trade, fashion and other aspects. What he wants to reveal is how commerce changes people’s lives. He focuses on more wider classes. One is “extensive” and the other is “refined”. However, from the perspective of methods, their studies both extend cultural issues from the perspective of commodity production and consumption.

Brook is always trying to interpret history from a new perspective. He likes to seek connections between different disciplines and fields, or creates relationships, which is also the approach favoured by western historical studies. For example, the previous doctoral dissertation *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* studied the relationship between Buddhism and gentry in late Ming Dynasty from the perspective of social history, and explored their social and political activities through their donation to Buddhist monasteries. His works published in recent years show that his research perspective and vision are broader than before. The new published *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* explores how climate shapes the history from an environmental perspective. *Vermeer’s Hat* uses Vermeer’s seven paintings as a starting point to paint a picture of global trade in the 17th century. If the earlier *Praying for Power* and *The Confusions of Pleasure* focus on the Ming Dynasty, *Vermeer’s Hat* and *Mr Selden’s Map of China: The Spice Trade, a Lost Chart & the South China Sea* are new attempts made by Bu from a global perspective. He constantly tries to explore China from the outside world by placing it in a wider world and constantly seeks the relationship between China and the world.

How is history written? Different historians have different interpretations. *The Confusions of Pleasure* is the Ming Dynasty that Bu Zhengmin sees and understands. Although some of his methods and views have aroused the doubts of some domestic scholars and some of his views are still worth discussing, each book is a historian’s reflection on the past.

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