All Mine! Happiness, Ownership, and Naming in Eleventh-Century China

By Stephen Owen. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. 208 pp. $30.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Anna M. Shields*

Princeton University, USA
*Corresponding author. Email: ashields@princeton.edu

doi:10.1017/jch.2022.39

The appearance of a new volume by Stephen Owen inevitably sparks lively discussion, debate, and engagement with the literature of middle-period China. This is certainly the case in the publication of *All Mine! Happiness, Ownership, and Naming in Eleventh-Century China*. Owen returns to more fully explore themes addressed in earlier books, including those on the mid-Tang (*The End of the Chinese "Middle Ages"*) and Northern Song song lyrics (*Just A Song*), here focusing on Northern Song informal prose (mostly in the *ji* 記 form), which eleventh century masters such as Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, and Huang Tingjian brought to unparalleled heights. In this brief volume of essays, Owen wrestles with a series of questions central to his selected texts. In the context of the rapid economic and social change that characterized the Tang-Song transition, including the explosion of commerce, the rise of printing and book production, and the monetization of the economy, how did eleventh-century literati come to terms with the new stakes of ownership and their own delight in acquisition and possession? How did these developments manifest in their conception of *le* 樂, which Owen translates as "happiness"? How did new practices of buying, collecting, and ownership complicate traditional Confucian beliefs about the importance of simplicity and selflessness, and prohibitions against excess? Owen argues persuasively that "The anxiety about ownership came in direct proportion to a pervasive awareness of ownership" (85) in a wide range of relationships between writers and their "things," from rocks to gardens to paintings. The book's introduction, six chapters, and conclusion, and the appended translations of the prose texts in the book sketch the prevalence of these questions—and they also show us that eleventh-century literati did not develop anything like a consensus about how to answer them, which is hardly surprising in a century filled with fundamental disagreements over appropriate cultural, political, and economic remedies to human crises. Owen places his work alongside that of other scholars who have wrestled with questions of possession and its discontents, such as Ronald Egan, Xiaoshan Yang, Michael Fuller, and Stephen West, but he offers us new, sometimes troubling views of Northern Song literati discomfort with the ways value structures were shifting in their lifetimes.

The contributions of the book include Owen's patience with the twists and turns of eleventh-century informal prose, the effortlessness of which can sometimes deceive readers as to its subtle craft; his identification of moments of crisis and tension in the texts, where writers pause to reframe their arguments or shift their grounds; and his well-known ability to summon up earlier (and sometimes later) voices of the tradition to weave into his analyses. Although the volume claims "the eleventh century" as its

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ground, the majority of the texts here were composed in a sixty-year stretch between the 1040s and roughly 1100, or from Song emperor Renzong's mature reign to Huizong's accession, with excerpts from a few later texts, such as Li Qingzhao's "Postface to the *Record of Metal and Stone*," standing as harbingers of the fall of the Northern Song and the impermanence of ownership. That fall and impermanence are also represented by the loss of Huizong's famous collections of art and his Mount Gen 艮岳 garden, which Owen refers to at various moments in the book as a looming end. Some of the chapters began as invited lectures, and the discursive flow of that original form, with minimal scholarly and textual apparatus as Owen moves swiftly from text to text, is yet another feature of the volume, echoing in many ways the qualities of the primary texts. This approach also allows Owen to draw connections between naming and ownership and other new Song concerns that might seem more distant from his central themes, such as empirical investigation and literati awareness of the growing merchant class; for instance, Chapter 5, "The Stone that Tells Its Name," threads together these themes from late essays by Su Shi and Huang Tingjian. Since the essays are presented as literary excursions, more along the lines of Owen's early *Remembrances* than his studies of literary history, readers will come away with a layered impression of eleventh-century encounters with ownership that resonate in the imagination, rather than explanations of writers' responses to cultural change.

From my perspective, however, Owen also makes choices throughout the volume that undermine some of his readings. This is particularly so in his discussion of essays in which the Northern Song writers are wrestling with the relationship among their private selves, the things they created and owned, and the social world in which both were embedded. Here I focus on three choices, offering some alternative translations and readings for consideration. The first is Owen's translation of *le* as "happiness" or "to be happy"; the second is a striking suspicion of one of the characteristic features of Song literati culture, its civic consciousness and attention to the "public good," the *gong* 公; and the third is the absence of history—both in Owen's readings of historical arguments in the primary texts and in a lack of attention to generational shifts in the eleventh century. These three features are themselves intertwined, because they have to do with the individual's engagement with the larger world—not just the phenomenal material world (the sphere of rocks, paintings, and landscapes, for example), but the phenomena of human social relations, including those preserved in history, in which one could "delight"—another possible translation of *le*—and could also *share* delight.[1] From the outset, "happiness" and "to be happy (in)" as translations for *le* strike this reader as inadequate. The individual and transient quality of "happiness" in contemporary English usage elides the deeper moral commitments explicit in early Confucian discussions of *le* as an emotion that required both cultivation and extension beyond the individual.[2] More critically, it obscures the powerful transitivity of *le* as a verb, for which English has only limited options. The response of the person experiencing *le* is one of active engagement—"delighting in Heaven" (*le Tian* 樂天), for example, reveals a profound and morally normative appreciation of the phenomena that stimulate the emotion. As

[1]Here I choose "delight" as a translation in order to better approximate the transitive use of *le* as a verb. In its nominal form, "joy" comes closer as an English translation to the profundity of *le* in the Chinese tradition, but the verb "enjoy" suggests a feeling that is both more temporary and superficial than *le*. English simply does not have a close fit to the flexibility of the literary Chinese word.

[2]For a summary of contemporary philosophical and psychological views of "happiness," see the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/happiness/ (accessed July 5, 2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the passages from the *Analects* and the *Mencius* included in the introduction show, the ability to experience *le*—which I will translate as "delight" and "to delight in"—was a fundamental feature of "worthy people" (*xianzhe* 賢者) and "the wise" (*zhizhe* 知者), who, the Confucian masters argued, were required to extend that state to those around them, *tongle* 同樂, especially if the wise and worthy aspired to be virtuous people (*junzi* 君子).[3] It is true, as Owen notes, that Mencius placed social, shared delight at the top of the hierarchy of *le* (I.A2, I.B1) that worthy people should pursue, but I do not agree with Owen's argument that "solitary happiness" (*dule* 獨樂) was always "a problematic happiness" (8), nor was it necessarily tied to ownership or possession. Solitary *le* could still be a starting point for broader understanding and cultivation.

The eleventh-century writers in the volume place this Confucian definition of *le* squarely at the center of their discussions, and their strategic use of other terms for more transient "pleasures" and "enjoying," such as *huan* 歡, *yu* 娛, and *xi* 喜, illuminates their sensitivity to the uniquely normative dimensions of *le*. They knew that money could buy "happiness" in an ephemeral *huan*-like way—the world around them offered more and more sensory pleasures for sale—but money could not buy *le*. Successful writing about *le* that arose from something one purchased depended not on defending wealth or acquisition, therefore, but on clearly explaining one's responses to the experience of the "thing" as good and right. This is the path taken by both Ouyang Xiu and Su Shi in their essays on Ouyang Xiu's late-life moniker, "Retired Layman of Six Ones" 六一居士 (Chapter 1), for example. Ouyang Xiu concludes his essay on his own name (which describes five objects of the studio, plus himself) with a discussion of what is "appropriate" *yi* 宜 at different moments of an official's career—this, in the year when Ouyang had recognized that the political sphere had changed dramatically and his influence had waned. Rather than seeing this as Ouyang conceding "defeat" in the discussion with his interlocutor (28), I would suggest that Ouyang works deliberately towards this conclusion, to defend his grasp of "propriety" (*yi* 宜) in an ideal sense. At the appropriate moment, with a full understanding of what was required of him at that time in the state and his career in 1070, he has relinquished the "labor" and "cares" of official service and has staked out a space among a handful of meaningful "objects" (*wu* 物) that "bring no calamity" (*wuhuan* 無患). In the end, Ouyang's delight does not derive from "owning" the objects, but from placing himself among them to fulfill, in a temperate way, his "long-held wish" (*suyuan* 素願, my translation). As Su Shi argues, Ouyang placed himself alongside the objects as an equal kind of "thing." By thus vanishing among them seamlessly, he could "have" (i.e., embody and follow, rather than "possess") the Way, *you Dao* 有道 (29).

Other texts also argue that ownership and *le* could coexist peacefully, as long as the individual fully recognized the moral demands that true "delight" placed on his relationship to that which delighted him—even in a solitary fashion. That is, one could claim "ownership" that was not "possession," but rather a full internalization of the qualities of the source of delight and a refusal to be burdened by either the object or the emotion itself. This experience of *le* had a long tradition in both Confucian classics and Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*[4]—it was not merely a choice between pride of possession and "Buddhist non-attachment" (86). Su Shi is well known for negotiating

[3]For a discussion of the Mencian position on shared delight, see Curie Virag, *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 120–24.

[4]See the discussion of the relationship between joy and "wandering" in the *Zhuangzi*, in Virag, *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 138–39; 154–55; 158–160 (on the "delight of fish" 魚之樂).

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a way to find joy in things without being burdened by them, as in his "Account of the Hall of Precious Paintings" (寶繪堂記), discussed at various places in the volume,[5] but Sima Guang's "Account of the Garden of Solitary Delight" (獨樂園記), examined in Chapter 4, "All Mine," takes up this challenge as well. As Owen notes, Sima Guang recognizes the pitfalls of taking delight in something owned privately, and his account of his garden indeed foregrounds this problem by opening with the Mencius passage on the superiority of shared, social delight. But over the course of the essay, even as he enumerates the names and locations of the sites in the garden, Sima Guang explains the effortlessness and the simplicity of the feelings he experiences in his study and garden. He concludes with a passage that I translate as follows, parsing the sentence somewhat differently from Owen: "When the bright moon comes in its turn and the cool breezes come of their own, I wander [in this] without being drawn, and I stop with no obstacles to block me, in my eyes and ears and inner organs, all that belongs to me 悉為己有 [i.e, the garden, the natural setting, his own body], in steady solitude, I am expanded by it, [to the point where] I can't imagine there could be a joy to replace this on earth" (95).[6] Owen's breaking of the sentence after *xi wei ji you* leads him to translate the phrase as "all is mine!," which is the source of the volume's title, emphasizing possession and selfishness. However, I suggest that Sima Guang's ownership here is precisely the kind of "ownership"—which is to say perfect internalization—described by Cheng Yi and quoted at the beginning of the chapter (86, my translation here): "When learning arrives at delight, then it is complete. An honest and sincere love of learning has never been as good as finding delight in getting it for oneself [自得之為樂].[7] Those who love it are like those who wander in others' gardens; those who delight in this *thus have made it their own* [樂之者則己物爾; Owen: "for those who are happy in it, it is one's own possession"]." Sima Guang defends his solitary delight and his garden precisely as joys he "obtained on his own," an experience that allows him to be both "in steady solitude" and yet "expanded," retaining his selfhood and finding transport in his garden, yet not constrained by either self or space. Delight and ownership as internalization, whether of learning or of the deeper resonances of a phenomenal experience, could coexist for these Northern Song literati without their falling prey to the burden of "possession."

The inadequacy of "happiness" as a translation persists when Owen examines writing that raises the problem of sociality, the ability to share delight with others, and to bring others delight as part of one's social responsibility as an official working for the public good, or in one's social role as friend or relative. Surprisingly, Owen spends little

[5]For Su Shi's approach to his relationship with things, see also Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), and his *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2006), esp. ch. 4, "Art Collecting and Its Discontents"; and Michael A. Fuller, "Pursuing the Complete Bamboo in the Breast: Reflections on a Classical Chinese Image for Immediacy," *HJAS* 53:1 (1993), 5–21.

[6]Editions vary on the modern punctuation for the line, but most punctuate it without a full stop, as follows: 明月時至，清風自來，行無所牽，止無所柅，耳目肺腸，悉為己有，踽踽焉、洋洋焉，不知天壤之間復有何樂可以代此也。.See, for example, Li Wenze and Xia Shaohui, eds., *Sima Guang ji*, 3 vols. (Chengdu: Sichuan daxue chubanshe, 2010), 3:1378.

[7]Owen renders this as "finding it a self-contained happiness" (86). The concept of "obtaining [things such as delight, knowledge, etc.] on one's own" or "apprehending [things] in and by oneself" can be seen in several Northern Song writers (frequently in Su Shi's work) and became central to Daoxue conceptions of learning.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time on the boundaries between the public and the personal, *gong* and *si* 私, that this question raises, except in a negative sense; his readings are most compelling when they remain firmly on the side of the personal and private—Su Shi and his rocks, for example, in Chapter 3, "Missing Stones." As scholars have long recognized, however, concern about the relationship between good governance and human well-being permeates eleventh-century extant texts of all genres, and that concern represents a major shift from Tang modes of thinking and writing to Song ones. Eleventh-century writing on ownership and its perils is staggeringly outweighed in quantity by writing on the welfare of the "people"—not merely in the vast trove of official documents such as memorials and edicts in Song collections, but also in letters, poetry, and notebooks (*biji* 筆記). Writing on popular welfare remains little studied by scholars of literature (although it is better explored by social and political historians), in part due to a reasonable mistrust of Confucian hypocrisy and elitism, along with our knowledge of the uneven impacts of Song state policies on the public welfare. Texts on the subject can be difficult to interpret, and readers are right to ask: at what point, and in which contexts, should we read Northern Song civic-mindedness as self-serving or superficial?

Ouyang Xiu's famous essays from Chuzhou in Chapter 2, "The Magistrate of Peach Blossom Spring," were written during his provincial service in the 1040s after a devastating trial and public humiliation. In his discussion of the "Account of the Pavilion of the Drunken Old Man" (醉翁亭記) and "Account of the Pavilion of Abundance and Delight" (豐樂亭記), Owen adopts the suspicious reading of Ouyang's "delight in [the people's] delight [*le qi le* 樂其樂]."[8] In these familiar essays, Ouyang describes his efforts to build structures to create *le* to be shared with others—the "Chuzhou people" in particular—and also vaunts his higher understanding of "delight" in his role as state official. As he states plainly in the conclusions to both essays, the role of delegate of the emperor demands not just that he provide for the local people, but also that he share their delight *and* use his literary talents to document his understanding of their delight. He concludes the "Account of the Pavilion of Abundance and Delight" with that message: "To spread the grace and virtue of the emperor in order to share delight together with the people is the duty of the administrator. Thus I wrote [this account] and named their pavilion after this." (夫宣上恩德，以與民共樂，刺史之事也。遂書而名其亭焉; my translation). In the first essay, Ouyang brings his historical consciousness to bear on the current state of peace and plenty that the people enjoy, which derives from "a hundred years of peace" after the chaos of the Five Dynasties; in the second, he offers a new view of "drunkenness" that exceeds individual, ephemeral pleasure in order to bring delight to others in Chuzhou. Owen recognizes the "intensely political Confucianism" at play in Ouyang's interventions and his appreciation of the common people's delight, but he does not acknowledge the degree to which Northern Song literati shared this social and political consciousness and did not simply give it "lip service" (57). It therefore made an appropriate topic for even informal compositions. Ouyang Xiu deliberately works to broaden the range of moral action available to a literatus, even one in a low-ranking position, or with no position at all.

Even if Ouyang's depictions of his efforts for the Chuzhou natives may strike us as naïvely elitist or self-praising, it is hard to be similarly suspicious of Su Shi, in part because he anticipates that response and often deflects it with wit or humility. Later

[8]For one older essay that adopts a similar approach to Ouyang's writing, see Xianda Lian, "The Old Drunkard Who Finds Joy in His Own Joy—Elitist Ideas in Ouyang Xiu's Informal Writings," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews CLEAR* 23 (2001):), 1–29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the same chapter, Owen discusses Su Shi's "Account of the Pavilion of Enjoying the Rain" 喜雨亭記 from 1062. Here, Su Shi engages in conversation with his "guests" (the Confucian "two or three fellows" (二三子)) in order to realize a more humane and correct understanding of the purpose of rain: to nourish the people. The essay moves from Su Shi's "enjoying" (*xi* 喜) rain to the more pressing topic of the people's well-being, as the unnamed companions tell him that if it should fail to rain, "then even if we few fellows desired to happily wander and delight in this pavilion, how could we have it [that delight]?" Owen focuses on Su Shi's crediting the rain to the "Maker of Things" (造物者) rather than to the emperor or to Su Shi as his official representative. Owen suggests that Su Shi is "being playful" in pretending that the rain is for his personal benefit and underscoring random chance rather than the impact of beneficent government in conclusion. I read the essay instead as a gentle and fairly straightforward parable of moral instruction about the need to go beyond individual or small-group "enjoyment" towards the profounder *le* of the people, which was guaranteed only by rain, steady harvests, and social order. Su Shi does not envision the pavilion as a place for the people's delight, like Ouyang, but surely his concluding poem that credits the "gift" of rain to the right source echoes Ouyang's use of his own erudition to explain the historical and natural circumstances for the Chuzhou commoners' well-being. From the perspective of the Confucian pedagogical tradition, it is does not seem accidental that Su learns his lesson about a truer kind of delight through dialogue with close comrades, a fact he memorializes in the essay. Getting knowledge "for oneself" was one path to wisdom, but learning could also be acquired through communal experience and reflection. Taken together, these essays explore the sociality of delight from multiple perspectives, from the public-minded "sharing" of delight with common people to using more intimate social exchange with peers to realize the ways in which delight was embedded in larger social structures. In both men's essays, sociality is essential to the epiphanies the writers experience and to the lessons offered to the reader. By focusing on possession and ownership while minimizing the Northern Song literati social conscience, Owen misses some of Ouyang Xiu's and Su Shi's points.

Finally, Owen's avoidance of history imparts a certain sameness to the chapters and to the writers under consideration that historical precision might have nuanced. I felt the lack of history on two levels: first in the discussions of Ouyang's historical reflections on the social and political evils of the Five Dynasties, which give moral meaning (not just humor) to the opening anecdote about Feng Dao as well as to his discussion of Chuzhou and the rocks of Ling Creek (the opening of Chapter 3, "Missing Stones"); second, in the lack of attention to generational shifts in a tumultuous sixty-year stretch of Northern Song history. Owen openly acknowledges his position vis-à-vis history in the introduction (13): "I prefer the mindlessly chronological order of the *Zuo zhuan* to Sima Qian's centered narratives. It returns history to 'one damn thing after another.'" This preference notwithstanding, there is a good argument to be made in the case of these Northern Song essays for attention to eleventh-century historical events, including some reflection on the impact of vicious literati battles over money, commerce, taxation, and the collective well-being that raged in the decades of the New Policies and their reversals. Su Shi and Sima Guang were deeply implicated in these battles, yet the New Policies are not mentioned in the book, and Wang Anshi, their highest-profile sponsor, appears only in passing. I will give a few examples where historical context might have complicated some of Owen's readings. First, demotion for Ouyang Xiu after the failure of the Qingli reforms prompted him to imagine the kinds of *le* that could be morally worthy and socially responsible for him to pursue. Unlike Liu

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Zongyuan, whose late-life despair and disengagement stood as a negative model, Ouyang chose optimistic engagement with the locale as his solution, even if we choose a skeptical approach to his self-promoting tone. He also had good reason, in the 1040s and 1050s, to imagine a return to power and the ability to shape state policy and the people's well-being, under emperors who might heed his political counsel. Next, Su Shi and Huang Tingjian, in the late essays from the 1070s to the 1090s Owen focuses on most closely, wrote in a moment that was far more politically dangerous, commercialized, and economically volatile. The widespread uses and abuses of money, and crises over its management, certainly made Su and Huang more aware than Ouyang of its threat to true "delight" and heightened their anxieties about ownership and wealth. There is a noticeable gap between Su Shunqin's simple joy in his Canglang Pavilion in 1046 and Huang Tingjian's sophisticated lecture to the merchant Han Jian in 1092 that can't be fully accounted for by style, genre, or biography, but could be better understood in the context of five decades of social, political, and economic transformation. This is not to suggest one could write an uncomplicated linear literary or cultural history of ownership and delight in the Northern Song, but to point out that history matters critically here.

In the end, *All Mine!* delivers what it promises: reflections gathered around a set of themes in Northern Song informal prose—in essays that are themselves "attempts," as Owen notes, "to account for salient questions" (13). Here I've suggested some places where the attempts fall short in representing their texts—not due to a failure of Owen's erudition or creative reading, but from the neglect of older and wider vistas these Northern Song writers imagined for their work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jch.2022.39 Published online by Cambridge University Press