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In *Porcelain for the Emperor: Manufacture and Technocracy in Qing China*, Kai Jun Chen excavates the neglected history of court-sponsored production of technological knowledge and industrial goods administered by bannermen technocrats in China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Centering on the career of the Manchu polymath Tang Ying (1682–1756), this book supplies a textured account of his engagement with the design and manufacturing of ceramic wares during his tenure as a supervisor-designer at the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory in Jingdezhen in southeast China. The author adopts the term “technocrat” to indicate “a combination of technological specialization and managerial responsibility” and to acknowledge the difference between bannermen officials in this position and Chinese bureaucrats of Han ethnicity (p. 5). Drawing on porcelain examples in museum collections, recent archaeological evidence, Tang’s own writing, and archival sources, *Porcelain for the Emperor* expertly analyzes Tang’s role in negotiating the regional knowledge surrounding porcelain manufacture with the court while imposing imperial order and extending centralized control over the local society.

The first chapter of the book familiarizes the readers with its protagonist with a nuanced portrayal of Tang’s family background and career trajectory as a Manchu bannerman. Born into a military family, Tang spent his early years as a bodyguard for the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722). He earned hands-on artisanal training as a pattern designer in the Imperial Workshops at court from around 1725 and later advanced to supervisor of the production of imperial commissions of numerous materials. From 1728 to 1756, he was appointed to head the Imperial Porcelain Manufactory in Jingdezhen and served as a critical agent in imperial control of the regional industry. Further, chapter 1 details how Tang used a distinct approach to knowledge, one vastly different from that of Chinese literati-officials, through proficiency in Manchu and literary Chinese, appropriation of mercantile skills, and exposure to Western culture. Using Tang as an example, the author
illustrates the complexity and uniqueness of the Qing dynasty bannermen technocrats’ career path and technocultural identity.

Chapter 2 examines a new knowledge culture institutionalized within the Imperial Workshops in the mid-Qing period, when the design system “evolved into a more communicative institution that allowed for direct technological and artistic intervention” (p. 70). The author proposes that the practice of yang (prototype) in ceramic production enabled the court to exercise technological experiments and impose quality and political control, while allowing certain space for designs by technocratic supervisors like Tang to negotiate with emperors about feasible production. Chen further fleshes out a systemic organization of design models and internalized archival approach under the imperial control of the yang system during Tang’s period of supervision. The latter half of this chapter surveys a technocratic model of porcelain design mastered by Tang, which ideologically aligns with the cultural pluralism celebrated at the Qing court. Tang’s design is indebted to elements that he garnered from a wide intellectual reservoir, including archaic ritual vessels, literati painting, and regional motifs. Tang also enriched his stylistic repertoire by creating pieces that blur the boundaries between the private and imperial realms as well as across different artistic media.

Chapter 3 evaluates the significance of Tang’s Illustrated Manual of Ceramic Production (1743), arguably the best-known premodern Chinese treatise on the porcelain industry, in documenting and communicating regional knowledge for the service of the imperial court. The author meticulously compares the Illustrated Manual with treaties on the same subject authored by Chinese literati and three contemporaneous albums on porcelain production to reveal the distinctive technocratic strategies employed in Tang’s absorption of local technical knowledge: deployment of a picto-textual index, differentiated articulation, and quantification. Characterized by the author as “ethnographic, archivist, and experimentalist,” Tang’s approach, which was premised on his firsthand encounter with techniques, materials, and artisans in situ, typified the culture of technocratic knowledge fostered by the court “within the apparatus of the Qing empire’s intelligence service” (pp. 72, 97). As for the function of Tang’s treaties, the author suggests that, by collecting and reorganizing local knowledge under the imperial order, it fulfilled the political agenda programmed by the emperor for technological and regional governance.

Chapter 4 studies the autonomy of Tang in the innovation of porcelain manufacturing in Jingdezhen despite tight political control from the imperial court via negotiation between new material conditions with technological knowledge he extracted from local artisans and Western technicians. To produce new glaze colors and overglaze palettes, Tang repurposed the local falang enamel techniques and the imported yangcai (foreign enamel) technology based on numerous trials or experiments (shi). He also incorporated sculptural forms in porcelain by imitating life modeling on Western sculpture and bronze. Here, we discern a fascinating consistency between Tang’s formula for innovating porcelain design and technology—namely, a “selection and combination” method, as the author calls it—with his diversified or even encyclopedic approach to knowledge that is investigated in chapter 1 (p. 101). In the meantime, Tang’s team sought to replicate famous old glazes and wares while inventing new monochromes and colors achieved by employing the yaobian (transformation inside the kiln) technique. Tang’s emulation of the old and foreign styles and forms, as the author convincingly argues, speaks to a historicized notion of innovation that announces the cultural inheritance and political legitimacy of the Qing ruling house.

Richly illustrated and lucidly written, Porcelain for the Emperor significantly complicates our understanding of the administrative and technolo-
gical programming of the Qing empire’s material governance in the porcelain industry afforded by the intervention of bannermen technocrats. The many details and anecdotes about Tang, coupled with his arresting intellectual curiosity and artistic creativity, would appeal to readers from different scholarly backgrounds. Casting light on “an expert officialdom working closely with artisans, merchants, and technicians,” this monograph insightfully advocates for Qing bannermen as equal contributors to the statecraft and intellectual history in dynastic China with their Chinese literati peers (p. 132). Chen’s fine-grained study will substantially deepen our understanding of not only the history of science and technology and the history of material and visual culture in early modern China but also global histories of imperial knowledge formation and empire building from the stimulating perspective of technocracy.

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