Seventeenth-century China has been a center of scholarly attention for its richness and complexity in politics, literary works, art, commerce, and most noticeably, the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Li Yu (1611-80) stands out from this period as a literatus who succeeded in a wide range of cultural endeavors: writing, publishing, designs, and lifestyle coaching. *Towers in the Void: Li Yu and Early Modern Chinese Media* by S. E. Kile, assistant professor of Chinese literature at the University of Michigan, makes a significant contribution to the ongoing conversation on media studies, material culture, and literature in the early modern period of China and beyond. Through examinations of three interrelated media—text, building, and body—Kile investigates how Li Yu yielded his influence on the material world of his readers as a “cultural entrepreneur.” The three parts of the book—“Textual Media,” “Spatial Media,” and “Corporeal Media”—correspond to the three forms of media, and each comprises two chapters. The author also uses a pair of concepts, *xu* and *shi*, variously meaning “artifice and reality, fictional and reality, imaginary and material substantial” (p. 3), through the book to track Li Yu’s strategic manipulation of the boundary between his persona and his readers’ life. *Towers in the Void*, the title of the book, speaks directly to the intricacies between fictionality and materiality. Technology, whether it is printing, architectural construction, or surgical procedures, as the book lays out in different chapters, is argued to facilitate Li Yu’s use of media to different ends, and hence another key term that characterizes Li Yu’s exploitation of the potential of media is *gaizao* (remodel, refashion).

With an appendix of Li Yu’s oeuvre of plays, novels, poetry, essays, and collected letters, Kile’s chapters thoughtfully focus on works that best demonstrate Li as a master of media. The key texts of Kile’s discussion include *Leisure Notes*, *Twelve Towers*, and *Silent Operas*. Following an introduction to Li Yu’s career and the theoretical framework of this book, part 1 focuses on Li Yu’s ideas and practice of writing, printing, and publishing. Chapter 1 outlines how Li established himself as a cultural entrepreneur and lifestyle influencer via
the highly transmissible and reproducible medium of the woodblock print. Particularly intriguing is Kile’s analysis of the printed illustration of fan paintings that Li instructed readers of Leisure Notes to create by remodeling the window and natural scenery (p. 57). While the cross-media relationships between painting and print are well studied, Kile enriches the scholarship by pointing out that through printing, layers of viewing experiences are transmitted to the reader from Li Yu. Kile thus connects Li Yu’s aesthetic persona to the tangible, everyday life of his audience. Chapter 2 begins by considering Li Yu’s poetry in relation to the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Kile offers a close reading of Li’s poems on his memory about writing, carving, and collecting books, showing that he reacted to the tumorous period by highlighting the ever-changing materiality of literary works. The more innovative analysis, however, is the investigation into playwriting by Li Yu, where Kile highlights the interconnections between writing and literary reproduction and the performance of the body. For example, Kile elaborates on how the aria and dialogue in Li Yu’s plays complement each other through his use of grammar, narrators, and the arrangements of singing and talking.

Buildings and architecture, as a medium, are the focal point of part 2. In chapter 3, Kile looks at writings on spatial construction and function in a collection of short stories titled as an architectural site, Twelve Towers, aiming to demonstrate the analogy Li drew between the structure of a story and that of a building. Buildings, as a reader encounters both in the story and in real life, also serve as intermediators between xu and shi. Chapter 4 singles out Li Yu’s writing on garden design in Leisure Notes and is a meaningful enhancement to the developing area of studies on Chinese gardens. Situating Li in the flourishing culture of the garden as a site of aesthetic experience, Kile compares his writing to a well-studied text, Fashioning Gardens by the famous late Ming garden designer, Ji Cheng (1582-c. 1642). Through examples of rock formations, the intentional use of the empty or white space, and borrowing scenes, Kile argues that Li’s garden design is shaped by his ideas of theatrical and fictional writing, whereas Ji Cheng’s conception refers more to lyrical experiences with painting and poetry. Through detailed textual and visual analysis, Kile not only enriches the study of garden literature but also our knowledge of the interplay of different media in the representation of garden designs.

Part 3, on the body-as-media, is the most theory-intensive section of the book, especially in Kile’s notion of technology as a device to extend the human body. Chapters 5 and 6 make a thought-provoking pair: these cover the unusual or even supernatural body, malleable by different techniques derived from Li Yu’s fictional writings, and the real body—of women, to be remolded and of men, to be taken care of. In each chapter, gender intersects with the body, enabling Kile’s critical assessment of Li Yu’s conceptions of this media form. Li’s discourse on human genitals, women’s skin, and the living environment of a man reveals the implanted hierarchy of genders. One insightful point made by Kile is that Li Yu’s writings about real women’s bodies are rooted in the practice of purchasing concubines, the ultimate commodification of a woman, which “complicate[s] our understanding of Li Yu’s potential protofeminism” (p. 241). Such analysis grounds Kile’s arguments about Li Yu’s prowess in media and technology in historical specificities, in addition to theoretical interpretations.

The epilogue presents a succinct summary of this book as well as the author’s goal on a larger scale—to expand the study of media in the early modern period beyond printing. Kile certainly has achieved this goal by showing a plethora of examples, and yet at the same time, Kile underscores the importance of printing again through Li Yu’s case. Above all, printing is the medium to transmit Li’s ideas, writing, design, and personal brand, and the key to his success. Additionally, some
scholars may be somewhat confused by Kile's atypical periodization of the Wanli period, where the birth and death dates of the emperor are used instead of his reign period (1572-1620)(p. 169).

With its incisive analysis, eloquent writing, and integrated use of theories, this book is of great value for scholars in literature, print culture, and material culture. To extend the accessibility of this book, the author has also launched a website about Li Yu and his works: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/liweng/, pointing to a promising direction of digital humanities projects.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-material-culture


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