An expansion of the author’s doctoral dissertation (Yale University, 1994), *Empresses, Art and Agency in Song Dynasty China* is a groundbreaking study of the involvement of women in Chinese art. It focuses on imperial women because, in contrast to most other women in the Song period, information exists on their role as artists and patrons. Weaving together complex analyses of authorship, style, political contexts, and most important of all, the issue of gender in the Song dynasty, Lee provides an eloquent treatment of Chinese empresses consciously patronizing and producing art as means of expression.

In her introduction, Lee explains the background of gender politics in pre-Song China. She starts with the beautiful story of Su Hui composing a palindrome, which was a female literary activity, narrated by the influential empress Wu Zetian. Like earlier empresses in the Northern Wei, Wu Zetian was an active patron of Buddhist art. However, due to her negative example as a female usurper of the throne and the ideology of the Chinese patriarchy which demanded the subordination of palace women, both the agency and contribution of imperial women in the Song have largely been overlooked.

The book is structured around three Song empresses, starting with the first empress regent, Empress Liu. Lee convincingly argues from multiple perspectives the connections between Empress Liu and the production of Jin Shrine sculptures in Shanxi. The model of art patronage she pioneered was copied by her successors. Although a remarkable ruler possessing outstanding administrative ability, she had to
struggle against the negative image of Wu Zetian, which also haunted subsequent empress regents. As a result, her and their agency had to be “expressed through the promotion of the ideal qualities of self-effacement and yielding” (p. 18).

In Chapter 2, Lee turns to writing as a female activity. Through a close stylistic analysis of imperial writings, she argues that the women’s practical duty of ghostwriting not only served the emperors’ interests, but was also useful in expressing their own voice of authority. Empress Yang, for example, represented her emperor husband Ningzong by adopting a calligraphic style similar to his, but at the same time also displayed an accomplished style of her own. By examining the portrayal of women possessing literary talent in paintings, the author argues that while the gift of writing was a widespread goal and a virtue among Song women, the paintings constantly eroticized women with such talent in order to prevent them from challenging the masculine.

Chapter 3 deals with Empress Wu, wife of Song Gaozong. Lee first examines didactic paintings that offered moral lessons at court and then discusses Empress Wu’s role as a patron of didactic art and a collector. She was able to work within the aesthetic program of Gaozong whose turbulent reign had reestablished orthodoxy as its main concern. By commissioning both public and private paintings, she established a new paradigm of talent for Song imperial women.

Empress Yang, the main focus of Chapter 4, collaborated with court painter Ma Yuan to produce self-expressive paintings and calligraphy. Empress Yang’s artistic involvement was more personal than other Song empresses, especially in her yongwu (singing of objects) inscriptions. The expressions were never direct, but through these works she communicated subtly with her husband, officials, and his clansmen. Female talent here becomes a tactic, employed particularly in political struggles involving the
empress. Lee ends the book by looking at Emperor Lizong whom Empress Yang helped to bring to the throne. His patronage of art was clearly a continuation of the model pursued by Empress Yang. Contemporaries were concerned with what they considered to be an over-abundance of feminine (yin) forces in Lizong’s court. This and the later downfall of the Song led to more prejudices against female creativity in art, suppressing their voices.

While the book’s attempt to examine the relationship between calligraphic style and a person’s character, as in the case of Ningzong, is commendable, more substantial evidence may be needed to establish a reliable case. Also, although Lee did discuss female ghostwriters in the Song court, when evaluating their agency she could have paid more attention to the political roles of those women in administrative processes, a topic political historians have recently become interested in.¹

Empresses, Art and Agency in Song Dynasty China is lavishly illustrated and elegantly written with an engaging narrative and interlocking arguments. Researchers of women’s history can learn a lot from its in-depth analyses of visual sources, which are likely to provoke discussions of wider issues surrounding female agency. Lee’s book is a major contribution to the field in two key respects, both drawing attention to the role of women in the patronage and production of art in China and offering an alternative to its male-centered history of art.

(Lik Hang Tsui, University of Oxford)