

# 16

## SOMETHING NEW

### A comment

*Timothy Brook*

On June 21, 1610, by our reckoning, the artist and connoisseur Li Rihua (1565–1635) made this entry in his diary:

I went to call on Prefect Shen and Magistrate Lu. At the prefectural guest hostel, I ran into Chen Yutong and Provincial Graduate Qiu with Wu Chihan of this prefecture, and we got talking. Wu said that in Guangdong at Macao there is a kind of human with a scaly body and black skin. When they swim underwater they can draw fish to swim with them, and when they come onto land they live alongside other people. Every prominent person in Macao has one in his care. They trick fish into entering nets, and when the nets are full, they suddenly yank them, and the men on the shore pull them in, netting a huge catch. They are called *lutings*. It is said that the defeated soldiers of Lu Xun who fled south by water in the Jin dynasty (265–317) mixed with the fish, and that the various types of what came into being are hugely various. In the space between heaven and earth, strange things emerge with time. There is no original number of them that we can determine.<sup>1</sup>

Li Rihua at the time was in retirement at home southwest of Shanghai. He was living the charmed life enjoyed by the great gentry families of the Yangzi Delta: collecting rents, hobnobbing with officials, consorting with his social peers on the Delta, and producing a steady stream of decent landscape paintings and excellent calligraphy. A formidable art collector, Li was also his generation's most consistent diarist. His diary reveals much about what the elite at this stage of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) thought of the circumstances in which they found themselves, and more particularly for this volume, what they thought about the things (*wu*) that thronged their world. Li had an endless curiosity for unusual

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things: two-headed calves and sea monsters, talking parrots and fiery clouds, red and black hailstones, roofing slates etched in an indecipherable language. The black divers of Macao – probably Andaman Islanders, possibly Africans, brought by Portuguese – were but one more case of Li's general proposition that things previously unknown could emerge within the space between heaven and earth. Those who lived in his time and place understood that there was always something new to discover and puzzle over, some arising within the Ming realm, some from beyond it.

It was not for humans to declare what was not physically possible. What was for humans to realize is that every physical thing, whether animate ('having breath,' *qi*, in Li's phrasing) or inanimate, had a particular nature that distinguished it from every other thing. When Li later that year offers another proposition – 'that things cannot come in two different sizes is fixed by their nature'<sup>2</sup> – he implies the more general principle of natural differentiation by which no two things can ever be the same thing. That each should have a distinctive nature had, at other times in the Chinese past, been grounds for denying there can be anything new under the sun. Li Rihua's generation believed there could be more things – and therefore more natures – than had been thought of in their predecessors' philosophy. As he concludes his entry on the black divers, there is no 'original number' of phenomena. The things of the universe are potentially infinite, every new thing simply taking its place among those already known.

Li Rihua was interested in things, for he was a keen collector. He most prized artwork, though only Chinese paintings. But he also collected curios and antiques, which gave him occasional access to foreign products. When Dealer Xia, one of his regular suppliers, drops in on March 10, 1610, he proudly shows Li a pair of earrings he claims are fragments of a rare tenth-century ceramic known as Chai ware. The knowledge of their manufacture had long been lost, and collectors were mad to get their hands on it. Once he sees them, Li knows differently. This is Venetian glass, though Li could not name them as Venetian, as his knowledge of Europe was not specific enough. As he notes in his diary, 'they were brought in a foreign ship from the south, and are things made in foreign countries by transforming [material] in forges.' Probably repeating what he told Xia, he declares that 'whatever is glass in this age is in every case made by the Europeans by melting stones, not some treasure that heaven has fashioned.' As for the earrings being made of Chai ware, 'they are not this thing.'<sup>3</sup> Dealer Xia may not have known that he was handling foreign material – he and Li constantly jostled over the authenticity of the things he tried to sell – but what he did know is that fragments of Chai ware sold for a lot more than fragments of Venetian glass. No sale.

What the anecdote reveals is that by the 1610s people of the Ming inhabited a world in which 'foreign' things – from people to plants to manufactured objects – were circulating sufficiently to attract notice. They played a role in the rejection of an older version of Confucian ontology that had declared the things of the world to be finite and fixed. Li Rihua preferred old things whose age

linked him to the origins of his culture. Thus elsewhere in the diary he admires an ancient two-handled ceramic goblet that comes to his attention as 'a superior thing,' praises an old zither another dealer brings for being 'an ancient thing,' and celebrates a seal from the Tang dynasty as 'an auspicious thing.'<sup>4</sup> But he was also passionate about collecting fine work by contemporary painters and ceramicists. The market responded to such desires. More scrolls were being painted in his era than at any earlier time in Chinese history, and porcelain pieces were coming out of Ming kilns in the millions every year. This expansion of production was part of the rapid growth of the Ming commercial economy during Li's lifetime: more commodities were produced than ever before, and more people could afford to buy them. The combination of exuberant productivity and heightened demand meant that the serious collector had to master the canons of taste that enabled him to place things accurately along the spectrum between 'vulgarity' and 'elegance.' One of Li's contemporaries on the Yangzi Delta would even compile a handbook, the wryly titled *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, to lead the uninitiated in the task of discriminating among the flood of things on offer to furnish the elegant life.<sup>5</sup> There were simply too many things in circulation in the last half-century of the Ming dynasty, and some of them were new.

For students of the history of early modern Europe, this situation should not be unfamiliar. The things available to Europeans in 1610 were growing in volume and variety and at a pace that beggared earlier dispensations. Many of these things were of European manufacture, such as Venetian glass, with which windows were now regularly being leaded and from which wine was being poured and beer gulped. But many came from abroad, in a dizzying range from pineapples to tulips, shells to pearls, tobacco to pepper, silks to porcelains. Europeans and Chinese alike shared the experience of coming to live within a global economy.

Their exposure to new things was different, however. Europe was a net importer, thanks to the cheap silver in the Americas, whereas China, happy to absorb the silver into its domestic markets, was a net exporter. This means that new things, many of Chinese origin, were tumbling into Europe at a far greater rate than European objects were appearing in China. This imbalance of circulation derived from the economy in which the objects moved, not as a matter of Chinese taste. The Chinese simply had less opportunity to absorb new things into their cultural practices than did the Europeans, who refurnished their homes and re-dressed themselves as new commodities flooded their markets. Their impact is immediately visible in the paintings that Julie Hochstrasser features in her chapter, the still lifes that emerged in Northern Europe just at the time Li was keeping his diary. Just as the new (and of course expensive) things were transforming the rooms in which Dutch householders lived, so too it affected the kinds of paintings they chose to pay for. These paintings leave us with a rich visual record of the things that were catching the European eye. And what the eye wanted to see, the painter knew to paint, developing a kind of distilled realism that strove to reproduce objects with visual exactitude in

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carefully controlled studio settings, manipulating light and distorting perspective to heighten the visual impact of treasured objects.

These new techniques are in view in the still lifes of the period, and also in the domestic genre scenes so popular with the emerging middle class that wanted art on its walls that reflected the prosperity their newly built and newly furnished rooms proclaimed. In a review of an exhibition of seventeenth-century Dutch art at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, Julian Bell notes that the interiors they painted showed a world that was 'well lit, well furnished: a world of recent manufacture, a world that is primly modern.'<sup>6</sup> The primness is not universal to the genre; one has only to think of the riotous scenes that Jan Steen took delight in painting; but the newness of the objects on display certainly is. Willem Kalf did not paint familiar objects, only new and visually remarkable things: nautilus shells, Chinese pots, Turkish carpets, Venetian goblets, and imported oranges. So too Johannes Vermeer carefully selected new things to accompany his human subjects. We see the same exotic carpets, goblets, and dishes that feature in Kalf's work, but then Vermeer goes on to furnish an entire room with new furniture and costly musical instruments, and on the wall hangs recently printed maps or paintings done within his lifetime. The world Vermeer and Kalf picture is a world of entirely new things.

Hochstrasser's chapter captures changes in the things with which Europeans surrounded themselves and in the ways of representing them. These two aspects – the advent of new things, and changes in their representation – run through the chapters in this volume. The second of these aspects, representation, engages the attention of some of the authors. I shall note only three. Pamela Smith considers the inescapable gaps between what early-modern authors wrote about the making of things and the things as they actually emerged under the hands of craftsmen. She expresses this gap in terms of the 'resistance' of matter, a resistance that the experimental method was developed to get past, but can do so only by making repeated approaches. Chandra Mukerji is concerned with the gap in representation that emerged not as a material barrier between things and words, but as a distance between Ottoman things and the texts and pictures about them among Europeans, where they became not so much new things as new information. Curiously, though, in the case she analyzes of European accounts of Ottoman costumes, what at first glance looks like an Orientalizing imposition of difference ends as a domestication of the foreign achieved through the pairing of European and Ottoman modes of moral reasoning. Finally, focusing almost exclusively on the problem of representation, Carla Nappi raises problems that can arise when we go back looking for a thing for which we have a name and identification – ginseng, in her case – but for which people at the time had no stable representation. We stand on the far side of a process she calls 'objectification,' which needs to be disassembled if we are to approach what it is people in the past thought they were dealing with when they spoke of the thing we speak of. Objectification is in her view very much a process characteristic of the early-modern world. I would agree, with the additional

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observation – which I am sure she would endorse – that economies trade in commodities, and if commodities can't be objectified, they can't be extracted, circulated, and sold. What appears to be many processes – commodification, objectification, alienation – may in fact be a single process.

Some contributors are perhaps less concerned with representation than with 'actual' things and what these did; or more precisely, what had to be done in order that something could be done with them. Giorgio Riello introduces the reader to household inventories, drawn up on the death or bankruptcy of a head of household (the inventory drawn up when Vermeer's widow declared bankruptcy provides the only 'facts' we have about him<sup>7</sup>). Despite being a 'subjective representation,' as Riello puts it, these inventories provide a sense of the sorts of things a household owned and used. When Anne McCants examines household inventories from Amsterdam, she notes that the things listed vary among households depending on their wealth and complexity, yet a constant among them is the possession of ceramics dedicated to brewing coffee, chocolate, and tea. These new global products were forcing the introduction of other new objects judged necessary for their consumption, and, in so doing, altering not just what people owned but how they experienced social life within the family. Corey Tazzara turns to yet other inventories, this time of Florentine craftsmen, to explore how the makers of things managed the complex and lengthy process of transforming raw materials into the finished goods they were producing for the growing commodity markets.

I have touched on only some of the chapters in this volume, but sufficiently to underscore what this volume asserts: that things can provide the historian with a barometer of economic and social change. They tell us in the first instance about what people made, used, and consumed. They also tell us about how people acted and thought: about what they favored and refused, what they wanted to see and to be seen with, and how they represented things to produce meanings that imposed order on the natural disorder of existence. That things can be used and given meaning differently at different times indicates how they might even assist us in identifying transitions in world history. At the very least, things in history provide us with indicators of how life was managed differently between one period and another, moving from fewer things to more, expensive goods to less so, cheaper luxuries to costlier, local things to foreign, and old things to new. These shifts in consumption could tempt us into interpreting things as indicators of the onset of Bell's 'primly modern' world. Whether we want to use things to proclaim the onset of modernity depends on what other problems we are trying to solve; I shall leave the matter open.

Does Ming China offer a helpful perspective here? Yes and no. Li Rihua would not have understood why Vermeer stripped familiar domestic spaces of signs of the past and refurnished them with entirely new things. Where are the old masters? The antiquities that anchor the wobbling present to a surer past? The signs of cultural continuity stretching endlessly into a revered past while still accommodating the new things the present brought? But then he didn't

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have the same pressure of new objects piling up around him as did the new Dutch middle class. Nor did he have the immediate connections to a trading company as global as the Dutch East India Company. Nor were traditional forms of wealth collapsing quite as rapidly as they were in Europe.

And yet there were features of late-Ming life that suggest that a common ground of expectation was in formation. In different ways Chinese and Europeans shared the idea that the world was wider than was once thought, that it thronged with things no one had previously even imagined could exist, and that the old verities about what existed or could exist were no longer unassailable. If Li Rihua and Johannes Vermeer saw and painted the world differently – the one striving to relate to traditions stretching back a millennium to the Tang dynasty, the other refusing to refer to anything predating the late Italian Renaissance – they did so because they occupied different locations in asymmetrical networks of global circulation, which brought them different things to think with, and therefore posed different problems to solve. But both of them learned to deal with something new. This volume asks us to do the same, and how can we refuse?

### Notes

- 1 Li Rihua, *Weishui xuan riji* (Diary from the Pavilion for Tasting Water) (Shanghai: Yuandong chubanshe, 1996), 102–103. This and the entry on earrings are noted in my *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 80–81, 96.
- 2 Li Rihua, *Weishui xuan riji*, 131.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 117, 121, 243.
- 5 This book is the subject of Craig Clunas' *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).
- 6 Julian Bell, 'The Mysterious Women of Vermeer,' *The New York Review of Books* (December 22, 2011), 86. The exhibition was titled 'Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence.'
- 7 John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 220–222.