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**SI 633, A Cultural and Material History of the Book
Winter 2009**

First Written Assignment: Book Review

This assignment has several goals. First, it allows you to read material that supplements our class discussions but that we did not have time to address as a group. Second, it gives you the opportunity to inform yourself on a topic of personal interest. Last but not least, the graded essay will serve to give you a sense of what I value in written work and the qualities on which you will be evaluated in your subsequent projects.

The list of titles I have drawn up is comprised of three basic types of works: first, academic studies (recognizable by their footnotes, bibliographies, and internal references to prior scholarship on the topic) that advance a single argument put forth by one or at most a pair of scholars; second, collections of essays by numerous scholars dealing more or less specifically with different facets of a specific topic; and third, general-readership works that rarely make explicit claims of novelty or advancement of learning but usually make at least an implicit argument.

Please note that about half the titles are marked by an asterisk. For the first book review, *please limit your selection to these marked titles*, as unmarked titles deal with issues that are either thematically more specific than the others or arise chronologically later in the term.

If you are interested in reviewing a work *that you have not previously read* and that does not appear on my list of suggested texts, please confirm your selection with me. You are of course welcome to select a book that deals with a non-Western tradition (Arabic/Middle-Eastern, East Asian, etc.) as long as the work is fairly broad in argument and topics covered.

Specifics of the assignment: after selecting one work from the list **read closely at least 150 pages** of the text, and preferably all of it. Portions read closely should include the introduction and conclusion, as well as at least two entire chapters. If you are a slower reader, you may skim the sections of the book that extend beyond this minimum amount. Then write an evaluative report of a length specified below that briefly summarizes what you take to be the major points of the text and evaluates the importance of the information presented. Some works under evaluation will be more informational; others will be more argumentative and speculative.

There is no recipe-like format I have in mind for the review and I leave the details of your approach to your discretion. In general terms, however, whatever else it contains your review should answer these basic questions:

1) What is the gist of the author's argument, and what are the major ways (rhetorical points, evidence, etc.) he or she makes it? In other words, you should have some form of comprehensive yet concise summary of the argument, and even if you disagree with the author this summary should be as neutral as possible. Logic dictates that this should come early in your review.

2) What is, in your opinion, the value (importance, originality, soundness, coherence, etc.) of the argument and the material presented? Here you may be as positive or negative as you deem appropriate, but make sure to justify all claims carefully.

3) What insights or advancement does the book offer to the larger question of the history of the book and the themes of the course? How does it fit into a larger picture?

Due date: Friday, February 13, by the start of class

Length guidelines: Option A students: around 6 pages (1500-1800 words)
Option B students: 7-9 pages (2000-2500 words)

I strongly prefer paper (hard-copy) submission for the first assignment. Subsequent assignments may be submitted electronically.