Reports

Hungry ghosts meet Ming bling: re-framing 50 years in the life of an empire

Anna Grasskamp

THREE YOUNG WOMEN ON LEASHES are sold for a pile of paper money, while in the background a wife is abandoned by her husband. This powerful image belongs to a set of 139 paintings made circa 1459 for the Braunging museum in Youyoush, Shansi, and used for the ritual appeasement of ‘hungry ghosts’, a euphemism for the restless souls of decedents involved in violent or immoral deeds. Another picture in the same series exhibits acrobats, athletes and performers, displaying their tattooed, spectacularly trained or otherwise extraordinarily shaped, modified or dressed up bodies for show. Through the inclusion of these impressive paintings the British Museum’s exhibition Ming: 50 Years that Changed China finds a strong and memorable way of representing figures outside the glamorous and well-documented spaces of elite power.

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The conference, Ming: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450, brought together curators and university-based researchers, as well as historians of painting, architecture and ship-building, porcelainists and musicologists, specialists of scientific and religious systems, scholars affiliated with museums in Beijing and Taipei, experts of past Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Persian empires. While transcultural and interdisciplinary in scope the choice of conference presenters was limited to scholars affiliated with institutions in the Anglo-American and Chinese regions of the world (with the exception of a single Korea-based scholar). This provokes questions on the connectedness of the global Ming academic community and the visibility and accessibility of research published in languages other than the world’s two most widely spoken ones. Focusing on the language of material and visual evidence the conference’s project curator, Lu Yu Pei, re-interpreted empresses’ headgear in an attempt to reconstruct symbolic meanings and aesthetic systems, which are in part documented in predominantly male-authored written records. In the same way as the painting described at the beginning of this review serves to evoke the presence of (oppressed) female voices in the exhibition, the hairpins and other components of female material culture that the show presents, are important artful testimonies of a past that we otherwise predominantly access through primary sources written by and for male (elite) authors.

While the publication of the conference papers is scheduled for 2015, the exhibition catalogue can be found in the museum shop, where it is framed by a variety of ‘Chinese souvenirs’ (some of them slightly disturbing in their almost aggressive use of the modified dragon motif, repetitively copied and pasted to the surfaces of a variety of contemporary utensils). Naturally, choices related to the museum shop lie outside the curators’ ambit. One also imagine that reductions of the emperors’ personage along the lines of “Xuande = The Aesthete” might not have been at the core of the exhibition makers’ mission. Nevertheless such ‘branding’ of historical figures might have helped the average visitor in dealing with the potentially confusing unfamiliarity of Chinese emperors, encouraging the fabrication of an inner image of what a Chinese emperor was like (supported by reproductions of famous emperor portraits). As some have pointed out, the exhibition shows traces of institutional and political constraints, in contrast to the catalogue that provides a more comprehensive ‘paper version’ of the actual show, adding significant pieces, elaborating on underlying frameworks and immaterial targets.

One of the declared goals of the exhibition lay in the public re-framing of fifty years in the life of a dynasty as ‘connected’ rather than isolated. In this regard, the display adds to various recent exhibits that highlighted the transcultural aspects of the Qing Empire (in particular in relation to the emperors Kang, Yongzheng and Qianlong and their engagement with European Jesuits). While the connectivity of the world has become commonplace, inviting scholars to ponder on ‘early modern globalization’, the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ or the ‘East Asian Mediterranean’, such envisioning has previously not reached a broader non-scholarly audience with the same intellectual strength and material variety that the British Museum show presents.

Regardless of whether one is with Clunas concerning his long-standing argument on early modernity in China that shaped the framework of the show and has been criticized by some,7 Ming: 50 Years that Changed China significantly changes a broad museum audience’s perception of Ming material, visual and political culture. In an exhibition space where a hungry ghost meets a piece of the ‘Porcelain Pagoda’, and an elegant headdress cómpées with the splendor of a sword, blue-and-white images of “the Ming” dissolve into a colorful bundle of interwoven strings of questions concerning (the display of) regimes – foreign and local, male and female, high and low, private and public, material and immaterial.

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References

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