

Screen of Kings: Royal Art and Power in Ming China. By Craig Clunas. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. Pp. 248. £35.00.

Craig Clunas, undoubtedly one of the most prolific scholars of the art and material culture of Ming dynasty China, has given us a groundbreaking new work that promises to reshape our understanding of Ming cultural history, as did his first book, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991). The art historical narrative of the Ming period has tended to emphasize two separate stories that only occasionally overlap. The first story takes place during the first half of the dynasty, primarily the fifteenth century, and focuses on the art, artists, and patronage found at the imperial court in Beijing. The second takes place during the second half of the dynasty, primarily the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and centres on art production and collecting in the wealthy urban centres of southeast China known as Jiangnan 江南. While there has certainly been recent scholarship that complicates or traverses these artificial categories, very little has been written about art and material culture outside of these two geographical regions, nor has there been much attention given to the producers or patrons of art and architecture outside of residents at the court in Beijing and members of the wealthy literate class of degree-holders and merchants.¹

In *Screen of Kings: Royal Art and Power in Ming China*, Clunas turns his attention to the artistic production and patronage of a group of people in the top tier of Chinese society whose presence has remained largely invisible—the regional aristocracy, descendants of the sons of Ming Taizu 明太祖, founder of the dynasty. Clunas acknowledges his own role in advancing one of the dominant narratives of Ming cultural history in his four earlier books when he states that, “this account of Ming China will be a deliberately revisionist one, and revisionist not least of some

¹ For some examples of other scholarship that challenge conventional narratives of art production and patronage during the Ming dynasty: on eunuchs, see Scarlett Jang, “The Eunuch Agency Directorate of Ceremonial and the Ming Imperial Publishing Enterprise,” in David M. Robinson, ed., *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), pp. 116–85; on the regional aristocracy, see Lai Yu-chih 賴毓芝, “Zhe pai zai ‘kuangtai xiexue’ zhi hou” 浙派在「狂態邪學」之後, in Chen Jie-jin 陳階晉 and Lai Yu-chih, eds., *Zhuisuo Zhe pai* 追索浙派 (Tracing the Che School in Chinese Painting) (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2008), pp. 210–21; on regions outside of the two “centres,” see Jennifer Purtle, *Peripheral Vision: Fujian Painting in Chinese Empires, 909–1646* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, forthcoming); and on the hereditary military, see Kathleen Ryor, “Wen and Wu in Elite Cultural Practices during the Ming Dynasty,” in Nicola Di Cosmo, ed., *Military Culture in Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 219–42.

of the things the present author has put into print about the period before now. An attempt to put [regional] kings at the centre of the story is by definition an attempt to rethink in some quite fundamental ways what we have agreed matters about Ming China” (p. 9). He then proceeds to take a characteristically fresh and provocative approach to shifting the lens through which we view art and culture of this period in Chinese history.

Chapter One, “A Fence and A Screen,” introduces the system of the hereditary aristocracy and its accompanying institutional structures and describes the state of the field of scholarship on this segment of Ming society. Clunas argues for the translation of their title, *wang* 王, as “king,” instead of the conventionally used “prince,” in order to reclaim “their importance as creators and sustainers of cultural projects” (p. 23). The phrase, “a fence and a screen” also serves as a central metaphor throughout the book to express the very real prestige of the regional aristocracy as extensions of the imperial centre. The author then offers explanations for why modern historians may have consigned the regional aristocracy of what might be termed “early modern” China to obscurity despite their visibility in contemporary sources. He concludes his introductory chapter by setting out the central themes and organization of the rest of the book, in which different media (architecture, calligraphy, painting, jewellery, and bronzes) form the focus of subsequent chapters. He also makes no claim to comprehensiveness in this first major study of the regional aristocracy as important actors in the Ming cultural sphere and identifies his further focus on two geographical areas, the modern provinces of Shanxi and Hubei.

Starting with the regional aristocracy’s literally most visible presence, Chapter Two, “The Kingly Landscape” examines the architectural traces of the kings’ palaces, temples, and tombs. By demonstrating the density of the kingly population in places such as Taiyuan 太原 and Jingzhou 荊州, based on information from gazetteers and other texts, Clunas creates a picture of the scale of their physical presence on the landscape, even though the actual remnants of their grand palaces and gardens are very fragmentary. The importance of the regional kings as builders is better seen in surviving monuments dedicated to religious traditions, where extant buildings, maps, stelae, and other objects attest to the magnificence of aristocratic patronage, in such temple complexes as Chongshansi 崇善寺, Yongzuosi 永祚寺, and Jinci 晉祠 in Shanxi and Taihuiguan 太暉觀 in Hubei. More vivid evidence of the conspicuousness of the regional kings in the Chinese landscape lies in extant Ming tombs in Hubei province, particularly those of the Kings of Chu 楚王 outside of Wuhan 武漢. Their scale, number, and luxurious furnishings attest to the position of their occupants as influential members of local society.

Particularly illuminating for scholars of the history of Chinese calligraphy, Chapter Three, “The Writing of the King of Jin” uncovers the role that the kings played

in the creation of canonical collections of *fatie* 法帖 (calligraphic rubbings) and as calligraphers themselves. While he uncovers and discusses the few extant examples of calligraphy by members of the regional kings, it is Clunas's examination of these men's pivotal role in the production of the "Antique Model Calligraphy Assembled in the Eastern Study" (*Dong shu tang ji gu fa tie* 東書堂集古法帖) of 1416, the "Antique Model Calligraphy Assembled in the Hall for Treasuring Worthies" (*Bao xian tang ji gu fa tie* 寶賢堂集古法帖) of 1486, and the "Su Palace edition" (*Su fu ben* 肅府本) of the "Model Calligraphy of the Chunhua Era" (*Chunhua ge fa tie* 淳化閣法帖) of 1615–21, that spotlights them as significant forces in transmitting what is typically characterized as literati culture. Indeed, he convincingly shows that courts and court culture had historically been central to the establishment of canons of calligraphic quality. Moreover, the collections of rubbings published as model calligraphy privileged the place of rulers as calligraphers within the history of the art. The production of rubbings collections in kingly courts was not merely an aesthetic practice, but "demonstrates the collective commitment of the imperial family to the values of *wen* [文], and as such demonstrates their fitness for continued rule" (p. 93). Clunas concludes by making an analogy between the transmission of imperial bloodlines and the transmission of model calligraphy, an ongoing reproduction chain, each a slightly fainter replica of the greatness which stood at the beginning of the chain.

Part of what makes the recovery of the story of the regional aristocracy's role in art patronage and production so difficult is the fragmentary nature of much of the evidence. In the fourth chapter, "The Painting of the King of Zhou," Clunas recovers their presence from apparent absence by meticulously looking at seals on extant paintings and sifting through textual records that describe not only the kings' role in art collecting but as artists themselves. Building on the work of Richard Barnhart and others, he provides not only a good sense of the possible extent of painting collections by some of these men, but also pieces together evidence for regional kings as painters from a variety of sources. The unfortunate fate of the works of art executed by kingly painters is then detailed at great length through an examination of the very few paintings from imperial clansmen and clanswomen that survive in either physical or textual form. Clunas also looks at the religious structures known to have royal patronage and suggests that mural decoration within them must have had the kings' participation at some level. But the loss of most of these buildings again hinders an understanding of the fuller picture. The question of survival is as much political as it is material. The burning of most of the palaces of the Ming regional aristocracy undoubtedly affected the historical record; however, this chapter also demonstrates that the denigration of the regional aristocracy by both Manchu and Chinese officials during the Qing dynasty, as well as by later historians, rendered anything associated with them irrelevant to history.

One of the most peculiar features of the field known as Chinese art history has been the shifting terrain of what constitutes its objects of study. Early Chinese art and archaeology is more comfortable with investigating a range of objects of luxury material culture, alongside more conventional subjects such as architectural design and decoration. Starting with the Song dynasty, with greater numbers of surviving objects with so-called “fine art” status, such as painting and calligraphy, selectivity increases and certain media, such as ceramics and lacquer, are deemed worthy of study while others are not. In Chapter Five, “The Jewels of the King of Liang,” Clunas shows why jewellery and other objects made of precious metals can shed light on networks of political, economic, and ritual importance in imperial China. He links the objects found in the tomb of King Zhuang of Liang 梁莊王 (1411–1441) and his consort Lady Wei 魏妃 (d. 1451) to the role of women in the kingly households. As in the conclusion to Chapter Three, Clunas emphasizes the importance of hereditary succession for the imperial clan and demonstrates the ways in which Lady Wei may have used the objects buried in her tomb as links between kingly women at the centre and in the provincial courts. Just as “true specimens” of model calligraphy were distributed by the emperor to the kingly courts where they were then collected and in turn disseminated as evidence of imperial prestige, jewellery from the imperial workshop given as gifts to women married into the regional courts functioned to validate their importance to the reproductive project of the imperial clans.

In the final chapter, “The Bronzes of the Kings of Lu,” the bonds of patronage and clientele between the regional aristocracy and the bureaucracy are further explicated through an examination of book printing and collecting, the writing of musical theory and the design of musical instruments, and the manufacture of bronze vessels. Clunas demonstrates that kings existed as part of an integrated elite culture in which they both asserted their shared values with what has been conventionally termed “literati culture” and “at the same time assert[ed] their role as cultural models or even leaders” (p. 165). Most of the scholarship that has been published on the regional aristocracy has focused on their participation in the publishing industry and book culture. While acknowledging their importance, Clunas takes issue with these scholars’ characterization of the regional kings merely as the recipients of literati culture rather than equal and active participants in the creation of that culture. He documents the extensive social relationships between members of the literati bureaucracy and the hereditary aristocracy and provides ample evidence that the regional kingly courts were sites of patronage and influence in cultural activities. In the realm of music, Ming aristocrats made significant contributions to the preservation, annotation, and explication of musical performance and theory. In addition, they collaborated in the production of such instruments as the *guqin* 古琴, many even known as makers themselves. Clunas links the participation of regional aristocrats in music to their interests in book publishing and other activities by showing how these endeavours

reflected their concern with the moral and political aspects of the antique that were connected with the correct deportment and good governance of kings.

While the organization of *Screen of Kings* is for the most part effective, there are several ways in which the content of individual chapters confounds the main themes set out in the introduction of the book. For a study that examines a wide variety of objects, making different media the focus of each chapter is an excellent way to incorporate both depth and breadth into the picture of the regional courts as active producers of culture in various forms. It is only in the sixth chapter that this organization breaks down, as the chapter title implies that bronze vessels or instruments will be the focus, but more time is actually spent on examining regional kings' interest in book culture and music, specifically that of the *guzhen*. In order to keep symmetry with the other chapter titles, the sixth might have been more accurately called "The *Guzhen* of the King of Lu" instead. Because Clunas recognizes that the book cannot possibly be an exhaustive revisionist history of the regional aristocracy, in his introduction he also states that his study will focus on two regions in particular; however, he violates this self-imposed restriction throughout the book. While he identifies his two major case studies as the regions of Shanxi and Hubei, two out of the five chapters that constitute the main body of the book centre on the states of Zhou 周 (Henan) and Lu 魯 (Shandong). Moreover, certain kings of regions outside of Shanxi and Hubei appear through the work and are essential to the larger arguments that the book presents concerning the cultural importance of the regional aristocracy. I am not sure that it was necessary for such a pioneering work to impose this kind of geographical restriction, as the richness of the subject-matter is all the greater when presented in all of its diversity. *Screen of Kings* is destined to become a reference book on the regional aristocracy during the Ming dynasty; one of its major accomplishments is the meticulous excavation and collation of all of the material and textual evidence on this elusive subject. Given the importance of the research presented here, there are also two somewhat disappointing formatting issues that were no doubt imposed by the publisher rather than by the author. The captions to the illustrations of certain works of art, such as painting and calligraphy, do not indicate the collection in which they are housed. As a result, the reader has to look for this information in the photo credits, which are not organized by plate number and are thus very difficult to read. In addition, no Chinese characters are given for names, titles, and terms; the main audience for this book will be researchers in Chinese Studies who consider the inclusion of them standard for scholarly monographs.

These minor criticisms, however, do not diminish the substantial achievements of this monograph. The mark of a truly influential work of scholarship is when it not only breaks new ground, but opens up exciting avenues for research and creates fresh attitudes toward existing material. *Screen of Kings* does all of these things and does them well. Craig Clunas has challenged cultural historians of the Ming dynasty

to take notice of the regional kings and has uncovered enough of their story so that we can no longer ignore them. As a result, *Screen of Kings* significantly expands our perception of what constitutes art patronage and production during this period of Chinese history and, more importantly, starts to rebalance our notions of what might matter about Ming China.

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The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy. By Yuri Pines. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. vii + 245. \$39.50/£27.95.

Professor Pines writes with the benefit of wide and deep reading that enables him to survey the intellectual, political, and social background against which kingdoms and then empires were founded, maintained, declined, and closed from the time of the Warring States until the modern age. His theme is that of the continued search for an ideal, of unification, seen as unique among the cultures of the world. He considers the parts played by different types of individual in fostering this ideal and enacting it in the process of government, with its blessings and restraints. These included the monarchs themselves, their advisors who were the privileged and prominent men of learning, local leaders arising in the provinces, and the people themselves who were subject to such authorities.

The book raises a number of questions to which answers may or may not be forthcoming. Historians may ask in what ways the term “everlasting” can properly be applied to any concept or institution devised by man. They may also seek a clear distinction between empires and other types of regime such as kingdoms. Necessarily they need satisfaction that the questions which the book raises may be properly put to the sources that are available. While unity is seen and treated as a concept, it requires consideration in the light of the actual development of institutions and the practice of rulership. Questions arise of how far the person of an emperor was essential to the maintenance of an empire; of the differing views that individuals of different types and social strata might take of an emperor’s function and duties, or of the imposition of a unity.

The choice of a title for the short book that covers this great theme immediately raises questions. Readers whose view of human institutions is accompanied by an adherence to Jewish or Christian beliefs may ponder whether the idea of “everlasting”