

***Culture, Courtiers and Competition:  
The Ming Court (1368-1644)***

edited by David M. Robinson  
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What role did the Ming China court play in Ming society and politics? How did the Ming court interact with the broader world of Ming literati culture and the wider world of peoples - Korean, Ryūkyūan, Japanese, Timurid, Mongol, Tibetan, Southeast Asian - who were subjects, to a greater or lesser extent, to the Ming emperor? *Culture, Courtiers and Competition: The Ming Court (1368-1644)*, edited by David M. Robinson, contains an ambitious series of essays that attempt to re-evaluate the role played by the Ming court both within Ming society as a whole and within the wider world. Robinson and the other contributors to the volume argue against earlier scholarship which saw the Ming court as a mere parasite on the Chinese state, or, in the case of Ray Huang,<sup>1</sup> as an institution so rigidly constrained and hemmed by the dead hand of the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368-98) that it was incapable of acting to solve the serious problems overwhelming China. Instead, the contributors to this volume reveal the Ming court to be a creative, cosmopolitan, and dynam-

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Huang. (1981). *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

ic institution, and argue that the Ming emperors, far from being helpless prisoners of the Ming bureaucracy, possessed considerable agency in military, political, and artistic matters.

The individual chapters themselves are all worthy and useful contributions, and deal with subjects ranging from music and art to political, cultural and military history. After an able introduction, Robinson provides, in the first chapter, entitled “The Ming Court” (pp. 21-60), a survey of the key problems surrounding research on the Ming court. In particular he shows the diversity of the participants (including eunuchs, palace women, foreign envoys, artists, and civil and military officials) and argues that the denizens of the court, including the emperor, had considerable agency to shape the events in which they participated. As well, in the insightful final chapter entitled “The Ming Court and the Legacy of Yuan Mongols” (pp. 365-421), Robinson explores the many ways in which the Ming court continued aspects of the Yuan court, notably in the important role played by Tibetan Buddhism, the continued flow of Korean tribute-women to the palace, the influence of Inner Asia in court diet and customs, and the vital role of Inner Asians in the capital garrisons. The other contributions are diverse in both method and material.

The volume includes military history in “Bestowing the Double-edged Sword: Wanli as Supreme Military Commander” (pp. 61-115) by Kenneth M. Swope, who demonstrates the military leadership shown by the Wanli Emperor (r. 1573-1620) in the three wars fought under his command in the Ordos, Bozhuo, and Korea. The volume also contains a discussion by Hung-lam Chu, entitled “The Jiajing Emperor’s Interaction with His Lecturers” (pp. 186-230), which explores the relationship between the Jiajing emperor (r. 1521-67) and the members of the Hanlin Academy who acted as his teachers during the classics-mat lectures; Chu sees a growing of the autocracy of the Ming court in the increasing unwillingness of the Jiajing emperor to subordinate himself as student to his lecturers.

The other four chapters are specifically concerned with the artistic

and literary activities of the Ming court. In “The Eunuch Agency Directorate of Ceremonial and the Ming Imperial Publishing Enterprise” (pp. 116-85), Scarlett Jang analyzes the role played by eunuchs in the publications produced by the Directorate of the Ceremonial, and explores the ways in which these books, which were published primarily for the Ming emperors and the denizens of the court, both received the influence of the wider society and were influential outside of the court. A similar pattern of interaction between the culture of the court and the cultural trends outside of the court is also uncovered by Julia K. Murray, who, in “Didactic Picturebooks for Late Ming Emperors and Princes” (pp. 231-68), explores the didactic picturebooks produced to educate the children of the emperors, and by Joseph S. C. Lam, who, in “Imperial Agency in Ming Music Culture” (pp. 269-320), argues for the vital role played by the emperors in shaping the music culture not only of the court but of Ming society as a whole. Somewhat different is Dora C.Y. Ying’s discussion, in “Tibetan Buddhism and the Creation of the Ming Imperial Image” (pp. 321-64), of Tibetan influence on portraits of the Ming emperors. Her chapter, while concurring in seeing the Ming court as susceptible to outside influence, explores a source of this influence – the Tibetan Buddhist clergy – which was alien to the Confucian literati of Ming China.

The volume showed many exciting new possibilities for exploring the Ming court and Ming society. However, despite the worthy efforts of Robinson in the introduction and first chapter, the boundaries of the court are never very clearly defined. Of course, too narrow a definition would not be desirable in a volume which is particularly concerned to escape a rigid dichotomy between court and society. Indeed, Robinson quotes, on page 5, Jonathan Shepard’s<sup>2</sup> definition of a court as “an entourage of

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Shepard. Courts in East and West. In Peter Linehan & Janet Nelson (Eds.) (2001), *The Medieval World*. London: Routledge, 14-36.

notables revolving around an overlord, of variegated and fluctuating composition but observing ritual deference to him.” This would seem to provide a definition of “court” flexible enough to allow for significant overlap with the broader society. Yet Robinson includes within the category of the court a vast range of actors – including palace women, artists, musicians, servants, eunuchs, members of the imperial family in the Inner Court, civil and military officials in the outer court, foreign participants in tribute missions, religious leaders of all sorts, and distant members of the imperial clan in the provinces – which would seem to go considerably beyond Shepard’s “entourage of notables,” and which potentially stretches the scope of the court to the point of meaninglessness.

In fact, in many of the chapters, it was unclear to me the significance or extent of the involvement of the Ming court. For instance, on pages 303-304, Lam describes the role that one Zhou Houjie, of the Hui princely establishment, played in the 1539 publication of an anthology of *qin* music and musical theory. Lam states that this publication was “noteworthy” as it reaffirmed the “leadership roles princely agents and courts played in the growth of Ming music.” Interesting though this detail is, its significance is unclear to me, and it would be useful to have an explanation of how the activities of this princely establishment interacted with the wider literati society, and how, if at all, it was linked to the imperial court in Beijing. A similar problem was also evident in Swope’s contribution. To be sure, the paper itself is an enjoyable and useful survey of Swope’s argument, – already present in a number of articles and now available in his book, *a Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail*<sup>3</sup>, – that the Wanli emperor played an active role in the military decision-making of the Ming. Yet, for the purposes of this volume, it would seem that the paper stretches the boundaries of the Ming court to an extreme, as Swope

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth C. Swope. (2009). *A Dragon’s Head and a Serpent’s Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592-1598*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

is largely concerned with battles fought on the far edges of the Ming empire under military officials like Li Rusong and Ma Gui (fl. 1580-1620) who were themselves products of the empire's frontiers. Although Swope effectively argues for the importance of the Wanli emperor in directing the wars and in supporting key military officials, he describes only in vague terms the process by which the Wanli emperor, in the capital, gathered information and made decisions about people and events occurring far away. Moreover, Swope describes the civil bureaucracy around the Wanli emperor as petty and faction-ridden, in contrast to the practical-minded Wanli emperor, who liked people "who could get things done" (p. 94). In other words, much though this chapter contributes to our understanding of the Wanli emperor, it does not escape from the established image of a rigid, hide-bound and unproductive Ming court.

A significant merit to this volume is that it locates the Ming court within a global context. Unfairly (considering the linguistic challenges that such a project would involve), I often wished that the contributors to the volume would explore in greater depth these interactions between a powerful Ming court and subordinate, but antonymous, royal courts or centers of power. For instance, on pages 162-163, Scarlett Jang mentions that *Lessons for the Inner Chamber (Naehun)*, authored by Queen Sohye (1437-1504) of Joseon Korea, was influenced by *The Biography of Lofty Empress Ma*, a publication of the Ming Directorate of the Ceremonial; in fact, as Jang reveals, in 1408 the Ming court gave fifty copies of *The Biography of Empress Ma* to the Joseon court. Of course, Queen Sohye was herself a denizen of a court culture which, while certainly influenced by the Ming, operated under significantly different circumstances. Perhaps a more detailed consideration of the nature of the inspiration, and the extent of the influence, would have been helpful in understanding the complex social and cultural forces linking the Ming court to neighbouring courts. Similarly, Dora C.Y. Ching's and Robinson's fascinating explorations of the interaction between Ming emperors and Tibetan hierarchs could have been even more meaningful if they had shown not only

the uses of Tibetan Buddhism for the Ming emperors, but also the usefulness of a Ming imperial link to the Tibetan hierarchs. Indeed, as a Koreanist, I often felt that comparison with Joseon court practice could have been useful. Hung-lam Chu's discussion of the classics-mat lectures under the Jiajing emperor, for instance, could have benefited from a consideration of scholarship on the classics-mat in Joseon Korea – a subject concerning which a certain amount has been written in English, notably by the late Jahyun Kim Haboush.<sup>4</sup>

That being said, the contributors to this volume are to be congratulated for a fascinating series of articles which considerably improve our understanding of Ming court culture and society. This is a valuable contribution which should have implications for all scholars working on Ming history or on court cultures in other parts of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, in *The Confucian Kingship in Korea: Yŏngjo and the Politics of Sagacity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.