



East Asian History

NUMBER 40 · AUGUST 2016

www.eastasianhistory.org

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Design and production	Lindy Allen and Katie Hayne Print PDFs based on an original design by Maureen MacKenzie-Taylor This is the fortieth issue of <i>East Asian History</i> , the third published in electronic form, August 2016. It continues the series previously entitled <i>Papers on Far Eastern History</i> .
Contributions to Back issues	www.eastasianhistory.org/contribute www.eastasianhistory.org/archive To cite this journal, use page numbers from PDF versions
ISSN (electronic)	1839-9010
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Banner calligraphy	Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

Published by
The Australian National University



CELESTIAL EMPIRE: LIFE IN CHINA, 1644–1911

 Nathan Woolley

This paper accompanies the online exhibition on the East Asian History website, which is a reduced version of the exhibition Celestial Empire: Life in China, 1644–1911 held at the National Library of Australia in Canberra from 2 January to 22 May 2016.

A selection of books, maps, and other documents produced under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was recently displayed at the National Library of Australia in an exhibition held in collaboration with the National Library of China (*Zhongguo guojia tushuguan* 中國國家圖書館). These items formed a series of vignettes illustrating the nature of life at different levels of society, suggestive of common customs and concerns. Together, they were markers in a tour of China over the last centuries of imperial rule. The choice of items emerged from the materials held by the two libraries. As such, it was guided by the nature of these collections and by the vagaries of survival of predominately paper-based documents through the vicissitudes of recent history. The use of library collections allowed an emphasis on materials that are not often displayed in exhibitions outside East Asia. Some items had already been subjected to extensive research, but others appear to have received little or no attention from modern scholars.

Maps produced under the Qing dynasty provide a window on the understanding and ordering of territory. Examples of Western cartography were available under the Qing, yet these had limited impact on the enduring cartographic tradition of China. Maps continued to contain many pictorial representations of geographical and man-made structures, displaying the influence of painting techniques. Text was also an integral part of a map's interpretation. Such features remain on a map of the entire empire based on the work of Huang Qianren 黃千人 (1694–1771). The introductory text, after explaining the symbols for administrative regions of different levels, invites

the erudite viewer to use the map 'on the road or at home' to survey the Qing's expanse.

Qing power was also expressed through the buildings and gardens of the court. The Lei family served as the imperial architects for seven generations, from the Kangxi reign period to the end of the Qing. Men from this family were responsible for the design and renovation of imperial sites, as well as of temporary structures for imperial celebrations. Documents used in this work remained in the family until after the foundation of the republic. Much of this material was secured by what was then the National Beiping Library (*Guoli Beiping tushuguan* 國立北平圖書館) in the 1930s, but other items from the archives are held in the First Historical Archives of China (*Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan* 中國第一歷史檔案館) and the Palace Museum (*Gugong bowuyuan* 故宮博物院), Beijing, as well as collections in Japan, France, and the United States. They are a significant source for the study of architecture and architectural methods under the Qing dynasty.

The print culture of the Qing dynasty maintained some of the achievements of the Ming but was far less exuberant. Some of the finest examples of Qing printing were executed early in the dynasty from images prepared by painters. The illustrations in *Lingyange tu* 凌煙閣圖 by Liu Yuan 劉源 (ca. 1640 – after 1670) and *Lisao tu* 離騷圖 by Xiao Yuncong 蕭雲從 (1596–1673) display especially fine detail. Another work by Xiao Yuncong, *Taiping shanshui tu* 太平山水圖, is perhaps one of the most striking examples of the period. Its illustrations of the landscapes of Xiao's home prefecture powerfully merge the techniques of painting with the execution of woodblock printing.

The depiction of landscapes was also the subject of travel accounts. Officials of the Qing could travel extensively in the course of their duties, giving them the opportunity to visit sites throughout the empire celebrated in poetry and prose, or appearing in historical records. Over the course of six volumes, Zhang Bao 張寶 (1763 – ca.1832) takes his readers on different journeys throughout Qing territory. The first of these, from Nanjing to the capital, gives an itinerary along the Yangzi and up the Grand Canal, one undoubtedly familiar to many among his audience. The images proved influential: many of Zhang's compositions, for example, reappeared in another celebrated work published later in the 19th century, *Hongxue yinyuan tuji* 鴻雪因緣圖集 written by the bannerman Lincing 麟慶 (1791–1846).

Such carefully executed books stand in sharp contrast to the wonderfully crude examples of printing produced for mass consumption. While popular religious works can display a degree of grace, almanacs and inexpensive educational primers have blockish and functional script. Their images similarly lack finesse, but are often lively, suitable for drawing the attention of an audience of limited literacy. These works, lacking pedigree, were not valued by Chinese bibliophiles. The shelf-life of almanacs, useful for only one year, also worked against their survival. But examples were collected by foreign visitors for the insight they provided into everyday life in China and hence found their way into collections overseas. The texts featuring in the exhibition were drawn primarily from the London Missionary Society Collection, acquired by the National Library of Australia in 1961.

The concerns of people in local society are also reflected in popular prints. Fine examples from famous workshops possess a wealth of detail and cover a variety of themes, but cruder examples give an alternate view of the con-

sumption of such images in local society. They often depicted family aspirations or gods with powers to impact the concerns of everyday life.

The views of visitors from outside the realm provide an alternate focus for the everyday. At a time when Japanese were forbidden from departing their country, some Japanese officials and publishers provided a systematic look at life in China as gleaned through Chinese books and interviews with visiting Chinese merchants. Among Europeans, Jesuits were the main conduit for information about the Qing. But short visits for the purposes of trade or prestige — for all their limitations — also provide notable records of life in China along the coast, in towns and the countryside, and during ritualised audiences at court.

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EAST ASIAN HISTORY 40 (2016)

