Reports

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

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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 Baoning monastery in Youyu County, Shanxi, 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.

Going beyond the outstanding collectibles of imperial provenance that (touristic) museum visitors usually find themselves confronted with in Beijing's or Taipei's museums, as well as many European institutions (some of which stage loot from the Summer Palace), the exhibition places these remarkable and subversive figures side by side with more common bodies of (material) evidence from the years 1400 to 1450. It would be misleading to state that these other pieces embody 'the Ming' in more familiar ways as the entire exhibition forms a challenge and perhaps a deconstruction of what museum visitors would stereotypically define as Ming – first and foremost the clichéd Ming Vase, whose emergence as a metaphorical image in the modern European mind has been subject of recent scholarship.[1]

Instead of the stereotypical blue-and-white vase, a gaudily colored cloisonné jar garnishes the exhibition poster and catalogue (Fig. 1). While the exhibition does present blue-and-white porcelain vessels it stages them as transcultural objects paired with non-Chinese artifacts that inspired Jingdezhen shapes and decoration systems. A non-specialist museum visitor who entered the show with a preprogrammed desire for china will leave it with impressions of manifold materials, forms and figures, adjusting blue-and-white preoccupations in favor of a more nuanced and polychrome image of the early Ming's social and material diversity.

Fig. 1 (left): Cloisonné jar and cover. Metal with cloisonné enamels. Xuande mark and period, 1426-1435. Beijing. H 62 cm, w 55.9 cm. British Museum, London 1957, 0501.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 2 (below): One of a pair of gold plaques inlaid with rubies, turquoise and other precious and semi-precious stones. Xuande period, 1426-1435. Beijing or Nanjing. H 14.47 cm, w 18 cm. British Museum, London 1949, 1213.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In contrast to the enamel jar chosen to appeal to the museum audience, a gold plaque is the key visual to the conference *Ming: Courts and Contacts 1400-1450,* held in conjunction with the exhibition, 9-11 October 2014 (Fig. 2). The piece of intricate jewelry, a testimony of high-level goldsmith work, presents the Chinese dragon alongside gems imported from South Asia, a panorama of fragments from foreign soil. While the majority of the jewels form a rectangular and alien frame to the organically shaped central icon, some gems also figure as cloud balls within reach of the dragons' five-fingered claws. Similar to artifacts found in tombs of Ming princes, this transcultural object forms part of the material culture of a social group of elite members that only recently has received ample scholarly attention, most prominently by one of the show's curators, Oxford University's Chair of Art History, Craig Clunas.[2] As part of a research project conceptualized by Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, the British Museum's curator and keeper of Chinese ceramics and Vietnamese art and antiquities, the show is the result of cooperation between university and museum.

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 contribution of the exhibition's project curator, Luk Yu-Ping, re-interpreted empresses' headgear in an attempt to reconstruct symbolic meanings and aesthetic systems in addition to those 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 can also imagine that reductions of the emperors' personae 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 names, 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,[3] 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.[4] 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 Kangxi, 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,[5] *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 competes 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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3 Platthaus, A. 2014. 'Krieg und Frieden auf Chinesisch', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 22.10.2014
4 Clunas, C. & J. Harrison-Hall (eds.) 2014. *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China* (exhibition catalogue), London: The British Museum, p.41
5 Jones, J. 2014. 'Ming: 50 Years that Changed China review – misleading and unhelpful', *The Guardian* 16.9.2014.