Introduction

David M. Robinson

Drawing from a variety of disciplines and incorporating a wide range of Chinese documentary sources, material artifacts, and contemporaneous foreign accounts, the chapters in this volume offer a multifaceted portrait of the Ming dynasty court (1368–1644). They demonstrate that the court was an arena of competition and negotiation. In this arena, a large cast of actors pursued individual and corporate ends, personal agency deeply shaped protocol and style, and people, goods, and tastes from all corners of the empire (and beyond) converged. Rather than a monolithic and immutable set of traditions, Ming court culture underwent frequent reinterpretation and rearticulation, processes often driven by immediate and keenly felt personal imperatives, mediated through social, political, and cultural interaction, and producing sometimes unexpected results.

The chapters in this volume address several common themes. First, they contribute to recent scholarship that rethinks previous notions about imperial isolation; instead, they stress the court’s myriad ties both to local Beijing society and to the empire as a whole. Forms of interaction examined here include personnel, religious patronage, material objects, musical tastes, and the flow of information. Second, the contributors reveal the court as an arena of competing interests and perspectives. Palace women, Tibetan monks, imperial craftsmen, court painters, Confucian educators, moralists, Mongol warriors, palace eunuchs, foreign envoys, musical performers, and others all strove to advance their interests and forge advantageous relations with the emperor himself and among themselves. The court was far from monolithic or static.
Finally, the case studies in this volume illustrate the importance of individual agency. In the evocative classic, 1587, *A Year of No Significance*, Ray Huang offered a vision of the Ming court, indeed the entire Ming government, as largely in thrall to the founding emperor, Hongwu (1328–98, r. 1368–98). A prolific writer, the founder penned scores of admonitions, demanding that his descendents and their courts follow his will in everything from hair ornaments, styles of gowns, and the frequency of audiences with officials to diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, the role of eunuchs in the palace, and investiture titles for imperial clansmen. More recent scholarship has done much to illumine the adaptability of local and central governments to shifting social and economic conditions during the Ming period. The chapters in this volume show that the founder’s legacy may have formed the warp in the dense tapestry of Ming court practices and tastes, but the weft varied considerably according to the specific personalities, ambitions, and circumstances of each reign.

Hongwu and his descendents enjoyed greater wealth than perhaps any previous imperial family. For the most part managed by palace eunuch bureaus, imperial workshops at their height employed approximately 15,000 men. These craftsmen produced a stunning variety of goods, from exquisitely wrought armor, finely woven brocade textiles, and jewel-encrusted golden headpieces for court women to ivory paperweights, scissors, paper, and fans used in the palaces. The holdings of art collections around the world today testify further to the enormous concentration of wealth and talent available to the Ming court.

To circumvent the limitations of written accounts, which are so often infused with the perspectives and interests of the literati, many of the contributors to this volume turned to such material objects as imperial portraits, picturebook illustrations, books, funerary statues, religious objects, and clothing. These material objects lend insight into artistic exchanges,

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1. Heijdra, “The Socio-economic Development of Rural China During the Ming.” On the increasing autonomy of local administration, see Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, pp. 89–93. For discussion of informal changes in personnel administration at the central government, see Nimick, “The Placement of Local Magistrates in Ming China.”

2. See the chapter by Scarlett Jang in this volume, pp. 116–85. One scholar estimates that the court’s budget was approximately one million ounces of silver late in the fifteenth century and about six million during the late sixteenth century; see He Benfang, “Mingdai gongzhong caizheng shulüe,” p. 77. He provides an overview of the Ming court’s expenditures and sources of revenue.

the growing importance of visual culture, and imperial self-perceptions at
the Ming court. Not directly subject to the political and cultural agendas of
civil officials and literati historians, these material objects offer valuable al-
ternatives to the written record.

Even discarded objects tell a tale of how the desire for court goods and
market demand undermined state efforts to regulate sociopolitical status.
During the fifteenth century, porcelains manufactured at Jingdezhen for
imperial use that fell short of its strict standards were intentionally broken
and buried to prevent their use outside the Forbidden City.4 An early sev-
enteenth-century guidebook to Beijing, however, shows that by late in the
dynasty such efforts were not completely successful. In a discussion of
items for sale in the City God Market of the capital, the editors of the
guidebook note: “Today that which [people] compete to purchase on the
market are usually things that were at the time not adopted for imperial use.
There are dragon patterns with five talons [an exclusive prerogative of the
imperial family]. [In order that] they did not fall into use among the people,
sometimes one talon was effaced and then [the item was] sold.”5

As the preceding anecdote shows, examination of the Ming court raises
wider questions about late imperial (or early modern) China, such as the
production, transmission, consumption, and perception of culture. To
some, the phrase “court culture” suggests a set of cultural practices unique
to the court. Studies of the sixteenth-century English Stuart court, for ex-
ample, are sometimes framed in terms of a “court-country dichotomy,”
highlighting the contrast between cultural values of a privileged, isolated
few at the court and the more broadly held views of the country as a
whole.6 A variation of this binary vision is to posit the court as the prin-
cipal site of cultural production, from whence patterns and objects of cul-
tural consumption diffuse through the rest of society. This view often
stresses a unilateral flow of influence; court culture influenced a wider
swath of subordinate territory yet retained its distinctiveness. More re-
cently, scholars working in a variety of periods and cultures have down-
played courtly isolation and stressed the interplay of the court and wider
spheres of tastes, materials, and personnel. Most authors in this volume

4. See the catalogue compiled by the Jingdezhen Institute of Ceramic Archeology
and the Tsui Museum of Art, *A Legacy of Chenghua*.

5. See Liu Tong and Yu Yizheng, *Dijing jingwu lüe*, juan 4, “Chenghuang miao shi”
城隍廟市, p. 164.

6. For a critique of such scholarship, see Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Roy-
alist Tradition*, pp. 2–5.
adopt this position, arguing against the court’s isolation and documenting its myriad ties to the rest of the empire. Although such an interpretive framework better captures the shifting, negotiated, and multivalent dimensions of cultural production, it does beg the question what, if anything, should be considered court culture, that is, something readily distinguishable from culture writ large.

The authors in this volume offer a number of answers to this question. All note that the Ming court was embedded in larger social, intellectual, cultural, and economic structures, that people, goods, and tastes flowed in and out of the court, and that the court commanded enormous prestige and wealth readily acknowledged by those beyond the court. However, the contributors reach divergent conclusions on the degree of friction involved in these interactions. Scarlett Jang in her discussion of palace eunuch publishing and Julia K. Murray in her chapter on the compilation of educational picturebooks intended for the heir apparent and young emperors see a high degree of consonance between the court and wider developments in Ming culture. Their studies indicate that the court and educated men shared many fundamental attitudes regarding the importance of the written word, the didactic function of the Confucian canon, the critical role of education and its ties to political power, and even particular aesthetic preferences in book production such as layout and illustrations.

Despite this considerable common ground, the court and the literati disagreed over who was to dictate the terms of interaction. The emperor and his close attendants rejected various literati efforts to determine who could produce what kinds of books for the throne; the emperor resisted literati attempts to exceed well-established precedents regarding their role as imperial educators. Yet even these tensions reflect common assumptions; both sides contested these issues because they considered them important. In his study of the Jiajing emperor’s (r. 1522–66) relations with officials who presented lectures on the classical texts and thought, Hung-lam Chu draws a similar conclusion. Both emperor and lecturers took for granted that intense study of the Confucian classics was essential for the ruler’s morality and ability to govern wisely. The central tension arose over who was to dictate the terms of study and who was to play the role of educator.

If most chapters in this volume suggest considerable congruence between court culture and the beliefs and attitudes held by educated society, the chapters by Dora C. Y. Ching and David M. Robinson throw into relief dissonant elements of court culture such as Tibetan Buddhist rituals, arti-
facts, and personnel or imagery drawn from Mongol models of rulership. The imperial harem, eunuch and military personnel, and formal interactions with foreign envoys also distinguished the court from the rest of society. Literati cast these facets of court culture as alien (in the case of Tibetan or Mongol influence) or inimical to proper order (for instance, overly powerful imperial females, affines, or military men).

Although such a characterization might seem to confirm a court-society dichotomy, scattered documentary evidence dissolves any absolute bifurcation. Small statues of Tibetan Buddhist deities were sold in Beijing’s markets; Mongolian fur hats and Korean silk gowns enjoyed popularity in the capital; interest in martial arts and military exploits was widespread and sustained. Thus, although Ming court culture was distinctive, it was neither isolated nor without points of resonance with the broader society. The same characterization holds true for the Ming court’s relation with other courts in the world.

Most chapters in this collection hew closely to the particulars of late imperial / early modern China; however, the Ming court can also be understood in a wider comparative context. Wherever they existed, most princely, royal, and imperial courts articulated and sought to impose visions of order. This order often began with efforts to ensure proper relations and attitudes among those physically present at the court. Acknowledging the centrality of personnel, Jonathan Shepard has defined a court as “an entourage of notables revolving around an overlord, of variegated and fluctuating composition but observing ritual deference towards him.”

Sometimes powerful magnates or aristocrats, who commanded nearly equal (or occasionally superior) political, ritual, or military resources, constituted the principal members of the court. In other cases, court members depended on ties to the chieftain, prince, king, or emperor for their livelihoods or privileged status in the greater polity or community. Ambitious courts attempted to order these various groups through titles, offices, clothing, access to the ruler, and participation in ritual and spectacle.

8. On the use of courts, ranks, and titles to transform an aristocratic elite to one defined through its relation to the imperial government during the seventh to tenth centuries, see Peter Bol, “This Culture of Ours,” pp. 32–75 and the scholarship cited therein. On similar efforts, often inspired by Chinese models, in classical Japan, see Piggott, The Emergence of Japanese Kingship. The consequences of these reforms differed dramatically. The use of court ranks, ceremony, and etiquette to tame competing elites was, of course, not unique to China. For a slightly dated but still influential study based on the
The great courts of the world often understood the proper regulation of the imperial family, notables, officials, warriors, and others at the court as one facet of an overarching order. Members of the court and those scholars and thinkers who articulated this more expansive order commonly integrated the realm of human action and morality into larger cosmic processes. Social hierarchies on earth reflected, represented, or derived from hierarchies inherent in the natural world. Rulers, in an effort to consolidate their power and legitimacy, also attempted to conflate the human realm with that of the divine. Discussing developments in early modern Europe, John Adamson has noted a trend “to express the elevated status of the prince in gestures and symbols that resemble, and were often derived from, religious liturgical practice.” He cites examples from courts in Madrid and Portugal, which used the cult of Corpus Christi to draw parallels between the sacred person of the king and Christ. In his Akba-namah, a “masterpiece of historiographical propaganda,” Abu al-Fazl articulated a new conception of rulership for his lord, the Mughal sultan Akbar (1542–1605, r. 1556–1605), that similarly effaced any bifurcation between the sacred and the profane. “Kingship,” he wrote, “is a refulgence from the Incomparable Distributor of justice . . . a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe and the receptacle of all virtues.” Akbar’s promulgation of a solar calendar and his worship of the sun reflected this understanding of Akbar as “the maturation of the light of sovereignty.”

In all cases, the creation and maintenance of a court was an exercise in power, persuasion, and negotiation. In recent decades, historians of early modern Europe have done much to dismantle past notions of absolutist kings who tamed the aristocratic nobility and enjoyed unchallenged authority at their courts. “Rather than being a centralized institution in which power ‘radiated’ from the person of the prince,” Adamson writes of the court, “influence and, in some cases, formal authority as well, emanated from a variety of subsidiary sources: entrenched office-holders, noble magnates, senior prelates, major army commanders, not to mention the

particulars of the reign of Louis XIV, see Elias, The Court Society. In the case of China, the court also claimed the right to decide the ranks and titles of gods and spirits, which in turn decided the kinds of sacrifices to which they were entitled. For the example of Confucius, see Wilson, “Sacrifices and the Imperial Cult of Confucius.” Wilson’s essay also includes citations to other cults and the ranks of their tutelary spirits.

11. Ibid., pp. 132–36; the quotation appears on p. 132.
satellite courts of the royal apanages.” 12 No ruler could afford to assume that relatives, nobles, officials, the military, or the world at large would unquestioningly accept his view of the world.

Even in the most autocratic cases, the court often proved a corrosive environment. Although perhaps formally acknowledged in the abstract, rulers’ power and status provided opportunities for negotiation or challenge whenever they took concrete form. Princes faced a variation of the “graying of politics” confronted by many twentieth-century socialist regimes. Once all elements of life are saturated with greater meaning, even such otherwise innocuous choices as clothing or music become powerful political statements. The preservation of an imperial vision of order required constant adjustment to shifting realities, negotiation with a variety of actors, and an occasional willingness to turn a blind eye to challenges too large or too small to permit effective resolution.

The Chapters

David Robinson and Dora Ching recast the Ming court by considering it in the wider context of Eurasia. Viewing the Ming dynasty as a successor-state to the Mongol empire, Robinson traces the Ming imperial family’s engagement with Mongol rulers, most especially Khubilai (1215–94), the founder of the Great Yuan Nation. This facet of Ming imperial identity violated the ethos and interests of many literati officials, who, as compilers of most extant documentary records, glossed over this strand of imperial rulership. In addition to reconsidering contemporary state chronicles and private writings in the context of post–Mongol empire Eurasia, Robinson draws on materials beyond the control of literati officials. These include imperial portraits that represent Ming emperors as Mongol khagans (khan of khans), often on the hunt or on horseback beyond the walls of the imperial palace; imperially produced porcelains and religious statues that reflect the Ming imperial family’s ongoing engagement with Tibetan Buddhism; and funerary figures dressed in Mongolian garb excavated from princely tombs. In doing so, Robinson decenters the literati and offers a more complex and cosmopolitan picture of the Ming court. Finally, he shows that this association with Khubilai, like most other elements of court culture, was subject to transformation and re-evaluation. He identifies the accession of the Jiajing emperor in the 1520s as a turning point in

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the identity of the Ming imperial family. Raised far from the Ming court and its complex body of customs and protocols, Jiajing was an outsider less wedded to court traditions, who felt freer to challenge the literati and eunuch bureaucracies and to change established court ritual, practice, and culture.

Ching, too, combines documentary and material evidence to rethink the Ming court by exploring a dramatic transformation in imperial portraiture. To explain the change from a more three-dimensional and naturalistic rendering of the early Ming emperors to a pose of rigid frontality and iconic representation by late in the fifteenth century, Ching turns to the Ming court’s engagement with Tibetan religious figures. Motivated by both political and religious goals, early in the fifteenth century, the third Ming emperor, Yongle (r. 1403–24), greatly increased exchanges between his court and Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs, resulting in a steady stream of gifts, religious objects, and personnel from Tibet to the Chinese court. Through a detailed analysis of style, composition, and medium, Ching argues that during the mid- and late fifteenth century, Tibetan Buddhist traditions of representing religious figures as icons influenced Ming imperial portraiture. The result was the “icon of rulership,” which became the standard imperial portraiture for the remainder of the dynasty. In addition to reviewing the ritual uses of imperial portraiture, Ching also traces the divergent ways different Ming emperors interacted with court painters and artisans. Like several other essays in this volume, Ching’s chapter illustrates the importance of contingency, exchange, and interaction in the formation and evolution of culture at the Ming court. Ching’s analysis of imperial portraiture also makes clear that the Ming court existed in a wider Eurasian context.

Scarlett Jang and Joseph S. C. Lam investigate two important institutions that spanned the course of the Ming dynasty. Jang’s exploration of the structure and function of inner court publishing activities shows the importance of eunuchs, another critical but poorly understood group at the Ming court, even in areas usually more associated with scholar-officials. The inner court produced exquisitely crafted books on a surprisingly broad range of subjects: Confucian classics such as the Analects, Mencius, and famous twelfth-century thinker and educator Zhu Xi’s commentaries on the Four Books; moral primers by empresses on proper behavior for imperial women; works on mathematics, medicine, and geography; even vernacular novels such as The Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Ming emperors composed the largest number of titles produced by the inner court press. In these imperially sponsored works, emperors instructed family members on ruler-
ship, the proper place of affines, and the correct role of civil officials. Many of the eunuchs who oversaw the production and storage of books at the Depository of Chinese Classics, the Depository of Buddhist Sutras, and the Depository of Daoist Texts and Scriptures were graduates of the dynasty’s eunuch academy, which at any one time might enroll as many as a thousand eunuch students.

Jang provides a powerful corrective to common characterizations of eunuchs as ill-educated, venal men who lacked legitimacy within the imperial system. Elite palace eunuchs received a well-rounded education in the classics, history, administrative precedents, and calligraphy. She shows that eunuchs figured in the education of the emperor, the crown prince, and palace women. They also produced such important works as compilations of administrative precedents, compendiums of rites, and even the dynastic calendar.

Joseph Lam’s essay highlights the interactions of patrons, audiences, and performers in the evolution of musical culture at the Ming court. Music and religion at the court drew deeply on local traditions beyond the walls of the Imperial City. Civil bureaucrats, eunuchs, and networks of religious patronage brought renowned musicians from around the empire to the court. Once employed at the court, these master performers joined the emperor and other patrons in a subtle process of instruction, accommodation, and elaboration.

Depending on the tastes and political needs of individual emperors, musical culture at the Ming court varied widely. Grand, relatively stable traditions of music for major state rituals, formal banquets, and annual celebrations drew heavily from Confucian theories and were housed in the eunuch-run State Sacrificial Music Office. This variety of music was, however, not static; emperors periodically ordered changes. Jiajing’s wide-ranging changes in the mid-sixteenth century were directly tied to larger revisions of ceremony that hinged on the major political and ritual controversies of his court. Music was not just background noise. The emperor, the imperial family, eunuchs, and civil officials considered music an integral part of court life that had consequences for the health of the dynasty.

As Lam demonstrates, music at the Ming court also had a more personal dimension. Southern arias, northern melodies, Uighur songs, qin music, Kun operas, and pipa performances variously enjoyed times of popularity with the emperor and his intimates. Imperial women figured in the musical culture of the court both as performers and as patrons. As was true in the realm of religious patronage, court women (from the empress
and concubines to palace servants and entertainers) formed a key link between court tastes and practices and those beyond the palace walls.

The eunuchs’ ubiquitous presence often challenged what scholar-officials considered their proper role at the court and their relationship with the emperor. Scholar-officials felt it their responsibility and their privilege to educate the Ming imperial family. As several contributors demonstrate, however, no one at the court took for granted the scholar-officials’ ability to monopolize the role of imperial educators. Through a detailed study of the daily and classics-mat lectures, Hung-lam Chu evokes the shifting relationship between the Jiajing emperor and his aspiring teachers. Designed to deepen the ruler’s understanding and appreciation of Confucian statecraft, the lectures were also intended to perfect the emperor’s morality. The emperor, however, dominated the sessions, often intimidating less experienced lecturers unnerved by close physical proximity to the Son of Heaven. Lecturers who wished to gain the ear of the emperor in the hope of influencing his views had to adapt to his tastes in delivery, intonation, dress, and subject matter.

The emperor periodically turned the tables on his instructors, taking the opportunity to lecture them on proper Confucian morality and correct rulership. As Scarlett Jang and Julia Murray (see below) note, during the first century of the dynasty, Ming emperors compiled guides for the proper behavior of both imperial family members and officials. In doing so, the emperor was acting as teacher. Thus, Jiajing’s actions formed part of an on-again off-again family tradition. Eventually, the emperor lost interest in the lectures and devoted his time to Daoist regimes for fertility and longevity. As Chu notes, at least a few Confucian-minded scholars from the Hanlin Academy were not above turning their literary skills to writing Daoist prayers as a way to maintain some influence or favor with the emperor. Chu argues that Confucian civil officials’ inability to put aside personal agendas and to present a united front to the errant Jiajing ultimately ended their influence over the ruler’s behavior and thought.

Julia Murray, too, examines efforts to shape rulers and their successors through education. Through a finely textured study of picture books compiled as educational texts for various heirs apparent and one emperor,

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13. One might understand the numerous collections on rulership compiled by order of the emperor as reminders to civil officials of who was actually in charge. For an early and somewhat flawed catalogue of many of these titles and the dates of their compilation, see Li Jinhua, Mingdai chizhuanshu kao.
Murray explores the complex interplay of competing agendas, publishing markets, and visual culture. As she notes, during the first seventy years of the dynasty at least four emperors issued instructions for future rulers and members of the imperial family. Murray shows that during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries when civil officials turned their hands to the task, the reception was generally cool. One Nanjing official whose duties had nothing to do with the education of the crown prince submitted a lavishly executed picturebook with more than 100 illustrations of moral exemplars. Fellow bureaucrats assumed that his motivation was to secure a post at the court in Beijing. The emperor rejected out of hand a second and simpler album as slanderous and inappropriate. Emperors did not lightly grant civil officials the opportunity to shape crown princes.

In 1572, the domineering prime minister Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–82) succeeded where others had failed. Consisting of 117 exemplary and cautionary tales in two volumes, the *Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed* (Dijian tushuo 帝鑒圖說; compiled at Zhang’s behest) was immediately incorporated into the education of the nine-year-old Wanli (r. 1573–1620) emperor. Zhang circulated a smaller woodblock version of the same title to capital officials. As Murray observes, Zhang thereby assumed the role of earlier rulers who had educated the imperial family and the bureaucracy.

The considerable commercial success of the *Emperor’s Mirror* and another later picturebook, *Cultivating Rectitude, Illustrated and Explained* (Yangzheng tujie 养正圖解), owed much to the appealing combination of pictures and stories, the entertainment value of historical figures (especially the depraved ones), and glimpses into the normally inaccessible world of the palace. Although an imperial tutor had rejected *Cultivating Rectitude*, a palace eunuch chanced on a deluxe printed version of the work in the southern metropolis of Nanjing and promptly recommended it to the throne. The episode neatly brings together personal ambition, publishing, the influence of eunuchs, and the Ming court’s many ties to the rest of the empire.

Taken together, the studies by Robinson, Jang, Chu, and Murray suggest that the composition of the court challenged many scholar-officials’ sense of identity. The need to reconcile deeply held beliefs about their proper role at the court with daily frustrations and compromises probably sharpened the rhetorical edge of scholar-officials’ memorials and other writings. Neither the emperor nor the civil bureaucracy itself assumed that efforts to educate or influence the throne were selfless acts of pure-minded Confucians. This skepticism and constant competition from others at court (e.g., palace eunuchs, military men, palace women, religious figures, and fellow
officials) encouraged officials to adopt a moralistic rhetoric. These more inclusive studies of the court offer a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the writings and self-perceptions of literati.

The battles between the Wanli emperor and his civil bureaucracy have often been seen as evidence of imperial intransigence that contributed to the dynasty’s ultimate collapse. Kenneth M. Swope offers a different perspective on this controversial emperor, exploring Wanli’s response to a series of military crises during the sixteenth century. Rejecting previous characterizations of the Wanli as an apathetic ruler whose lack of attention to state matters precipitated dynastic decline, Swope argues that the emperor was keenly interested in the great military campaigns of the day. He shows that the emperor cultivated relations with leading military families in the empire, families that much of the civil bureaucracy considered dangerous and untrustworthy. In order to meet the challenges of a major military mutiny in the northwest, the large-scale Japanese invasions of Korea during the 1590s, and a stubborn rebellion in the southwest, the emperor overrode his bureaucracy’s objections and directed these far-flung military campaigns to a successful conclusion.

Swope’s work throws light on the continuing importance of the military at the Ming court and throughout the empire. Several scholars have commented on the resurgence of military concerns in China during the seventeenth century; some term it the militarization of Ming society. It is more accurate to say the military and the martial never disappeared from either the court or society in general. Swope’s case study also illustrates the need to understand emperors as individuals with agency. As a boy, Wanli had learned the importance of military affairs to the empire from his tutor, the powerful minister Zhang Juzheng. Although Wanli would later grow disillusioned with the memory of his intimidating tutor, he retained a deep interest in military preparedness and in the powerful military families that guarded his borders. Swope’s revisionist perspective serves as a useful historiographical reminder about the dangers of generalizations based exclusively on the perspectives and concerns of the civil bureaucracy. Wanli’s

14. Writing during the early decades of the twentieth century, the noted historian of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Meng Sen (Mingdai shi, p. 275), opined: “The decline of the Ming began after the Zhengde [1506–21] and Jiajing [1522–66] reigns. It became more severe with the Wanli court. Portents of the Ming’s collapse were fixed, once the Wanli reign began.”

15. In Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven, I make this point based on the particulars of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.
alienation from the majority of his civil officials did not mean alienation from all officialdom. In the nomenclature of the Ming dynasty, military officers were no less “officials” (guan 官) than were their civil counterparts.

**Remaining Questions**

Given the size, complexity, and duration of the Ming court, this collection of essays makes no pretense of being comprehensive. The number of important questions, themes, perspectives, and materials not examined in this volume, of course, far outnumber those we do consider. In the spirit of *paozhuanyinyu* 抛磚引玉 (casting a brick and receiving a piece of jade), we hope that these studies will encourage others to deepen and broaden our understanding of the Ming court. Here I would like to note two larger questions that grow out of this collection of essays: princely courts and the place of the Ming court in a wider historical context.

The chapters in this volume focus mainly on the court in Beijing. However, as several authors note, the Ming imperial family went to considerable lengths to preserve a strong sense of corporate identity and unity. After the first decades of the dynasty, princely courts were denied political and military control over the areas where they were invested. In exchange, they enjoyed privileges that marked them off from the rest of the local population. They received generous (at least during the early decades of the dynasty) subsidies. Sumptuary laws permitted them to maintain princely palaces constructed of materials and in styles prohibited to the rest of the

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16. The Nanjing court, both during the earliest decades of the dynasty and later, when it became a secondary capital, remains a promising topic of research. For a primarily political account, see Farmer, *Early Ming Government*.


19. Craig Clunas (*Superfluous Things*, p. 161) has noted that sixteenth-century western European visitors to China were struck by the wealth of the Ming provincial imperial aristocracy. However, such observations applied only to the upper ranks of provincial aristocracy. By the late sixteenth century, if not earlier, enormous discrepancies in income emerged within the ever-growing ranks of imperial clansmen; see Gu Cheng, “Mingdai de zongshi,” pp. 103–7.
population. They maintained staffs of eunuchs, military honor guards, and administrative advisors denied to commoners. Imperial princes of the first rank were expected to visit the emperor annually. Government statutes enjoined princes to ensure that their processions to and from the capital were awe-inspiring sights that would impress officials and commoners. If generationally senior to the emperor, princes might sit and receive bows from the Son of Heaven. They also received from the Beijing court a wide range of gifts: exquisitely printed inner court books, finely woven silk textiles, intricately wrought jewelry of gold and silver, as well as valuable paintings, calligraphy, playbooks, and porcelains from the imperial collection. When they died, members of princely families were dressed in clothing designated for the imperial family, buried in elaborate underground palaces complete with wooden or porcelain tomb figurines including honor guards and entertainers and gifts from the court in Beijing, and honored with ceremonial archways and stone tomb statuary.

Thus, although the central node of the Ming court was in Beijing, the secondary court in Nanjing and princely establishments in the provinces meant that the greater court extended throughout much of the empire. Material goods, ritual, protocol, personnel, and social markers tied together this extended court system. Certain imperially commissioned books on protocol and ceremony that circulated between the imperial family in Beijing and the princes seem to have been only dimly known to even the capital bureaucracy. More research is needed on the links between the pro-

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20. Shen Shixing, *Du Ming huidian* (hereafter cited as *DMHD*), 56.21a.


22. For instance, wedding gifts made of silver were frequently produced by the Directorate of Ceremonial in Beijing; see Wang Jichao, “Mingdai qinwang zangzhi de jige wenti,” p. 65. The flow of goods crafted in Beijing court workshops ensured at least a minimum of ritual and material consistency throughout the imperial family. On the perception that during the Hongwu reign (1368–98), imperial princes received the libretti for large numbers of plays from the court upon departing Beijing for their assigned feoffs, see Idema, “State and Court in China,” p. 178n1.


24. Su Jinyu (“Henan fanfu jia tianxia,” p. 41) estimates that Ming princes of various ranks were resident in “nearly a hundred” cities.

25. Huang Zhangjian, “Du Huang Ming dian li.” Copies of the *Huang Ming dian li* did exist within the capital bureaucracy, but the fact that the emperor specially granted copies to the Grand Secretariat and the Ministry of Rites suggests that they were not common; see the memorial of gratitude from Zhu Geng, “Xie ci Huang Ming dian li jie.”
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26. The Beijing court was concerned that princely establishments might develop dangerously wide political and economic networks; see *DMHD*, 56.49a–b.

27. Dong Xinlin, “Mingdai zhuhou wanglingmu chubu yanjiu”; Wang Jichao, “Mingdai qinwang zangzhi de jige wenti.” The most substantial account to date on Ming princely tombs is Liu Yi, *Mingdai diwang lingmu zhidu yanjiu*; see esp. pp. 153–325 for the considerable variation among princely tombs according to time and region.

28. On the “northernization” of imperial cuisine, see Qiu Zhonglin, “Huangdi de canzhuo.” This northernization is reflected in the fact that by the late Ming, nearly 80 percent of palace eunuchs hailed from North China, most especially the Northern Metropolitan Area (Qiu Zhonglin, “Mingdai zigong qiyong xianxiang zailun,” p. 139).

29. For a preliminary study that stresses princely courts as sites of cultural production, largely in the literati tradition, see Su Derong, “Mingdai zongshi wenhua ji qi shenhui yingxiang.” Su’s essay is intended as a partial rebuttal of Gu Cheng’s characterization of Ming imperial clansmen as a “gargantuan parasitic group” (“Mingdai de zongshi,” p. 89). Especially early in the dynasty, many imperial princes were important cultural figures; see Idema, *The Dramatic Oeuvre of Chu Yu-tun*.

30. I explore this question in my forthcoming *Ming Court in Eurasia*.
socioeconomic developments, tended to view the Ming and Qing as a single period that exhibited considerable continuity. Over the past decade, landmark studies by such scholars as Mark Elliott, Pamela Crossley, Evelyn Rawski, Nicola di Cosmo, Patricia Berger, and others have significantly advanced our understanding of the Qing dynasty, clarifying many of its distinctively Manchu facets, often through contextualization in a larger Eurasian setting. Their work has opened the way to a more nuanced and informed consideration of the court, ideologies of rulership, and relations with surrounding countries and peoples from the thirteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The practices and tenor of the Ming court were deeply shaped by both previous Chinese dynasties and its immediate predecessor, the Mongol empire. Facile dismissals of the Ming court as recidivist, xenophobic, or reactionary clearly miss the depth of the court’s engagement with such groups as the Mongols, Tibetans, and Koreans. One has the sneaking feeling that extensive historical rewriting commissioned by the Qing government has shaped our views of the Ming in ways that are still not fully appreciated. Qing rulers were quick to criticize the Ming and to distance themselves from what they labeled a flawed and fallen regime. As several scholars have shown, the Qing court derived many of its institutional practices and ideological postures from the Great Yuan Nation. The Qing also freely drew on Ming institutional practices. Knowing more about the

32. On the question of periodization, see von Glahn, “Imagining Pre-modern China”; and Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, p. 264–n15–16.


34. For instance, in 1709, the Kangxi emperor opined, “The Ming dynasty’s expenditure was extremely profligate. Its construction projects, too, were vast. Its daily expenditure corresponds to what [we] now use in a year. The money spent on cosmetics for the palace women was 400,000 taels of silver. The silver spent on supplies was one million taels. It was not until Shizu (Fulin [i.e., the Qing Shunzhi emperor, r. 1644–61]) took the throne that all this was eliminated” (cited in Qiu Zhonglin, “Huangdi de canzhuo,” p. 29). As Qiu notes, such remarks should be taken with a grain of salt.

35. Farquhar, “Mongolian Versus Chinese Elements in the Early Manchu State”; idem, “Emperor as Bodhisattva in the Governance of the Ch’ing Empire.” This theme runs through much of Berger’s elegant *Empire of Emptiness*. At one point, she terms the Qing the “New Mongols.” James Millward (“The Qing Formation,” p. 113) has recently observed: “The Qing looks almost like a project to restore an empire along Mongol lines” and stresses the importance of “the Mongol imperial legacy” for understanding the Qing in a wider Eurasian context.
Ming court will improve our understanding of the Qing court as well. For instance, did the Ming court contribute anything to Qing’s Inner Eurasian face? In any case, it seems clear that the Qing ruling family was far more successful than its Ming counterpart in enforcing its view of the world. This was especially true in the imperial family’s clashes with the civil bureaucracy and other contending interests.36 Perhaps the Qing rulers learned from the Ming imperial family’s failure to keep family interests at the center of things.

36. Even at the height of Qing power, the throne encountered repeated challenges to efforts to impose its will on officialdom. For an evocative case study, see Kuhn, *Soul-stealers.*
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