Introduction

The Ming court (1368–1644) of China worked hard to sell its rulership, articulating its power and legitimacy regularly, in many arenas, and through a variety of media. The imposing architecture of the imperial palace complex and the capital’s towering walls was visible, tangible evidence of power and great resources. An encompassing system of rituals emphasized the emperor’s unique status among men and his centrality to the polity. The throne’s patronage of classical scholarship and support for the “right” sorts of thought and beliefs reflected claims as defender (if not arbiter) of orthodoxy and proper morality. “Officials of the word” (ci guan), who worked in government bureaus that produced imperial proclamations, historical chronicles, and administrative compilations, also composed essays and poems that celebrated dynastic rigor,

1. The phrasing is borrowed from Sharpe, Selling the Tudor Monarchy. For a concise review of Chinese rulership and imperial ideology during the pre-imperial and imperial periods, see Pines, Everlasting Empire, pp. 45–75.
2. For early court rhetoric of political legitimacy rooted in philosophical and historical arguments, see Knechtges, “The Rhetoric of Imperial Abdication and Accession”; Nylan, “The Rhetoric of ‘Empire.’”
3. Meng Fanren, Mingdai gongting jianzhushi. For the capital as a statement of the ruler’s power and legitimacy, see Steinhardt, Chinese Imperial City Planning.
5. Elman (“‘Where is King Ch’eng?’”) argues that the Ming state adopted the “disguise” of Tao Learning (known more commonly as Neo-Confucianism) to justify its bureaucratic and military power. Bol (Neo-Confucianism in History, pp. 117–52, esp. p. 119) and others, in contrast, stress that Neo-Confucianism contributed to a more human view of the emperor, one that insisted that the ruler “cultivate himself through learning in the style of the literati” and serve the common good.
rulers’ virtue, and the blessing of Heaven and the people; these writings were intended for broad consumption at court, in the capital, and throughout the realm. Government officials frequently reminded all who would listen that the emperor and his servitors cared for the people like their own children on whose behalf they labored tirelessly. Finally, the court issued tens of thousands of proclamations on a range of topics, for example, dictating what people should and should not wear, outlining what deities were acceptable, expressing the court’s impatience with corrupt officials, granting awards for exemplars of female chastity, extending disaster relief, and denunciating recalcitrant foreign rulers. Such announcements asserted authority: the court knew what was correct and could put things right. Stated simply, like nearly all courts, the Ming invested heavily in an essentially open-ended campaign of persuasion.

This book explores one facet of this campaign of persuasion, a cluster of activities that I call martial spectacles, during the dynasty’s first two centuries. More specifically, I focus on the royal hunt, equestrian demonstrations, polo matches, archery contests, formal reviews of troops, and the imperial menageries because they shed much light on early modern court culture, Eurasian traditions of display, and Ming contests over rulership and power. In the interest of full disclosure, the group of spectacles examined here does not correspond neatly to any one contemporary Ming category. Recent Chinese-language scholarship has often considered things like archery and hunting as court sports or leisure entertainment. Ming and Qing (1636–1911) period works listed the royal hunt and the military review, which often included archery contests, as military rituals. Polo matches hosted by the throne were associated with

7. For such efforts during the early Ming, see Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation*.
8. For Roman (and successor states’) efforts at promulgating an imperial ideology of eternal triumph, see McCormick, *Eternal Victory*.
9. Gao Shouxian, “Mingdai gongting de xiuxian yule” and “Mingdai huangjia siyang de zhenxi dongwu he chongwu”; Li Daming, “Mingdai gongting de Duanwu sheliu.” Zhang Bo mentions archery and riding contests as part of court festival life (“Zhuo zhong zhi yin shi hao shang ji lüe,” p. 87).
seasonal festivals like Duanwu. The menagerie and hunting parks fell under the rubric of institutions with physical plants that required regular maintenance.

So what justifies lumping such varied activities and sites as “martial spectacles”? Martial spectacles shared a number of common characteristics. Nearly all involved rigorous physical action, the use of animals (often horses), large numbers of men as participants, and elite audiences in the capital. Most revolved around the demonstration of martial prowess, whether it was skill in riding, mounted archery, or coordinated action directed toward killing game. The imperial menagerie and hunting preserve were in some ways the odd men out, neither events nor spectacles for large audiences. However, they did derive much of their significance from episodic controversies and were closely linked to the presentation of gifts, usually from foreign rulers, and military drill. Poetry, prose, and paintings transmitted them to a wider audience than might visit their physical plants. Finally, like the other spectacles examined in this book, the menagerie and hunting preserve were based in the ruler’s mastery over animals and men (who presented the animals to the throne).

Martial spectacles are best understood as part of the throne’s broader repertoire of display and military traditions. Events such as coronations, funerals, investitures of heirs-apparent, royal weddings, annual sacrifices to mark the New Year, the emperor’s ritual tilling of the soil and the empress’s participation in sericulture, and formal observations of filial piety often began within the Forbidden City and involved processions with grand carriages, elaborately dressed members of the imperial family, and their personal attendants.11 Martial spectacles were embedded in traditions of military display and ritual that included martial dances and music, the presentation of war prisoners to the throne, ceremonies for conferring command on military generals, sacrifices to battle flags, prayers for victory in war, and pre- and post-campaign reports at the ancestral shrine. In the palace and on the road, Ming emperors were conspicuously

11. Public displays and spectacles had a long history in China by the Ming period. For discussion of the public display “as a way to balance hierarchy with reciprocity” during the Warring States and Han dynasty, see Nylan, “Toward an Archeology of Writing,” pp. 23–37.
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protected by the imperial guard, which provided both security and an imposing sense of grandeur for any occasion (see figure 1).12 Outside the capital, the seven massive naval armadas that the Ming court dispatched to Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and as far as the African coast were certainly intended as a particularly extravagant martial spectacle for a vast international audience.13

Martial spectacles required capital.14 Indeed, they advertised rulers’ ability to mount extravagant events beyond the means of potential competitors. Rivals could—and at various points during the Ming dynasty did—include enemies abroad, ambitious military men at home, disaffected local leaders (both religious and secular), scheming court ministers, and resentful imperial clansmen. Detailed financial data regarding the Grand Reviews, large-scale formal drill and inspection of imperial troops conducted on the grounds of the emperor’s palace complex in the capital, have not survived (the mountainous Qing dynasty archival materials suggest the kinds of Ming sources lost over the centuries), but the imperially compiled chronicle of the dynasty, Ming Veritable Records (Ming shi lu 明實錄), reports that 10,000 and 30,000 taels of silver were distributed to soldiers as gifts prior to two reviews held during the second half of the sixteenth century. Ming observers claimed that a 1569 review

12. The guard’s prominence is well reflected in a late sixteenth-century pictorial account of a court audience. See Yu Shi 余士 and Wu Yue 吳鉞, Xu Xianqing huan ji tu ce 徐顯卿宦蹟圖冊 (1588), reproduced in Yang Xin, Ming Qing xiaoxianghua, leaves 8 and 21, pp. 37 and 43. For analysis of the folio painting, see Zhu Hong, “Xu Xianqing huan ji tu yanjiu”; Yang Lili, “Yiwei Mingdai Hanlin guanyuan.” Although Yu and Wu were probably not court painters, their portrayal was based on information provided by Xu Xianqing, who, as a Hanlin official, possessed intimate knowledge of court protocol, clothing, and architectural layout. Both Zhu Hong and Yang Lili pass over the point in silence, but for Xu the military constituted an essential element of court majesty, a majesty that Xu valued as it highlighted his own status and unique fortune.


14. Zhao Kesheng stresses court rituals’ enormous expense, arguing provocatively (and not entirely persuasively) that during the late Ming, such costs were a greater drain on dynastic coffers than military campaigns. Zhao, however, does not discuss the costs associated with martial spectacles, dismissing martial rites as unimportant and only periodically conducted. See Zhao, “Mingdai gongting liyi yu caizheng.”
cost “two million taels” and that the towering bridge to scale the capital walls in one early seventeenth-century review required “tens of thousands in gold.” In addition, the throne distributed textiles and silver medallions and held banquets for favored participants. The men on the parade grounds wore standardized uniforms, wielded state-supplied weapons, and rode horses provided by their garrisons. The soldiers in the reviews (and hunts, archery contests, and equestrian demonstrations) were themselves another resource at the ruler’s disposal. Tens of thousands participated in mid-sixteenth century reviews, with one writer claiming 120,000 for the 1569 review. Enclosure hunts routinely involved hundreds, sometimes thousands, of men. Martial spectacles demonstrated the emperor’s ability to make men move with discipline and skill.

We see something similar elsewhere in Eurasia. Based on the particulars of the Mughal and Manchu camp-cum-courts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jos Gommans concludes, “Since the camp showed the imperial grandeur on permanent display all over the empire, actual fighting could often be avoided. The pending arrival of the court was usually more than enough to bring people into submission.”15 Displaying his resources in treasure and manpower was costly, but much cheaper than the burdens of a full-scale military conflict or a palace coup. The royal hunt, polo matches, and archery contests were intended as both grand entertainment and a reminder that military force remained a central pillar of the dynasty.

Martial spectacles should be understood in the context of the Ming court’s deep engagement with the Northern Yuan court and other Mongol polities on the steppe. Northern Yuan is a scholarly convention of convenience that refers to the Chinggisid court on the steppe after its withdrawal from Beijing in 1368 following nearly a century of rule in China. Claiming direct descent from Qubilai (and more generally Chinggis khan), it retained great prestige and commanded, if sometimes only indirectly, large and powerful armies during the late fourteenth century. The Ming and Yuan remained locked in a political contest for legitimacy and recognition in eastern Eurasia.16 Court grandeur was one element of their competition.

At a more pragmatic level, horsemanship and skill in mounted archery were vital dimensions of their military conflict. Throughout Inner Eurasia and its periphery, the mounted archer remained the premier military weapon during the medieval and early modern periods. Steppe powers had access to large numbers of high-quality horses and men who had grown up riding and shooting. More sedentary powers in West, South, and East Asia used their superior economic resources to secure horses from the steppe to supplement domestically bred mounts, which were generally of lesser quality and quantity. Thus, although twenty-first century audiences might assume that high-tech firearms were the gold standard for military reviews and that horses were more for show, polities surrounding the steppe knew through painful experience that the reality of war was quite different. Firearms’ importance grew as they improved, but the mounted archer remained essential for most of Inner Eurasia through the early modern period.

Spectacles

A common element of most courts throughout history and indeed a prominent feature in contemporary political theater today, spectacles have been explained in many ways. Scholars looking at Western Europe during the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries have produced a sophisticated body of work on spectacles, rulership, and power. In his classic Splendor at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and the Theater of Power, Roy Strong describes the state entries, masques, fireworks, sculptures, paintings, and ballets of the court fête. Strong argues:

17. Chase, Firearms. This is not to deny firearms’ value. Military reviews at the Ming court and in the provinces also featured firearms. Firearm units grew increasingly important over time, yet they did not immediately supplant the importance of mounted archers in Ming China, Muscovite Russia, and other polities that regularly faced large steppe forces. The relative prominence of mounted archers versus firearms units varied significantly among Western Europeans, the Ottomans, the Safavids, and East Asian powers depending on their particular military demands.

18. Gommans, “Warhorses.” For points of entry into the voluminous literature on Ming efforts to secure horses, see Tani Mitsutaka, “A Study on Horse Administration in the Ming Period”; Rossabi, “The Tea and Horse Trade.” For more extensive analysis, see Serruys, (Sino-Mongol Relations during the Ming III) Trade Relations: The Horse Fairs, 1400–1600.
Through them the prince was able to manifest himself at his most magnificent in the sight of his subjects. By means of myth and allegory, sign and symbol, gesture and movement, festival found a means to exalt the glory of the wearer of the Crown. In such a way, the truths of sacred monarchy could be propagated to the court and a tamed nobility take its place in the round of ritual.  

Strong is far from alone in understanding progresses, spectacles, and pageantry as a projection of royal power. Based on the particulars of sixteenth-century Italy, Bonner Mitchell has similarly observed that the primary function of civic pageantry was “to represent the majesty of the state to its citizens and to foreigners.” And R.J.W. Evans has noted, “Spectacle could be a vital weapon for demonstrating the power of the ruler and good order of his government.”

Other scholars, however, have questioned the idea of spectacle and pageantry as simple projections of power, reexamining assumptions about a “tamed nobility” and instead stressing the multivalent and contested elements of civic pageants. As Jeroen Duindam has observed, “While one cannot deny the conscious use of ceremony to bolster reputation, it is equally futile to present it as a Machiavellian ruse, monopolized by the sovereign and unconstrained by the hierarchical worldview.” Striking a slightly different note, John Adamson warns against reducing court culture to “propaganda” that inculcated a consistent and coherent set of political values into a

21. Evans, “The Court,” p. 485. In the same sentence, however, Evans observes that those “who sought to employ such grandeur” could well be compensating for “limited practical authority.”
22. For a highly influential analysis of the early modern European court, see Elias, The Court Society. For reassessments of the balance of power between early modern rulers and their nobility, see Adamson, “The Making of the Ancien-Régime.” For consideration of Elias’ impact on the study of the court, see Duindam, Myths of Power. For brief comments, see Duindam, Vienna and Versailles, pp. 7–10. Malcom Vale has similarly questioned Elias’s idea that “by a process of courtization a warrior nobility was transformed into a court aristocracy.” See Vale, The Princely Court, p. 17.
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malleable and compliant audience. Bonner Mitchell and Malcom Vale, among others, have noted that while progresses may have highlighted princely power, they often also involved recognition of the prerogatives and status of local elites. Whereas Duindam, Vale, and Adamson argue against the fallacy of a subjugated aristocracy under the ruler’s thumb, Sydney Anglo stresses questions of perception and transmission, warning that not everyone in the audience understood complex visual and textual allusions. Finally, in his wide-ranging and insightful work on authority and image in Tudor-Stuart England, Kevin Sharpe has pointed to the need to “consider the uncertainties and anxieties that Tudor images, in words or on canvas, were endeavoring to overcome.”

Taken together, these studies from Western European courts during the late medieval and early modern periods indicate that spectacles must be approached with a sensitivity to the dangers of assuming too much: the efficacy, intentions, and motivations of spectacles and other efforts at “selling” rulership were seldom self-evident; they were subject to appropriation and alternate interpretations; and finally, they revealed as much about the fears and vulnerabilities of courts as they did about their majesty and glory. Not everyone was buying what the court was selling. Despite the sophistication of such studies on the creation, transmission, and interrogation of spectacles, they often slight the role of court ministers, who appear as little more than amanuenses. Studies of more recent times often focus on “the state” and its apparently monolithic efforts to project power and control. The example of Ming martial spectacles reveals considerable contestation within the court, as the interests and perspectives of rulers and senior ministers often differed.

Martial spectacles demanded a response from audiences. Court officials who attended polo matches, archery contests, and imperial military reviews did not simply observe the event. Based on the particulars of the United States in the twentieth century, Michael

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24. Adamson, The Princely Courts, p. 40. For review of the concept of “propaganda” in West European historiography of court ritual, see Shaw, “Nothing but Propaganda?” My thanks go to Craig Clunas for bringing this article to my attention.

25. Anglo, Images of Tudor Kingship, p. 3.

26. Sharpe, Selling the Tudor Monarchy, p. 36.
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Halloran has emphasized spectacles as “lived experience,” noting that “the experience of a spectacle is already an enactment of the social order.” Halloran stresses the impact of audience response on the spectacle. Members of the audience constitute a community born of their participation in the spectacle. By praising the ruler on the occasion of imperial spectacles, by composing commemorative literature for such events, indeed by their very attendance, high-ranking civil officials at the Ming court signaled their acceptance of a particular variety of rulership and a particular relation to the emperor. Thus, for senior court officials, spectacles forced an explicit confirmation (and in effect perpetuation) of structures of power.

This brings me to the first core argument of this book. Rulership does not exist in the abstract but must be demonstrated. Ming emperors demonstrated rulership through political decisions, military campaigns, imperial proclamations, and martial spectacles (to name just a few). They could not and did not assume that their rulership was unquestioned or their will inviolate. Just as Elias has observed of kings’ prestige, rulers’ power had to be asserted and confirmed on a regular basis to remain vital, but such assertions of rulership were simultaneously moments of vulnerability. If mocked, dismissed, or rejected, spectacles could subvert the ruler’s authority. When, in the first century BCE, Diodorus wanted to undermine the political legitimacy and stature of Antiochus IV of Syria (215 BCE – 164 BCE), he derided the ruler’s failed spectacles. “Some of the enterprises and actions of Antiochus were kingly and wondrous,” he wrote, “but some were so tawdry and foolish that he was utterly despised by everyone. In celebrating games he adopted a policy contrary to that of other kings.” Spectacles were not only grand entertainment and demonstrations of rulership but also moments when such rulership could be challenged.

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28. “Each participant, above all the king, has his prestige and his relative power confirmed by others... without confirmation of one’s prestige through behavior, the prestige is nothing.” See Elias, The Court Society, p. 101.
30. The interplay between spectacles (circuses, horse races, triumphs, etc.) and rulership within the context of the Roman polity and its successors immediately comes to mind (McCormick, Eternal Victory).
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As acts of rulership, martial spectacles displayed the ruler’s mastery over men and animals. Organized into massive hunts or military reviews, they performed at the emperor’s command and for his purposes. The warriors were drawn from his armies; the animals were provided by his stables, his menagerie, or allied foreign leaders (as tribute). Martial spectacles showcased the ruler’s discernment of men and their abilities; he judged their skill in riding and shooting and rewarded bravery and prowess in the hunt. In martial spectacles, rulers made manifest their generosity with lavish entertainment for their subjects and bountiful rewards to participants.

Control, discernment, and munificence were essential elements of rulership in most places and times. Within the broad and variegated Chinese tradition, emperors were generally expected to possess such qualities, but we have perhaps focused more often on their expression in a civil context, especially during the late imperial period. Ming emperors were considered wise to the extent that they recognized and cultivated talented scholars by offering trust, office, and rewards. Martial spectacles make clear that although literati might pass quietly over the fact, such attributes had an equally vital place in the military realm.

31. Kenneth Swope has consistently stressed the importance of the Wanli emperor (r. 1573–1620) as a military patron. See Swope, “Bestowing the Double-Edged Sword.” Western scholarship has devoted far greater attention to the martial dimensions of Qing rulership, beginning perhaps first with Jesuit observations at the Manchu court and extending to a series of excellent studies produced in recent decades. Such studies include but are not limited to Spence, Emperor of China; Elliott, The Manchu Way; Waley-Cohen, The Culture of War; Chang, A Court on Horseback.

32. For how these ideas played out in painting and illustrations, see Scarlett Jang, “Issues of Public Service” and “Form, Content, and Audience.” By the Ming period, pictorial representations of relations between rulers and ministers, for instance, in paintings of sleek, vigorous horses that owed their health to an unseen but generous ruler, had a long history. For discussion of the late Yuan period, see Silbergeld, “In Praise of Government.” For analysis of judging horses as a metaphor for judging humans, see Harrist, “The Legacy of Bole.” Homilies on the importance of men’s character for government service date back to the classical canon. See “Establishment of Government” (li zheng 立政) in book 19, part 2 (The Books of Chow [Zhou shu 周書]) of The Shoo King, or the Book of Historical Documents (vol. 3 of Legge, The Chinese Classics), pp. 508–22.
Such dissonance relates to a second core argument of this book. Martial spectacles helped define the identity of the ruler, his servants, and the court as a whole. Military spectacles appeal to audiences as entertainment, but they also shape perceptions and influence behavior. Scott Hughes Myerly has noted that the lavish British army spectacles of the nineteenth century attracted huge crowds, who were drawn by the military bands, the colorful uniforms, and the perfectly coordinated movement of men and horses. He argues that such spectacles contributed to the popularity of military images in theater, music, toys, and social organizations. In the case of Ming China, the hunt, military reviews, and menageries did not merely reflect attitudes about rulership; they were instrumental in defining the range of the ruler’s activities and concerns. Was it desirable that the ruler shoot a bow and arrow on horseback in the field, stalk deer in the imperial hunting lodge, or maintain collections of lions, leopards, elephants, and raptors? As the following chapters demonstrate, the answers to these questions, which varied considerably over the life of the dynasty, directly shaped what it meant to be the Son of Heaven.

Analogously, how high court ministers and other literati responded to the martial spectacles of the court deeply influenced their identity. Were they to compose congratulatory paeans upon the emperor’s reception of white elephants from abroad? Were they to praise, critique, or mock elaborate military reviews on the grounds of the Forbidden City? How they elected to employ their literary gifts was an important way to define their relationship to the emperor, their identity as a court minister, and their understanding of themselves as scholars concerned with the health of the dynasty. As John Dardess in his study of Jiangxi officials and more recently Harry Miller in his work on tensions between the state and the gentry have shown, such questions of identity were neither static across time nor

33. Myerly, “‘The Eye Must Entrap the Mind.’” Myerly argues elsewhere that many contemporaries valued military spectacles (and military management, the military machine, martial paradigm, etc.) for promoting order, discipline, selflessness, and devotion to the state during a time of rapid and often disturbing social and economic change (British Military Spectacle).
monolithic among officials. Responses to martial spectacles provide a way to explore change and variation. Finally, the imperial hunt, polo matches, and gift exchanges were all ways to negotiate the identity and status of the Ming court on the wider stage of eastern Eurasia. Thus, martial spectacles did not just reflect identity, they helped fashion it. As the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz has observed, “The easy distinction between the trappings of rule and its substance become less sharp, even less real; what counts is the manner in which, a bit like mass and energy, they are transformed into each other.”

As later chapters will detail, there existed specific precedents for hunting, polo matches, horse riding, and other martial spectacles at the Ming court, but court culture was a product of both individual agency and long-term historical patterns. The particular form of martial spectacles displayed at any given time owed much to the tastes and ambitions of individual emperors and their close advisors. At the same time, all Ming rulers drew on a deep reservoir of court traditions and practices that had long predated the dynasty. The proximate sources of individual elements might be traced back to courts established by Qitan, Jurchen, and Mongol rulers who during the tenth to thirteenth centuries had come from the steppes of Mongolia and the forests of Manchuria or to Chinese dynasties like the Song (960–1279). For fifteenth- and sixteenth-century emperors, the precedents established by the Ming founder and his successors—that is, family tradition—became a critical touchstone. The Qitan, Jurchen, Song, Mongol, and early Ming courts were conditioned by mutual influences on the one hand and simultaneously drew

34. Dardess, *A Ming Society*; Miller, *State Versus Gentry*. Officials’ relation to the throne was a defining element of their identity. Pines writes that “the intellectuals’ voluntary attachment to the ruler’s service [w]as their single most important choice (*Everlasting Empire*, 77).

35. Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charisma,” quotation appears on p. 152. Based on the particulars of Emperor Taizong of the Tang, Jack Chen in *The Poetics of Sovereignty* similarly observes that Taizong “inherited a discourse on sovereignty and . . . transformed the inherited discourse” (p. 11). Additionally, he notes that the sovereign “is always also subject to the theater of authority and thus inextricably part of the same audience that he or she is addressing (p. 380).

36. To this, Elias adds the “interdependence with other positions in the total social structure” of the court (*The Court Society*, p. 20).
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on notions of rulership, regimes of court protocol, and emblems of power and authority that reached farther back in time on the other.

My goal is not to trace the ultimate origins of Ming court culture in general or its martial spectacles in particular. It suffices here to recognize that such notions as “Chinese” or “steppe” might assume great rhetorical or ideological force at a given time or in a given circumstance, but one should be chary of overstating their utility as analytical categories. By the time Hongwu 洪武 (1328–1398) took power in 1368, polities based on the Central Plains and the steppe had been interacting for more than two millennia.37 Such engagements included a mix of active emulation, appropriation, ostentatious rejection, and quiet redefinition. Thus, like most previous emperors, Ming rulers drew from a complex set of practices, ideas, and symbols whose origins and transformations over time were only partially understood, even by those industrious authors of administrative compendia who ostensibly traced political and ritual institutions back to the beginning of recorded history and beyond.

Much of my third and final overarching argument is implicit in the preceding paragraphs, but let me make it explicit here. We need to view the Ming court, and the Ming dynasty more generally, with a wide lens. In synchronic terms, many elements of Ming history become clear only when considered in light of developments elsewhere in eastern Eurasia, most especially in Inner Eurasia. During its first century, the Ming court was defined by its competition with the Yuan court and its successors on the steppe. The following chapters show that martial spectacles at the Ming court were often intended for audiences far beyond the palace or the court, not only under Hongwu or Yongle 永樂 (1360–1424, r. 1403–1424) but also for the first two centuries of the Ming.

37. Technically, Hongwu is a reign title, the title describing the period when the Ming founder, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, occupied the throne. Zhu Yuanzhang is often referred to by his posthumous title Taizu, Grand Progenitor. In order to reduce confusion, I refer to Ming emperors by their reign titles (rather than personal names or posthumous titles) throughout the book. Such signature elements of early court culture and emblems of rulership as chariots, jades, and possibly bronze vessels drew from traditions and technologies in Inner Eurasia. See Sherratt, “The Trans-Eurasian Exchange.” As Michele Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens has cautioned, the circulation of objects and images, however, did not necessarily result in deep understanding of the Other (“Inner Asia and Han China,” p. 450).
In diachronic terms, the Ming court must be better integrated into a longer span of history, and a reevaluation of its relation to the preceding Yuan and succeeding Qing dynasties is long overdue.\textsuperscript{38} A description drawn from late medieval Western Europe identifies a number of features shared by many, perhaps most, courts. Malcom Vale writes of courts found in the kingdoms of England and France and the principalities of the Low Countries:

[They] often harbored ‘foreign’ influences, were increasingly costly, and open to alien and external influences. They were thus most likely to arouse sentiments of both resentment and xenophobia among some sections of a ruler’s subjects, provoking expressions of ‘national’ sentiment in reaction to their allegedly alien and extravagant nature. The court was a vehicle whereby a degree of internationalism and cosmopolitanism was transmitted to the upper strata—both clerical and lay—of society. . .\textsuperscript{39}

Many courts based in what is today China might easily be described in similar terms. The cosmopolitanism of the Tang court has long been acknowledged.\textsuperscript{40} More recently, scholars have stressed the multi-ethnic character of the Qing court and drawn attention to the throne’s active patronage of Chinese, Manchu, Tibetan, and Western European scholarship, language, religion, technology, and art.\textsuperscript{41} Finally, so-called “conquest dynasties” of Tibetan, Turkic, proto-Mongolian, Jurchen, and Mongol origins all demonstrated high levels of cultural hybridity, adopting, appropriating, and refashioning widely disparate practices, ideas, and goods in response to shifting political, military, and psychological needs.

\textsuperscript{38} For successful integration of the Ming into an analysis of 2,500 years of Chinese political culture, see Pines, \textit{Everlasting Empire}.

\textsuperscript{39} Vale, \textit{The Princely Court}, p. 298.

\textsuperscript{40} An early but still valuable classic is Schafer, \textit{The Golden Peaches of Samarkand}. For excellent synthetic coverage, see Lewis, \textit{China’s Cosmopolitan Empire}.

\textsuperscript{41} Farquhar, “Emperor as Bodhisattva”; Rawski, “Presidential Address”; Hostetler, \textit{Qing Colonial Enterprise}; Berger, \textit{Empire of Emptiness}. This more cosmopolitan interpretation of the Qing has begun to make its way into trade publications, usually a good sign of growing acceptance. See Elliott, \textit{Emperor Qianlong}. Among the many other stimulating ideas in her \textit{Translucent Mirror}, Pamela Crossley develops the notion of the “simultaneity” of Qing emperorship, especially during the eighteenth century.
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So where does the Ming court fit into the mix? Characterizations of the Ming court as introverted, xenophobic, or simply uninterested in foreign lands and foreign peoples often rest on implicit comparison with the preceding Yuan court or the succeeding Qing court. As noted above, in recent decades the Qing has gained increasing recognition as a vibrant multi-ethnic empire, whose rulers consciously attempted to place themselves at the center of a complex set of religious, political, and ideological traditions. The Yuan court is similarly renowned as a vital actor in a Eurasian-wide system of exchange in which personnel, material goods, religious practices, concepts of rulership, and bodies of knowledge circulated on an unprecedented scale.42

When considered in such company, both the Ming polity in general and the Ming court in particular strike many observers as isolated and inward looking.43 Sugiyama Masaaki, a leading Japanese scholar of the Mongol empire, sharply contrasts the vibrant, expansive, and cosmopolitan Yuan with the bleak, withered, and regressive Ming.44 Miya Noriko similarly argues that the early Ming court possessed far more limited horizons, a shift reflected in its markedly diminished geographical knowledge of the world.45 The eminent scholar Morris Rossabi holds that by the mid-fifteenth century, the Ming court had lost interest in Central Asia.46

42. For cogent analysis, see Allsen, Commodity and Exchange; Allsen, Culture and Conquest.
43. The late Ray Huang, an insightful historian with a rare command of Ming period documents, characterized the Ming dynasty as an “introverted and non-competitive state” (China: A Macro History, p. 169), whose “reliance on cultural cohesion made the Ming empire static. Its timeless and changeless outlook forbade development in any new direction” (p. 175).
45. Miya, Mongoru jidai no shuppan bunka, p. 568.
46. Rossabi, “The Ming and Inner Asia,” pp. 246–58. Rossabi notes that trade never completely stopped and that “many Chinese were also were aware of, and knowledgeable about, the peoples of Central Asia” (p. 253). Wang Gungwu maintains that during the fifteenth century, “for the first time in Chinese history, the doors to the continent and the seas were closed [simultaneously]” and that after Yongle’s death, “Chinese steadily grew more isolated from each and every surrounding people.” See Wang Gungwu, “Wubai nian qian de Zhongguo yu shijie,” p. 98. My thanks go to Professor Dai Yingcong for bringing this article to my attention.
Sugiyama, Miya, Rossabi, and others are certainly correct that when compared with the Yuan or the Qing, the Ming court was less cosmopolitan, less deeply engaged with foreign countries, and less confident on the wider Eurasian stage. Yet, that does not mean it was consistently isolated, inward-looking, or xenophobic. If we return to Vale’s measures, the Ming court appears more cosmopolitan and more deeply engaged in Eurasia than is commonly assumed. Emperors from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth century were regularly criticized for their persistent and generous patronage of such alien religions as Tibetan Buddhism, building temples in the capital and supporting hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Tibetan monks. Similarly, during the first century and a half of rule, the Ming court was an aggressive rival of the Northern Yuan and its successors: it strove to convince the rest of Eurasia that the Mandate of Heaven had changed hands; the Ming welcomed men of talent regardless of their origins; it promised to respect the status and privileges that leaders in Eurasia had enjoyed under the Yuan; and it tried to show that it commanded sufficient military strength to counter Yuan influence throughout the region. Recruiting Mongols and appointing them to senior positions in the Ming military was one way to achieve all of those goals.

The court’s cosmopolitan dimensions were sometimes embraced and sometimes reviled. Ming literati periodically criticized the court’s use of Mongols and their descendents. The Ming court maintained a menagerie that included big cats from as far as way as Samarkand and Anatolia well into the mid-sixteenth century, again much to the ostensible outrage of some court ministers. Vale has suggested that cosmopolitan and alien practices might provoke criticism from certain subjects. Depending on the time period, objections to the emperor’s interest in Tibetan, Mongolian, or Central Asian beliefs, personnel, animals (and just below the surface the ties to Central Asian rulers) were voiced by civil officials within the court itself.

This book explores sometime surprising continuities in court culture that run through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing. If we reject the equation of less engagement being equivalent with no engagement, if we resist overdrawing the distinction between Inner Eurasian (or northern conquest) and Chinese polities, and if we attend to
neglected elements of Ming court culture, we can discern striking continuities in such deep-seated practices and beliefs as the ruler as military leader, the prominence of equestrianism, and the importance of the royal hunt.\(^{47}\)

Until fairly recently, the Ming court had eluded systematic study, even as comparative and integrative studies of court culture elsewhere multiplied.\(^{48}\) Before a mature evaluation of the early modern court in a global framework is possible, a nuanced understanding of power and rulership at the Ming court is essential. How were they generated, negotiated, and sustained? How were they displayed, transmitted, and contested? How did the ruling house, senior ministers, the bureaucracy, local elites, and men and women far from the capital perceive and attempt to exploit imperial power? How did imperial power relate to court culture? These are all questions of broad significance to our understanding of both the Ming court in particular and early modern courts in general.

In recent years, scholars have begun to consider the contours of court culture at the Ming capital, explore its relation to the scores of princely courts in the provinces, and examine its connections to wider developments in Ming history.\(^{49}\) The Ming court included not only the central court located in the main dynastic capital of Beijing (after the early fifteenth century), but also a vestigial court at Nanjing (the dynastic capital during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries) and scores of princely courts located in the provinces. At the risk of implying too great a degree of explicitly articulated administrative coherence, I refer to these three sites and their practices and protocols in toto as the Ming court system. Despite

\(^{47}\) Michael Chang discusses the symbolic importance of hunting, equestrianism, and ruler as military commander in his analysis of imperial tours of the Qing (\textit{A Court on Horseback}).

\(^{48}\) For an outline for the systemic comparative study of the early modern court, see Duindam, “Dynastic Centres in Europe and Asia.” See also Duindam's “Introduction” in \textit{Royal Courts in Dynastic States and Empires}.

\(^{49}\) In his cultural history of the Ming, Shang Chuan 商傳 discusses at some length “court culture” (\textit{Mingdai wenhuashi}, pp. 101–30), while Chen Baoliang 陳寶良 systematically incorporates elements of court life in “social life” and “customs” (\textit{Mingdai shehui shenghuo shi}). For preliminary exploration of Ming court culture in the English language, see the essays in Robinson, \textit{Culture, Courtiers, and Competition}. For a brief introduction to provincial courts, see Robinson, “Princely Courts.”
important differences in scale, perspective, and roles of the three courts, emerging scholarship shows that ritual usage, administrative protocol, personnel, and corporate interest justify an inclusive view of the Ming court. Although I discuss the court of the Ming founder and provide synthetic treatment of provincial courts, this book focuses on the court in Beijing, the main dynastic capital from the early fifteenth century to the Ming’s fall in 1644.

**Audiences**

Spectacles require audiences. Many early modern Western European spectacles were intended for large and varied audiences that included not only nobles and local elites but also crowds of more humble subjects, who lined the sides of the road to view processions or watched the combat of tournaments from the stands and nearby trees. Such occasions helped forge connections between the ruler and his people. In the case of ancient Rome, the distant and imperfectly observed antecedent for many early modern European spectacles, audience reaction was critical. Roman observers commonly included the applause, cheers, and jeers of the populace in their accounts of spectacles, an acknowledgement of its considerable if not always finely articulated power.

Ming spectacles played to smaller and generally more select groups. Most spectacles discussed in this work were held on the grounds of the imperial palace complex, a tightly regulated space inaccessible to the vast majority of the capital’s population. Admission to imperial spectacles was a rare privilege distinguishing elites from the hoi polloi. Thus, whereas in ancient Rome or early modern Europe the spectacle figured in relations among the ruler, his court, local elites, and ordinary subjects, in Ming China, the focus was on the imperial family (most especially the emperor), his senior civil ministers, military commanders, and members of the merit aristocracy. Spectacles both heightened corporate court identity and highlighted distinctions among its constituent elements.

As examples from other places and other times suggest, few rulers could realistically hope to surgically implant desired values and behaviors into a passive body politic through spectacles. Civil officials, military commanders, members of the merit aristocracy, eunuchs, and others were all sophisticated consumers of imperial
spectacle and grandeur. They judged rituals, banquets, and other spectacles, noting poorly coordinated events, meager gifts, or unpalatable food that they felt undermined the ruler’s munificence and glory. At the same time that the ruler and his close advisors organized spectacles, they too were both participant and audience. As Bell has observed, “However cynical and knowing they may be in the rhetorics, leaders cannot but be affected themselves by the ritualized aesthetics.”50 As both host and participant, the emperor performed his role as ruler, shaped his identity as sovereign, and forged relations of lord and vassal with his court officials.

Finally, the meaning of martial spectacles was self-evident to neither participant nor audience.51 The court commissioned literary accounts of polo matches, military reviews, and other events not only to disseminate such spectacles to broader audiences but also to ensure that they would be correctly understood. Ming emperors generally turned to their officials to fashion interpretative narratives—whether such narratives took the form of rhapsodies, short poems, or prose accounts—to ensure that readers drew the right conclusions. The accounts of court spectacles that survive today probably reflect in the main the throne’s interests and perspectives, but such narratives also helped shape the emperor’s interests and perspectives. Neither author nor patron exercised exclusive control of the message. Over time, the dissonance between Ming emperors and their ostensible clients only grew.

Sources

The Ming court produced many of the materials used in this book, including dynastic chronicles, administrative compendia, commemorative poems, and imperial portraiture. As later chapters discuss in more detail, such materials were shaped by dynamics of institutional imperatives, political interests, economic factors, literary conventions, and personal relations. Despite the Ming court’s importance,
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It did not monopolize cultural production. Texts—historical, literary, philosophical, didactic, legal, commercial, agricultural, and others—as well as images, cultural accoutrements such as clothing, household furnishings, and forms of theater, music, and religion—were also produced in great quantity outside the court and transmitted broadly beyond the court. During the Ming, interaction between the court and external sites of production was regular and widely recognized.52

The recreation of spectacle through textual materials is fraught with difficulties. The atmosphere of the spectacle, which was often intended to engage the senses, is imperfectly captured in written descriptions. The din of drums and horns, barked commands, and the enthusiastic bellowing of the crowd formed an important part of the event. The thundering of hundreds of horses moving in the crisp, choreographed sequences of a military review or in the chaotic scramble of a polo match shook the ground beneath the feet of observers. The smell of sweat from hard-riding men, of decomposing foliage in the early morning air of autumn, of blood and excrement from dressing freshly killed game no doubt long remained lodged in the memories of those who participated in royal hunts but is only faintly indicated in commemorative poems.

Highly educated men with senior positions at court composed most extant textual descriptions of Ming martial spectacles, and their accounts were filtered through the perspectives of gender, socioeconomic status, intellectual orientation, and political interest. Literati influence was far from unique to the Ming court. As David Graff has shown, textual accounts of military battles of the Tang closely reflect the perspectives of literati historians, who generally focused on the “more abstract, intellectual, and nontechnical aspects of conflict” and who valued cleverness over strength.53

In addition to bearing in mind authors’ perspectives, we cannot overlook the transmission of their texts. During the Ming, most

52. Robinson, “The Ming Court.” Scholars who served in the Hanlin Academy and related bureaus at the Ming court believed that their writings not only served the throne but set literary and moral standards for the entire empire (Ye Ye, Mingdai zhongyang wenguan; Zheng Liju, Mingdai Hongwu zhi Zhengde).
scholar-officials did not publish their own works. Many kept either the original or copies of reports they produced for the state, letters they exchanged with friends and colleagues, and poems, prefaces, obituaries and dedications they penned. However, it was often their descendents, students, or more distant admirers who gathered their writings and decided what was appropriate for inclusion in a published work. Thus, even Ming editions do not represent our authors’ whole literary output and only imperfectly reflect their political associations, scholarly views, or personal attitudes. Finally, regardless of the time period, educated men expressed their perceptions in ways that conformed to well-established literary conventions and tastes. Thus, as valuable as such texts may be, they must be used with caution and close attention to the circumstances in which they were created.54

To better understand military spectacles at the Ming court, I have made extensive use of poems, which as literature may be judged superficial, trite, or even craven but which nonetheless reveal contemporary attitudes about martial spectacles, definitions of rulership, and the role of the scholar-official. In writing poems about martial spectacles, officials were responding to claims about rulership and asserted their place at the court. Not only sources that shed light on how the hunt, polo, and military reviews were conducted, these texts are artifacts of those spectacles, a fact that rulers and their ministers all understood. Many of the poems used in this study were composed by an elect group of officials who, on the basis of their superior performance in the civil service examination, received choice posts in the Hanlin Academy and associated bureaus of the capital bureaucracy.55 Sometimes called “officials of the word,” these Hanlin

54. Noting the dissonance between text and event, Halloran calls for greater attention to the material conditions in which texts were produced (“Text and Experience in a Historical Pageant”).

55. These bureaus included the Secretariat 内閣 and Household Administration of the Heir Apparent 着事府, which in turn subsumed two secretariats of the Heir Apparent 左右春坊 and an editorial service 司經局. For other posts within the Hanlin Academy, see Hucker, “Ming Government,” p. 86. For a brief discussion of the Hanlin Academy with an emphasis on literary production, see Jian Jinsong, Mingdai wenxue piping yanjiu, pp. 21–36; Huang Zhuoyue, Ming Yongle zhi Jiajingchu, pp. 4–23. Perhaps most authoritative is Ye Ye, Mingdai zhongyang wenguan, pp. 15–208.
scholars produced much of the dynasty’s vast textual edifice, drafting imperial edicts for the emperor, writing dynastic histories, explicating the classics for the imperial family, and composing whatever else their sovereign required, including poems to mark every occasion from the birth of the Heir Apparent or the death of an imperial clansman to the discovery of an auspicious stalk of grain or the successful completion of military campaigns. A select few from the Hanlin Academy also served as advisors to the throne and senior officials of key government ministries. Reflecting their prestigious status, Hanlin writers were expected to produce texts that attained high literary standards, embodied proper morality, and served as models for the empire. The ruler, his high ministers, capital officials, the dynastic bureaucracy, and educated men throughout the realm were united in their belief that Hanlin writers were responsible for creating normative texts that would be read by a variety of audiences.

The poems were also products of social interaction. To note just one facet of this field, court ministers carefully distinguished among varieties of “command poems” (ying zhi shi 應制詩); especially treasured were personal orders from the emperor to compose poems in his presence, or perhaps better yet, invitations to “match” in theme and rhyme a poem the emperor had himself created. Far less appreciated were occasions when palace eunuchs relayed the ruler’s command for poetry; not only was the minister denied direct access to his ruler, but even the pretense of a personal tie between them was stretched precariously thin through the insertion of a palace eunuch.56

Finally, the court commissioned paintings depicting martial spectacles. Many issues involved in approaching literati texts are also relevant for understanding the corpus of surviving court paintings. Imperially sponsored paintings were produced in different forms

56. Writers from the latter half of the dynasty often idealized sovereign-minister relations of the early reigns, as when Huang Zuo 黃佐 (1490–1566) wrote that Hongwu and Yongle always issued their orders for poetic compositions in face-to-face encounters with their officials. Only later did eunuchs relay the commands (Huang Zuo, “Ying zhi shi wen” 應制詩文, in idem, Han lin ji, 11.9b; Wen yuan ge Si ku quan shu, vol. 596, p. 977).

Ye Ye, Mingdai zhongyang wenguan, pp. 51–53. Ye describes the latter scenario as the “mechanical completion” of their duties as Hanlin scholars.
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ranging from large pieces meant to be viewed from a distance to scroll paintings that were to be enjoyed more intimately. Paintings too were subject to considerations of genre and convention, alluding extensively to earlier works, historical events, and literary images. Paintings of imperial processions or the reception of tribute animals and tribute envoys produced by order of the court were often reproduced, their images appropriated by those outside the court for wider (and often commercial) circulation. Finally, trying to extrapolate the variety and volume of Ming court paintings on the basis of what survives today (or perhaps more accurately what is known today) is even more precarious than making assumptions about the Ming textual tradition based on the extant corpus of written texts.

To give just one example, the Palace Museum in Taipei holds a magnificent pair of scroll paintings commissioned to mark the departure from and return to the capital of a late sixteenth-century emperor, either Jiajing or Wanli (see figure 3). The scrolls are enormous, one approximately eighty-five feet in length and the other nearly one hundred feet long; both are three feet wide. Meticulously rendered in vivid color with great attention to the details of clothing, weapons, musical instruments, pennants, and varied landscapes, they convey the majesty of the emperor and his court through a visual inventory of the Son of Heaven’s cavalry troops and infantry soldiers, eunuch attendants and musicians, horses and elephants, carriages and barges, all put into motion by the emperor. This pair of scrolls is the only known example of this genre from the Ming; whether it was sui generis, a one-off with no precedents and no successors, remains an open question.

58. A long handscroll measuring nearly fifty feet in length and just over one and one half feet in width painted in 1053 that portrays in great detail the men, animals, arms, musical instruments, and banners of an outing by the Song imperial family has survived. For discussion, see Ebrey, “Taking Out the Grand Carriage,” esp. 41–63. An anonymous Yuan period copy of the handscroll is held in the Chinese History Museum and reproduced in much reduced fashion (the characters are so small as to be illegible) in Fu Angyang, Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu, vol. 1, pp. 221–25.
One final point of orientation remains. For a variety of reasons, “the Chinese” have periodically been declared non-violent and their governments averse to war. Some hold that Chinese dynasties were basically defensive, with little interest in acquiring new territories or in conducting offensive campaigns. In the realm of social or cultural values, the idea that the civil dominated the martial is a common stereotype; bromides like “holding the civil in high regard, considering the martial in scant regard” or “good iron doesn’t become nails and good men don’t become soldiers” are not baseless. As Frederick Mote put it, this meant a keen appreciation and elite status for all things that flowed from the brush—calligraphy, painting, literature, political writings, philosophical musings, and so on. In political terms, mastery of the classical canon, perhaps the epitome of wen, and success in the civil service examination was often the most prestigious point of entry into a career in government office. Civil officials dominated the dynastic bureaucracy, from the six ministries in the capital, to senior officials in the provinces, down to the humble county magistrate. Finally, great skill (or at least great renown) in the civil arts often figured prominently in one’s social and economic standing. Craig Clunas has demonstrated how masters of painting, calligraphy, and other such arts could parley wen into lucrative sources of income.

Nevertheless, “holding the civil in high regard, considering the martial in scant regard” obscures as much as it illuminates. First, the line of thinking limned above is profoundly ahistorical. It fits poorly with the military aristocracies of such early ancient polities as the Shang and Zhou or medieval ones such as the early Tang. It offers no place for Turkic, Jurchen, or Mongol regimes that often placed a premium on physical strength, equestrian proficiency, skill with the bow and arrow, and military conquest. Those traditions often did not recognize a clear civil/military distinction, much to the puzzlement or even consternation of those committed to Chinese

59. For lucid discussion and convincing rebuttal of such claims, see Johnston, Cultural Realism.
60. Mote, Imperial China, pp. 151–52.
61. Clunas, Superfluous Things; Clunas, Elegant Debts.
traditions. Second, neither military men with education and literary inclinations nor literati with a keen interest in martial arts, military history, and war were rare. Civil officials were routinely charged with security matters, and some supervised major military campaigns. The renowned Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) was neither the first nor the only civil official of the Ming to achieve consistent success in the military realm. Third, it does not account well for the vast resources devoted to the military throughout Chinese history. Efforts to better understand what Nicola di Cosmo has broadly termed “military culture” in imperial China are ongoing, and I hope the present study makes some small contribution to the enterprise.

Although some might be tempted to dismiss the martial spectacles of the Ming court as another instance of Oriental ornamentalism, a flowery substitute for a real military, the Ming state, like its predecessors and successors, never doubted the critical importance of armies, armaments, generalship, logistics, or the efficacy of coercive force. As Martin van Creveld has shown based on examples from classical Rome and medieval Europe to nineteenth-century Britain and twentieth-century Germany, spectacle and display have both long been integral features of war and military culture. The Ming state maintained a military force that generally numbered somewhere in the neighborhood of one million men, who were organized into approximately three hundred garrisons, which while concentrated most heavily around the capital and the northern border,

62. The Jurchens did not differentiate civil and military positions until the 1140s, when the Huang Tong Code 皇統制, modeled loosely on Tang institutions, was adopted. See Hok-lam Chan, “Zhao Yanwei Yun lu man chao zhi Jin yuan shiliao.” Similarly, Sinicized Khitan and Chinese advisors urged Mongol rulers to adopt administrative structures that clearly distinguished military and civil jurisdictions as Mongol forces occupied northern China in the first half of the thirteenth century.

63. See the essays in Military Culture in Imperial China, especially the introduction by Nicola di Cosmo. Di Cosmo offers a tentative four-part schema for approaching military culture: (1) the culture and behaviors of military men, (2) strategic culture, (3) the values that determine society’s inclination for war and military organization, and (4) aesthetic and literary traditions that valorize military events and laud martial adepts (pp. 3–4).

64. Van Creveld, The Culture of War, esp. chapters 1 and 4.
extended the length and width of the empire. As fitting for a polity as large and diverse as the Ming, military institutions varied considerably according to time and place. During the early Ming, hereditary households with the responsibility to provide an able-bodied male for military service each generation formed the core of imperial armies, but in the face of changing military needs and socioeconomic developments, mercenaries, militias, and tributary forces came to serve increasingly important roles. Ming forces fought in many theaters, each with its particular logistical demands—from the unforgiving, arid borderlands of the north to the often mountainous, semi-tropical jungles of the south; from the open seas, winding coastline, and complex river systems of the eastern seaboard to the distant wind-swept plains and mountain ranges of the west; and a nearly infinite variety of environments in between. Ming forces ranged from contingents of a few thousand men to vast hosts of several hundred thousand troops. They engaged in conflicts that lasted anywhere from a few days or weeks to months, years, or decades. They battled Mongolian and Jurchen cavalry, royal regulars and guerrilla forces from Annam, Japanese pirates, mounted warriors from Turfan, and a wide array of domestic foes that fought on horseback and on foot, on land and on sea, on the plains and in the mountains. In a word, the Ming dynasty resembled most other empires in that it faced a variety of military challenges on a regular basis and maintained a correspondingly large and diversified set of military forces and institutions that responded to shifting demands. The martial spectacles of the court were not a substitute for a “real military” but a potent display of the resources that the dynasty had at its disposal for an audience whose members might disagree about the appropriate place of the military and its relation to rulership but never doubted its indispensability.

The structure of this book is straightforward. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the royal hunt during the Ming dynasty’s first century as an element of court life, diplomacy, and the rhetoric of dynastic power. They also explore how the imperial family (especially the emperor) and court ministers used the royal hunt to forge and contest

conceptions of identity. Chapter 3 considers polo matches, the archery competitions such as the Willow Shoot, riding exhibitions, and military reviews hosted by the throne and conducted within the Imperial City during the dynasty’s first century. Chapter 4 traces shifting attitudes toward martial spectacles during the second century of the Ming; it reveals both civil officials’ mounting criticism of martial spectacles and emperors’ continued attachment to them. Chapter 5 shows how menageries and preserves, like other martial spectacles, inspired both heated debate and rich cultural production, including poems, prose accounts, painting, and writings about paintings, that are profitably understood as elements of a wider discussion about rulership and the proper role of emperors and literati in the polity. After reviewing the book’s principal findings, the conclusion reconsiders the Ming in the wider context of Chinese and Eurasian history.