Book Reviews

Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court. By David M. Robinson. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013. Pp. xiv + 423. $52.95/ £39.95.

In his third major monograph on the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), David Robinson draws on a wealth of primary works in Chinese and secondary sources in Chinese and Japanese to describe the significance that rulers, officials, scholars, and some commoners attached to "martial spectacles," including the hunt, equestrianism, archery, menageries, and parks. He argues that these staged events and constructed institutions played important and manifold roles in the cooperative and competing efforts of various parties to uphold and interpret the political legitimacy and cultural vitality of Ming state and society.

The author divides his study into two major parts: the first hundred years including principally the reigns of Hongwu 洪武, Yongle 永樂, Xuande 宣德, and Zhengtong 正統, when there was a widespread consensus on the need for military strength to prevent a revival of Mongol power; and the second hundred years, including notably the reigns of Chenghua 成化, Hongzhi 弘治, Zhengde 正德, and Jiajing 嘉靖 when rulers no longer led troops into battle, the centre of authority shifted from throne to officials, and great debates ensued over the relative importance of civil and martial arts in the defence of the polity even as martial spectacles continued to be mounted and observed. The study concludes with a less detailed assessment of the last three quarters century of the dynasty when, despite the persistence of public displays of military strength, martial institutions atrophied and domestic and frontier adversaries worked separately but effectively to bring the Ming to an end.

This study has many virtues and makes important contributions to our understanding of how Ming central and regional courts worked with civil and martial bureaucracies to govern the largest population and territory under one roof in the world at the time. The Introduction sets the Ming state in time, going back to the earliest recorded polities of Shang and Zhou, and in space, including much of contemporary Inner Asia and Eurasia. Like other courts, the Ming court engaged in continual propaganda to insure domestic and foreign respect for its legitimacy and maintained armed forces of about one million men, including mounted archers who were still essential despite the dawning of firearms. "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

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about the appropriate place of the military and its relation to rulership but never doubted its indispensability" (p. 26).

Chapter One, eschewing an overdrawn distinction between "Inner Eurasian" (or "northern conquest") and "Chinese" polities, shows that the royal hunt, shared with most other dynasts of Eurasia, originated in China in a "complex legacy" of "venerable Central Plains polities of high antiquity," such as the Shang, later Turkic ruling houses based in North China, such as the Wei, and most recent frontier minority regimes, such as the Yuan (p. 28). Cultural tradition, however, was modified by individual rulers in accord with their particular experiences and concerns. The commoner Ming founder Hongwu did not hunt, perhaps because he was originally a poor farmer and because he reacted against the governing style of the Mongol Yuan. He nonetheless insisted that his sons hone their skills of riding, shooting and command through hunting, and his principal successor, Yongle, raised as a prince, showed great personal interest in the royal hunt. Taking the cue, leading officials depicted successful hunts as "proof of good governance" (p. 43). Yongle regarded hunting as good training for warfare, and his son Xuande, who accompanied him on campaigns and succeeded him on the throne, was also a "keen huntsman" (p. 55).

Chapter Two explores contrasting images of the royal hunt that resulted from the experience of Xuande's son and successor Zhengtong. Zhengtong came to the throne at age seven, the first child ruler in the Ming, and at age twenty-nine he led a military expedition into the steppe to oppose the rise of the new Mongol leader Esen. At a battle over a fort named Tumu 土木, Zhengtong was captured and held ransom by the Mongols. The Ming court in Beijing refused to compromise and simply replaced Zhengtong with his half-brother. Although Zhengtong was ultimately released and regained power through a *coup d'état*, his reign continued to be unstable. Under these conditions, many officials criticized Zhengtong's intemperate military adventures and his subsequent indulgence in the hunt on the model of his erstwhile kidnappers the Mongols. When Zhengtong's son Chenghua took the throne in 1464, he demonstrated little interest in the hunt as did also his son and successor Hongzhi. These rulers nonetheless followed Song and Yuan traditions, as well as Confucian and Buddhist ones, and allowed themselves to be depicted in portraits as hunters. Hongzhi, however, was persuaded by officials to return a gift of gyrfalcons to an uncle because their only use was in the hunt. Ming princes in the provinces were now discouraged from hunting.

Chapter Three on equestrianism and archery disputes the view that polo had been popular in the Tang but declined in the Song, Yuan, and Ming. It argues that "Polo at Yongle's court was not a marginal event enacted by actors of negligible social status but instead a critical element of court culture that brought together imperial prestige, lavish costumes, and clear ties to the military" (p. 155). When polo matches disappeared from the record in the Xuande reign, "grand demonstrations of riding and

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archery skills remained prominent features of life in the Forbidden City" (p. 160). Scholar-officials celebrated such spectacles in their poetry as evidence of an era of "great peace," while Mongol, Jurchen, Korean and other elites readily understood the message. Equestrianism and archery were justified because they had their roots in the Zhou and were practised by the Mongols even though they were considered to be foreigners (Hu 胡). While the later ruler Zhengde constructed a Leopard Quarter (*baofang* 豹房) within the imperial city where he could have more free contact with military commanders, some officials criticized the over-emphasis on reviews and mounted archery as a misuse of limited resources.

Chapter Four chronicles the major shift in attitudes toward martial spectacles during the second century of Ming rule. Chenghua and Hongzhi showed less interest in military reviews than their predecessors had. Authority shifted from the rulers to high officials who became more critical of martial spectacles as a waste of resources and a sign of incivility. The leading scholar-official Qiu Jun 丘濬 opposed royal progresses to the provinces and inclusion of archery in the civil examination curriculum. When Zhengde expressed his continuing passion for the hunt and even led a military expedition south of the Yangzi, many Ming officials "were not buying what Zhengde was selling" (p. 220). When his son, Jiajing, came to power he dismantled his father's reign, releasing animals from the royal menagerie and prohibiting the submission of any others. From the early sixteenth century onward, hunting was increasingly linked in the historical record to nomadism and the Other (p. 238). Jiajing nonetheless presided over a revitalization of military ritual including the construction of a Military Hall to strengthen military education. Sometimes "senior officials rather than the emperor pushed hardest for martial spectacles" (p. 253). The Grand Secretary Zhang Juzheng 張居正 "offered Longqing [隆慶] an active role in military affairs" (p. 255) causing him to disregard the warnings of more cautious officials (p. 258).

Chapter Five explores how rulers and literati used royal menageries and hunting parks "to define and perform rulership" (p. 279). Once again, the Ming founder and his son were sceptical about the cost of feeding wild animals but they soon accepted gifts of exotic creatures such as elephants, tigers, and lions from distant potentates who paid tribute to secure trade. During the rest of the first century of Ming rule, scholar-officials praised the accumulation of rare beasts as signs of Ming authority over the land at the centre (*zhongtu* 中土) of the known world (*tianxia* 天下). During the late fifteenth century, paeans for royal menageries became less common, but many court practices continued unchanged. The Ming continued the tradition of royal hunting parks, particularly the Southern Lakes hunting preserve. Once again royal practice and literati opinion changed over time to fewer hunts and more critical appraisals of them, but the institution persisted through the dynasty.

In Chapter Six the author offers several important conclusions placing Ming martial spectacles in wider perspectives. First, martial spectacles were nearly ubiquitous

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at imperial courts over millennia and throughout Eurasia. Despite their changing nature and relative decline in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they "were an enduring feature of the Ming court" (p. 361). Second, though rulers tended to support such spectacles to enhance their authority and scholar-officials often criticized them in their own interest, literati artists celebrated the spectacles in their paintings, sometimes patronized by military officers. All of this makes "any essentialized dichotomy between the civil and the martial . . . wrongheaded" (p. 363). Third, individual rulers and officials had various—and varying—views of martial spectacles, but their persistence at the Ming court "through its first two centuries (and beyond) reflects the imperial family's struggle to control its interests and perspectives" (p. 365). Fourth, "[i]n general terms, the diminution of support for court-sponsored martial spectacles seems to parallel growing literati perceptions of their centrality in the polity," but "[s]uch perceptions were long-standing rather than unique to the Ming" (p. 367). Fifth, although "New Qing historians" stress the multi-ethnic and martial nature of the Qing polity, "many facets of . . . the Qing Grand Review . . . mirror the Grand Reviews conducted by Ming emperors during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (p. 372). Sixth, while Qing rulers justified imperial tours in terms of emulating the ancestors and implicitly "mark[ed] out territory in an ethnically charged contest with their Han officials and subjects," "one might also understand the rhetoric of filial piety in such contests as part of a more general tension between imperial families, whether Zhu or Aisin Gioro, Han or Manchu, and their imperial bureaucracies" (p. 373). Seventh, while a massive painting of Qianlong's 乾隆 1758 inspection of Eight Banners and Central Asian troops may have been "one of very few depictions of emperors as warriors in the entirety of China's imperial tradition,"[1] Zhang Juzheng had submitted a set of poems and a painting to capture Wanli's 萬曆 1581 Grand Review. Other such imperially commissioned paintings of emperors donning martial or even Mongol dress may simply not have come down to us. A contrast between Kangxi's 康熙 personal dynamism and Wanli's ritual restraint is no more significant than would be a contrast between Yongle's militancy and Guangxu's 光緒 emasculation.

This meticulously researched and clearly written study effectively challenges many such middle-level generalizations about the place of the Ming in Chinese and Eurasian history. It nonetheless uncritically accepts and thereby perpetuates the two principal reigning paradigms in the field along with their terminologies. The first is "imperial China" which is traced back conventionally to 221 B.C.E. and divided into the three sub-periods of early (Qin-Han), middle (Sui-Tang), and late (Ming-Qing). While this periodization allows for a pre-imperial period (Shang-Zhou) and a post-

[1] Pamela Kyle Crossley, "The Rulerships of China," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992), p. 1483.

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imperial period (Republic-People's Republic), it focuses on what others have called "the everlasting empire," stretching over more than two millennia. The resulting "empire" is then compared—more often than contrasted—with other empires and courts, including the Romans, Mongols, Mughals, Ottomans, and Tudors. The emphasis on the military nature of the Ming, Chosŏn, and Qing courts reinforces the idea of the Ming as an empire like any other. It results in the use of anachronistic terms such as Mongolia and Manchuria for regions inhabited by Mongols and later by Manchus. While such terms as Yi 夷 and Hu are sometimes wisely left untranslated, they are other times translated as "barbarians," a Western term with various connotations that do not coincide precisely with various Chinese terms for Others including foreigners and "non-Chinese." The common Chinese terms for their polity, the central states (*zhongguo* 中國), central lands (*zhongtu* 中土) , and central plains (*zhongyuan* 中原), are rightly left untranslated or rendered literally, and the term Chinese is mercifully not conflated with the term Han 漢 (pace the New Qing historians). But the implications of the Ming's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural identity are not fully explored.

The second master narrative tacitly accepted by this study is the Euro-Japanese one dividing Chinese history into three periods of ancient, medieval, and modern. Sub-periods include the "early modern," of particular relevance to the Ming and popular among historians of China who wish to be taken seriously by historians in the West. While this framework should at least potentially facilitate comparisons and contrasts between the Ming and Qing and contemporary Western European polities such as Portugal and Spain, the emphasis in this study is on the similarities among polities across Eurasia. As a result, the relatively civil, continental, contained, and continuous Chinese/Ming quest for a harmonious and sustainable world order gets little attention. Taken together, the late imperial and early modern paradigms tend to validate each other and to obscure the distinctive features of the Ming approach to martial spectacles and to the rest of the world.

Fortunately, Robinson is nonetheless sufficiently sensitive to his rich Chinese sources and to manifold and dynamic Ming perspectives that he adds significantly to our appreciation of the Ming's complex interactions with past, contemporary, and future Chinese polities. As we have seen, he joins other scholars in finding important continuities between the Yuan and Ming, but he acknowledges that Ming Taizu 明太祖 distanced himself from the Mongols and tried to recover purity in earlier orders (p. 32). If the Ming had been just another empire, it might have followed the examples of the centralizing Qin and the multi-cultural Sui. But the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 and the later Ming scholar-officials Yang Pu 楊溥 and Qiu Jun pointed out that the Qin and Sui had overextended themselves in progresses and wars and were soon overthrown (pp. 56, 211). Ming rulers and officials therefore preferred to follow the Zhou that was not just "classical" but a historical polity in its own right. The

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scholar-official Yang Rong 楊榮 alluded to King Tang of Shang 商湯王 who showed compassion toward game during hunts (p. 73). Another official compared Zhengtong with King Xuan of Zhou 周宣王 (pp. 92–93), and Chenghua remarked to the king of Chosŏn that King Wu of Zhou 周武王 was "circumspect with his virtue" (p. 99). The scholar-official Ni Yue 倪岳 urged Hongzhi to "emulate the great rulers of the past like King Wu of the Zhou . . . who declined the hunting hounds and outstanding horses from distant lands" (p. 305). Zhang Juzheng cited Zhou origins of the Grand Review to justify its perpetuation in the late Ming (pp. 265–66).

The Ming founder also reacted against the Song and admired the multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan Tang (pp. 14, 20, 32). The compilers of the standard *Ming History* 明史 interpreted Yongle's institution of polo and the Willow Shoot 擊球射柳之制 "as a conscious emulation of Taizong [太宗] of the Tang dynasty, an emperor whose political ambition spanned both the steppe and the sown, earning him the title 'Heavenly Qaghan' [天可汗] among at least a portion of the Turks. Further, as many scholars have noted, the Ming founder frequently claimed that he was restoring the rites and institutions of the Tang dynasty . . ." (pp. 172–73). Given Yongle's deep involvement with the Mongols and the Yuan, Robinson finds it "more reasonable to conclude that the early Ming court drew from the Mongols' legacy" (p. 175). Given Chinese views of their own history, however, the seven centuries and nearly six hundred miles of separation between the Tang and the Ming may not have been as long and as far as some Western historians might think (pp. 173–75).

Indeed, the Han dynasty, even further removed from the Ming in objective time and space, may have been subjectively the most powerful and instructive model for Ming martial spectacles. The leading early Ming scholar-official Yang Shiqi 楊士奇 criticized the Han poet Sima Xiangru's 司馬相如 critique of Han Wudi's 漢武帝 hunting in Shanglin Park 上林苑 in an effort to defend Yongle from similar critiques (pp. 45, 76). The early Ming scholar-official Liu Dingzhi 劉定之 may have covertly mocked Zhengtong in comparing him favourably with Han Wudi (p. 93). The later scholar-official Xu Zonglu 許宗魯 criticized Zhengtong and Zhengde by comparing them with Han Wudi and contrasting them with Zhou Wuwang 周武王 (pp. 228–31). In 1526 Yuan Zhi 袁袠 discussed the domestication of tributary lions in terms of hunting parks of the Han dynasty and reminded Jiajing of Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 "who won praise for his decision to 'close the Jade Gate,' that is, to terminate relations with Central Asian polities in the first century CE" (pp. 331–32). Mid-Ming pretentions to the "great peace" are reminiscent of similar claims in the Latter Han (pp. 162, 168). The Western and Eastern Han thus provided a full range of models to be variously interpreted over the course of the Ming. The Han "official hunts . . . were primarily pageants . . . of imperial power [and] simultaneously . . . symbols of folly and frivolity . . ." (p. 341). Sima Xiangru "concludes his 'Shanglin Park' with the ruler ruing his indulgence." After Sima's critique "[t]he ruler goes on to denounce the

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hunts, dismiss the huntsmen, convert the park to farmlands, and open the lands to commoners for fishing and gathering wood" (p. 353).

In the eyes of the Ming, then, the Han was perhaps neither early imperial nor ancient classical China but rather a particular order with popular egalitarian characteristics that had special significance for the Ming. Thus Hongwu, who had once been a mendicant monk, did not engage in the hunt which he considered to be for elites, and he did not establish a menagerie for fear that it would "disrupt farming" (p. 289). He worried that his descendants would lack his "understanding of the hardships facing ordinary people" (p. 116). His son and ultimate successor Yongle, on the other hand, used the hunts he engaged in as a prince to learn about conditions among the poor and his son and grandson continued to do so as rulers (pp. 39, 50–51). The grand secretary Yang Shiqi accordingly saw no conflict between the royal hunt and farmers' welfare (p. 47) and other scholars regarded participation in the royal hunt as an opportunity to "appreciate the bucolic company of simple but honest farmers" (p. 82). Xuande warned men joining his force from nearby garrisons not to plunder local inhabitants and he managed to combine filial piety, hunting, and farming in the same martial spectacle (pp. 60, 63). He remarked that his grandfather had repeatedly ordered the princes to inquire into the farmers' pain and suffering when they passed through their villages, and his mother took the occasion to inquire about the lives of countrywomen (pp. 64, 65). When a eunuch violated discipline and beat a commoner to death, Xuande ordered his immediate execution; he meted out the same punishment to troops who illicitly entered the homes of the people (pp. 68, 70). During the second century of the Ming, the scholar-official Xu Xuemo 許學謨 criticized a Ming prince for hunting, saying "[t]he people of his lands suffered because of this" (p. 137). During this period civil officials often "set the maintenance of the imperial menagerie in opposition to the people's sustenance" (p. 215). One official opposed Zhengde's stay on the border, pointing out that the Six Armies despoiled the people as a result (p. 218). All of these recorded instances of concern for popular welfare are problematic, of course, because they are in line with widely admired ideals and constituted stereotypes of good governance. But it would be as wrong to dismiss them as mere propaganda as it would be to accept them as the unvarnished truth. It would be as misleading to deny their association with the Ming polity as it would be to accept them as applicable to all Chinese polities. To the extent that they are credible and significant, reflecting precisely the human agency Robinson is looking for, they may suggest a pattern of Chinese history that is closer to Chinese views and values than the teleological and Eurocentric paradigms that continue to dominate the field.

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