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‘As a Hedge and a Fence...’: Kingly Courts of Ming China (1368-1644)

Can ‘court studies’ as they have been applied so fruitfully to so many different European courts be applied with equal relevance to the courts of Ming China? Craig Clunas set out to show that they can. This is a controversial position. As he pointed out at the start of his paper, many of his colleagues would regard the concept of Ming court culture as an oxymoron. To challenge that preconception, he focused his attention on the numerous provincial courts presided over by cadet branches of the imperial clan. The title given to these junior descendants of the dynasty’s founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, has conventionally been translated into English as ‘prince’, but Professor Clunas suggested that ‘wang’, a deliberately archaic term, ought instead to be understood as ‘king’. As a group, these ‘kings’ have received little attention. Neglect by imperial historians and, more recently, active hostility from Communist historians has created a consistent historiographical tradition presenting them as no more than aristocratic parasites. Art historians have, for the most part, ignored them. This paper, in contrast, put the case for them as major practitioners and patrons of the arts of calligraphy and painting. Unfortunately, very few examples of their works survive and, apart from one isolated example, none can be linked to a specific king. Yet the literary evidence makes it clear that their cultural role was far from negligible. As Professor Clunas acknowledged, some of that literary evidence might be no more than conventional praise, but the fact that this was the convention is itself a revealing clue as to how that role was seen. Archaeological evidence supports this view. In recent years a remarkable series of excavations – a by-product of China’s current economic boom – has uncovered a number of kingly tombs from this period, and their contents, including important examples of gold, jewellery and textiles, have revealed just how impressive this Ming court culture could be. The temptation now would be to see these kings as merely decorative, as genteel nonentities who had been sidelined by the professional bureaucrats who undertook the ‘real’ work of government. But in Confucian terms, there was no distinction between culture and government, which places these self-consciously cultured kings at the heart of what they conceived to be the process of governing. **AB**