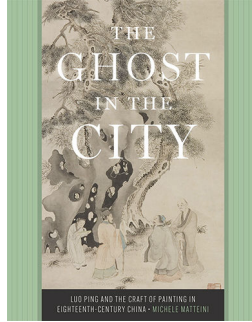


MICHELE MATTEINI, *THE GHOST IN THE CITY. LUO PING AND THE CRAFT OF PAINTING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CHINA*

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Within scholarship in the field of Chinese art history, studies of the arts of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) have been significantly influenced by the advent of the New Qing history in the 1990s, which expanded the scope of inquiry to forms of artistic production that had been excluded from earlier narratives that were centrally concerned with artistic innovation and quality, particularly in the medium of painting. Despite the publication of groundbreaking monographs on Qing art history over the last two decades,¹ in his introduction to *The Ghost in the City. Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth Century China*, Michele Matteini observes that “the frameworks of the New Qing history – synthetic identity

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See Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness. Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*, Honolulu 2003; Claudia Brown, *Great Qing. Painting in China 1644–1911*, Seattle 2014; Yee-wan Koon, *A Defiant Brush. Su Renshan and the Politics of Painting in Early 19th Century China*, Honolulu 2014; Kristina Kleutgen, *Imperial Illusions. Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palace*, Seattle 2015; and Stephen Whiteman, *Where Dragon Veins Meet. The Kangxi Emperor and His Estate at Rehe*, Seattle 2020.

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formation, cosmopolitanism, the redrawing of public and private spheres – are, however, most generally applied to the study of those who were more directly involved in the creations of a collective Qing identity and its state- and empire-building agenda” (p. 10).² In contrast, in *The Ghost in the City*, Matteini deftly integrates the story of one artistic luminary of the second half of the eighteenth century, Luo Ping (1733–1799), one of the so-called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, with larger issues of ethnic, cultural, and regional identity. In this project, the author examines art production and patronage in Beijing outside of the court, as well as literati culture outside of the Jiangnan centers such as Yangzhou. It focuses on groups of works by Luo Ping executed at various times between 1772 and 1799, a period in which ink painting has been assessed as moribund at worst and irrelevant at best. This assessment derives from larger historical narratives influenced by modern, Eurocentric notions of “progress” in which innovation and rejection of the past are the key criteria for determining the significance of art works. While Luo Ping has long been viewed as exceptional due to his innovative and diverse painting styles, his oeuvre has nonetheless been primarily situated in relation to the so-called Yangzhou eccentrics of the previous generation. By using the painter’s experience of sojourning in the capital city of Beijing as its theme, *The Ghost in the City* challenges the way we think about cultural “centers” in China during the Qing dynasty through its demonstration of how regional identity was enacted at the capital and in a space that was both segregated and a place where diverse actors across social and ethnic lines came together. While historians have explored the importance of the Southern City, the section of Beijing south of the Imperial City in which the local non-bannermen population had to reside and where its distinctly interregional character made it the social and cultural center of the capital,³ Matteini breaks new ground when he explores the world of the diverse independent artists like Luo Ping who were professionally and intellectually connected to the leading high officials of the time.

Matteini opens *The Ghost in the City* with the handscroll, *In the Realm of the Ghosts* (ca. 1766), Luo Ping’s most famous work from earlier in his career, whose colophons map out the painter’s entrée into the world of elite ethnically Han men residing in the capital, especially in the Southern City. With *In the Realm of the Ghosts*, the author also sets out a metaphor for understanding the painting of Luo’s late period, in which “fictionality [...] was not set in opposition to a presumed more authentic reality lying behind it, nor was it understood exclusively as deceptive and illusory. At the same

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Some recent exceptions to this include Koon, A Defiant Brush, and Michael J. Hatch, *Networks of Touch. A Tactile History of Chinese Art, 1790–1840*, University Park, PA 2024.

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For example, see Benjamin Elman, *Classicism, Politics and Kinship. The Ch’ang-chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, CA 1990, and Ori Sela, *China’s Philological Turn. Scholars, Textualism, and the Dao in the Eighteenth Century*, New York 2018.

time, fictionality was not completely disengaged from reality, or “autonomous”” (p. 8). *In the Realm of the Ghosts* was acknowledged as a plausible depiction of the subject by its colophon writers, even though some expressed doubt about the existence of ghosts. Like Luo’s painting of ghosts, the author sets the stage for his subsequent revelation of how social identities and painterly and poetic codes informed an artistic process that transformed uncertainty and disjunction into narrative or pictorial strategies. In his reconstruction of Luo’s extended social and professional world in the Southern City, the cast of characters is large; however, Matteini creatively structures the main part of his study through four separate but overlapping themes that also center on an important patron of Luo Ping – the Han bannermen Faššan and Ingliyan in Chapters 1 and 2, the Hanlin Academician, Weng Fanggang in Chapter 3, and the private secretary Zhang Daowo in Chapter 4. The four chapters also resonate with each other in various ways that integrate Matteini’s major points across the entire monograph. Throughout his analysis, Luo’s dual engagement with ancient and recent histories is revealed, as well as the strategies that both artist and patron used to express a viewpoint and identity specific to the group of individual sojourners in the artist’s network.

Chapter 1, “The Dream of the Southern City”, sets the stage for Luo’s artistic practice in the capital by describing the geography of the Southern City and how Luo Ping’s representations of it express specific conditions of the social relations among Luo Ping’s patrons and larger professional circle. While the author situates such paintings within the longer tradition of depicting the real and imagined spaces of scholars’ urban retreats and other sites of literati gatherings, he convincingly demonstrates how the artist transformed such imagery into expressions of a specifically Qing dynasty history that linked Kangxi-era scholars and their activities to those of Luo’s world a few generations later. Ultimately Matteini illustrates how the artist created an iconography of the Southern City that integrated the imagined, allusive, and realistic depictions of sociality. He analyzes the various ways in which Luo Ping and other artists enacted group relationships through their painted images. The author ends with a masterful comparison of the earlier court painting, *The Hanlin Academy* (1744–1745), with Luo’s late work, *The Yingzhou Pavilion* (1794), which exemplifies the type of visual topography of Beijing connecting a community of like-minded individuals which was created by Luo Ping and other ink painters.

The author shifts perspective from the primacy of the space of the Southern City as a gathering place for sojourners to a sojourner’s negotiation and deployment of regional identity in Chapter 2, “Luo Ping from Yangzhou”. To this end, he engages with Luo Ping’s relationship to the history of painting in which the artist’s works that explicitly engage past masters’ styles reimagine that history, creating a process of appropriation as well as estrangement. Matteini contends that Luo capitalized on the vast cultural repertoire that was the “South” in the imagination of the late imperial period.

Luo's identity as a painter from the southern city of Yangzhou was promoted at the capital for his patrons such as the Han bannerman Ingliyan (1707–1783), for whom he did the album, *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters* (1772), which is the central work analyzed in this chapter. The author elegantly demonstrates how Luo's painting process engaged with more recent artistic masters as models for emulation, valuing the recent over the distant past. He connects this directly to the concept of "modeling oneself after later kings", which was articulated by the influential poet, calligrapher, and fellow denizen of the Southern City, Wang Wenzhi (1730–1802). Through Luo's choice of the painter Shitao (1642–1707) and his teacher Jin Nong (1687–1763) as "Later Kings", he established a specifically Yangzhou genealogy of landscape painting that positioned Yangzhou at the center of the changing artistic geography of the Qing, and Luo himself as a producer and product of "Southern-ness".

If Luo Ping's relationship with Ingliyan was manifest in the space of landscape paintings in which the artist and patron could imaginatively project and confirm common cultural and social values, a different manifestation of cultural and social values is seen in Luo's figure paintings executed for arguably his most important patron and friend, Weng Fanggang (1733–1818). In Chapter 3, "Textures of *Samsara*", Matteini explores Weng's close connection to a famous figure of the past, Su Shi (1037–1101), through the Buddhist concept of rebirth. Too often the identification with figures from the past by literati is viewed as clichéd posing that merely signals erudition, social status, or cultural refinement; however, the author vividly demonstrates the meaning that such a perceived connection had for the literati who inhabited the Southern City. Weng was a leading authority on the Song dynasty poet and calligrapher and was an avid collector of objects related to Su Shi and his circle, but his commitment to Su's legacy took on dimensions that went beyond most common forms of scholars' obsession for a past figure. The author argues that Luo Ping's images of Su Shi engaged the notion of reincarnation and granted access to a deeper and more consequential truth. Matteini specifically connects *Su Shi and the Two Miao* (1795) and *The Su Studio* (1780) to Su Shi's and Weng Fanggang's concerns with self-representation. Luo's images of the Song dynasty poet for Weng joined the two men but underscored differences as well. By comparing and contrasting Luo's paintings with the works of other painters who depict sitters in the guise of historical and Buddhist figures, Matteini reveals that Luo enabled a form of identification that rejected perfect correspondence while also refusing the theatricality of an artist like Chen Hongshou (1598–1652), whose portraits depicted the subject as someone temporarily taking on the guise of a past figure.

The final chapter, "Landscapes of Culture", focuses on a single work, *The Sword Terrace* (1794), and links this landscape painting of a specific location in Sichuan Province to contemporary political events. Matteini also investigates how Han cultural identity and history are intertwined with the history of painting. He sketches

the biographies of the people who convened around the production of the work and argues that in the painting, Luo imagines the vast extent of the empire by referencing and reassembling poetic depictions of Sichuan Province with a range of pictorial sources. Revisiting one of the foundational myths of literati identity, the donkey rider, and one of the poetic touchstones of literary history, the Road to Shu, Matteini demonstrates that *The Sword Terrace* became meaningful to its audience because it suggested an alternative to disenchantment and self-parody. By recuperating the lore of Shu and the donkey rider and modeling it after the lived experience of one member of Luo's Southern City circle, the painting's inscribers suggested that if there was to be a return to the values that this lore embodies, it had to begin from the interpersonal bonds of those who identified with each other as a community. The author deftly weaves an analysis of Luo's painting with past imagery of both themes and effectively contrasts *The Sword Terrace* with images of Shu produced by the imperial court that promoted Qing military victories in Sichuan. This contrast highlights the vastly different agendas behind the use of the same repertoire of literary and pictorial depictions of the Sword Terrace and the Road to Shu.

While there have been several major studies of Luo Ping's career,⁴ *The Ghost in the City. Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth Century China* not only illuminates the artist's production during his three periods in Beijing but more broadly provides a nuanced and thought-provoking picture of the world of elite Han identity during the late eighteenth century. In this picture, Matteini challenges persistent art historical taxonomies that continue to categorize the production of painting and art patronage in terms of binaries such as court versus literati, metropolitan versus regional, orthodox versus "eccentric". Ultimately this is a book about how cultural identity for those educated elite who sojourned in the Southern City was expressed through ink painting and how "the "crisis" of the late eighteenth century was [...] not one of disenchantment and demise but of regained confidence in imagination and the potential of words and images to turn imagination into reality" (p. 181). Matteini's work is a major contribution to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to significantly reframe how the art of this period is studied.

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For monograph-length studies, see Chen Jinling, *Luo Liangfeng*, Shanghai 1981; Kim Karlsson, *Luo Ping. The Life, Career and Art of an Eighteenth-Century Chinese Painter*, Zurich 2004; and Kim Karlsson, Alfreda Murck, and Michele Matteini (eds.), *Eccentric Visions. The Worlds of Luo Ping (1733–1799)*, Zurich 2009.