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BOOK REVIEW

The Ghost in the City: Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth-Century China

By Michele Matteini. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023. 248 pp. $65.00 (cloth)

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Michele Matteini's *The Ghost in the City: Luo Ping and the Craft of Painting in Eighteenth-Century China* is an elegant and erudite study of painting, social networking, and the politics of culture in late eighteenth-century Beijing. *Ghost in the City* is cultural history at its best, spiraling out from a seemingly discrete study of one artist to reveal a deeply enmeshed web of culture, sentiment, and politics at a critical moment in the transition from the High Qing to the fraught history of China in the nineteenth century. The book is structured with an introduction, four substantive chapters, and an epilogue, each of which is anchored by a handscroll, album, or hanging scroll by the ink painter Luo Ping 羅聘 (1733–1799), with many additional paintings by the artist, his contemporaries, and his predecessors used to illustrate the artistic patrimony of the works under evaluation. Matteini gives equal due to the paintings, the poetry and colophons that frame the art, and the social occasions at which the paintings and poems were created.

Luo Ping hailed from the city of Yangzhou; he had trained with one of the so-called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, the renowned calligrapher and painter Jin Nong 金農 (1687–1763). The monograph takes its name from Luo Ping's two handscrolls depicting ghosts that bookend the study: his 1766 *In the Realm of Ghosts* (*Guiqu tu* 鬼趣圖), which first made a splash among connoisseurship circles in Beijing when he sojourned there in the early 1770s; and his 1797 remake of that same painting as he left the capital for his native Yangzhou after a second stint in Beijing in the 1790s. But "ghost in the city" works on a metaphorical level, too, to evoke the indeterminacy of Luo Ping's style and to allude to the artists and under-employed men of letters who haunted the residences of scholar-officials living (mostly) in the southern quarter of Beijing, supplying paintings, poetry, and conviviality for all manner of occasions for their patrons.

Chapter 1, "Dreams of the Southern City," narrates the emerging cultural and social networks in the Outer City of Qing Beijing in the last third of the eighteenth century. This locale was home to the book and antique markets of Liulichang 琉璃廠, which developed in tandem with the imperially sponsored *Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書) compendium; it was home to officials of Han ethnicity and to sojourners from places around the empire—whether examination candidates or artists—who lived as "scholars under the gate" (*menxia ke* 門下客) of those with official position,

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serving as retainers, private secretaries, artists, long-term house guests, etc. This Southern City was characterized by mobility (frequent change of residence, movement into and out of office, favor or neglect at court), as well as bonds forged from shared appreciation of culture (poetry societies, theatrical soirees, and garden parties) that transversed status and, even, ethnic difference. As Matteini puts it, "Spatially positioned at the juncture between court and provinces, the Southern City flourished from interaction with both" (17). Luo Ping became one such "scholar under the gate," patronized variously by Weng Fanggang 翁方鋼 (1733–1818), a senior editor of the Four Treasuries project, and Faššan 法式善 (1753–1813), a high-ranking bannerman official whose "Poetry Shrine" villa within the Inner City became a magnet for poets and painters.

Chapter 2, "Luo Ping from Yangzhou," offers a close analysis of the album leaves of Luo's *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters* (*Fanggu shanshui tuce* 仿古山水圖冊), produced for the Manchu patron Ingliyan 英廉 (1707–1783). Through style and motif, borrowings and innovations, these album leaves cast the artist as the quintessential southerner. Here, Matteini's art historical bona fides are on full display, as she walks readers through the canon of literati landscape painting, including Yuan painter Gao Kegong 高克恭 (1248–1310); the Orthodox School of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), preeminent theorist of the "intuitive" Southern School (defined in contrast to the "descriptive" Northern School of court painters); Individualists, or eccentrics, such as Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707); and Jin Nong and then Luo Ping in the eighteenth century. Luo Ping, more craftsman than literati-painter (although also skilled as a poet), drew eclectically from the long history of landscape painting, defying timeworn distinctions among different schools. Matteini convincingly demonstrates Luo Ping's versatility as an interpreter of the southern style, even as she shows that his album was performative, flattering his northern patron as a true connoisseur by foregrounding his own status as an artisan sojourner from the south.

Chapter 3, "Textures of *Samsara*," teases out the Buddhist concept of karma as explored through paintings and writings by Luo Ping and his patron, Weng Fanggang. In particular, the chapter homes in on the visual and literary recycling of the storied encounter of the Song-dynasty poet and statesman Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) with the Two Miao (*er miao* 二妙), the Buddhist monk, Miaoshan 妙善, and the Daoist priest, Miaoying 妙嬴, at which the Two Miao presented Su with a portrait they had painted of him. Since Su Shi was Weng Fanggang's culture hero (Weng even named his residence the Su Studio), Luo's painting was a tribute to the bond between Luo Ping and Weng Fanggang. In rendering this episode in pictorial form, Luo intimated that Weng was a latter-day Su Shi, just as Weng's colophon on the painting and his calligraphy for the title honored the painter as a true soulmate. Here, Matteini peels back layer after layer of allusion—through brush stroke, design, color, and their relation to Chan Buddhist practice, and on to the literary corollaries of the "strange familiarity" of the fragments of memory that were thought to survive rebirth, as expressed in the fiction of the time, such as *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji* 石頭記; also known as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* [*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢]). If Weng identified spiritually with Su Shi, Luo Ping's other patron, Faššan, fancied himself the reincarnation of Li Dongyang 李東陽 (1447–1516), famed statesman and historian of Ming-era Beijing. Faššan pursued his obsession by retracing the former sites of Li Dongyang in the city, and this, too, was captured in painting albums by many of the under-employed literati in Faššan's orbit. Such paintings, Matteini observes, "created an interstitial space that folded the past into the present, magnifying opportunities for

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encounters across time" (115). Men of letters, however, were not the only ones to deploy these Buddhist tropes to accentuate the self; they had competition on this front from the Qianlong emperor, himself, who had his court painters immortalize him as an enlightened one.

The competition between the imperial court and men of letters to control the cultural narrative through pictorial representation is also on full display in Chapter 4, "Landscapes of Culture." The chapter begins with a close reading of Luo Ping's mounted hanging scroll, *The Sword Terrace* (*Jian ge* 劍閣), which depicts the treacherous but scenic mountains of Sichuan. The painting is surrounded by poems and colophons crammed into the white space around the edges of the scroll, all of which were written to celebrate the appointment of Zhang Daowo 張道渥, fellow retainer and erstwhile painting collaborator with Luo Ping, as a judge in northern Sichuan. After explicating both the strategic importance of this territory to empire building by successive dynasties, and the poetic and visual tropes of "the road to Shu 蜀 (Sichuan)" dating back to Tang times, Matteini then reads the painting against the political and military conflicts of the Qing in the southwest in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Whereas the Qing court's pictorial commemorations of the bloody campaigns to control these territories were whitewashed as victories (despite largely being costly failures), the officials out of favor at court—such as Weng and Faššan—recouped such landscapes to fantasize about horizontal bonds of community and scholarly identity, turning the pictorial space of the Sichuan mountains into a place where one might find the solitary, down-on-his-luck scholar riding a donkey rather than the imperial horses of war. *The Sword Terrace*, Matteini argues, "appears as something more than an elegy to a long-gone harmonious order … beneath its veiled allusions and textured surface, the painting proposes a more harmonious solution" (155). The faction of officials critical of the Qing wars in the southwest, in other words, were the same men of the Southern City who expressed their concerns—however obliquely—about the harsh tactics of the state through painting and poetry.

The *Ghost in the City* models, in a way, the brushwork of the paintings Matteini so deftly analyzes: each chapter is comprised of short sections of three to four pages, which through accretion build up a rich and dense sense of the artistic, intellectual, and political ferment of life in the Qing capital in the late Qianlong years. The depth and breadth of scholarship that has gone into the study is breathtaking. Not only does Matteini unpack the visual motifs of the paintings, but she also demonstrates the same facility with the allusions in the poetry, as well as deep familiarity with the factional politics of the late Qianlong reign. To be sure, China art historians have long since examined the text and image on paintings in tandem, but Matteini goes well beyond this in her attention to a socially and politically embedded reading of visual and textual culture. Matteini's contributions are threefold: as art history, as social history, and as reflection on the politics of aesthetics.

As art history, Matteini's study offers a close analysis of the oeuvre of Luo Ping. He may have become most famous for his ghost painting scroll, but, as she shows, he had facility in all manner of styles. His choice of style in which to render a painting was situational, not based on any sort of theoretical consistency. Matteini then categorizes this kind of artistic practice as craftsman-like "tacit knowledge" (174), putting her study in conversation with Dorothy Ko's work on inkstone carvers and Kaijun Chen's study of the artisan-technocrats who led the imperial porcelain kilns in the mid eighteenth century. These men (and occasionally women) engaged with scholars but were not wedded to intellectual or visual lineages. "Luo Ping's approach," Matteini writes,

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"was one in which practice informed method, and art historical knowledge was embedded in things" (176). And thus, the study of Luo Ping also reveals a corollary in art practice to the move from philosophy to empiricism among the very same cohort of late eighteenth-century scholar-officials who patronized Luo Ping's art. The field of intellectual history has long noted this trend toward empiricism, but Matteini brings these insights to the study of Chinese ink painting. In doing so, she restores Luo Ping to a critical moment in the evolution of Chinese ink-painting practice, rejecting the bifurcation of orthodox versus eccentric labels of later critics, and instead suggesting that his painting offered a roadmap for later generations of painters to "envision a mode of painting that would not silence but embrace the 'anomaly, division, limits' of the world and the artist's desire to be one with it" (181).

As social history, *Ghost in the City* limns the networks that structured patronage and sociability in the capital in the late Qianlong years, especially in the Southern City. Those networks were hierarchical, even as the men of letters who sponsored them imagined themselves as casting off position and ethnic difference for more egalitarian bonds based on shared appreciation of culture—whether poetry, calligraphy, or painting. Matteini's study does for late eighteenth-century Beijing what Tobie Meyer-Fong's *Building Culture in Yangzhou* has done for late seventeenth-century poetry associations in Yangzhou and James Polachek's *The Inner Opium War* for poetry associations in Beijing in the Daoguang reign (1820–1850), but Matteini turns attention to the bonds of men brought together not just by poetry but by painting, too. The *dramatis personae* in Matteini's study overlap with the self-same cohort of men who patronized opera in the commercial theaters of Beijing as explored in my *Opera and the City*, and, indeed, even with the interconnected networks of women poets—the wives of capital-based scholar-officials—featured in Susan Mann's *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*. Many of this same cast of characters were probably also the prototypes for Chen Sen's *A Precious Mirror of Boy Actresses* (*Pinhua baojian* 品花寶鑑), which, though written between 1815 and 1849, drew inspiration from the officials, "scholars under the gates," and actors in Beijing in the last few decades of the eighteenth century.

As a window onto the intersection of politics and culture, *Ghost in the City* illuminates the multitude of ways in which painting became a medium, literally and figuratively, through which to carve out identity and meaning distinct from that imposed by the powerful Qing court. Matteini's monograph is one among a growing number of works that seek to find values and commentary critical of state power in cultural forms, whether the form be scenes played out on commercial opera stages, poems written at elegant gatherings in the Southern City, or albums and paintings gifted between friends and commented upon by men bonded through the shared appreciation of culture. The multifaceted reach, superb research, and fine production values of Matteini's book will surely open *Ghost in the City* to a wide readership of scholars working on the Qing and, more broadly, on cultural approaches to Chinese history.

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