

## Book Reviews

*What the Emperor Built: Architecture and Empire in the Early Ming.* By Aurelia Campbell. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2020. Pp. xiii + 219. \$65.00 hardcover.

Imperial architecture as a building type in Chinese architectural history is a significant domain for in-depth research. Much had been published on palatial architecture; particularly, the many buildings remaining from the last two imperial dynasties had been well scrutinized. Under the rubrics of imperial architecture, past research framed the form and construction under different subcategories of imperial architecture, such as palaces, altars, gardens, imperial temples, mausolea, and others. Complementing these physical remains is a rich collection of contemporaneous textual and visual records, either from court or private sources, that provides the contexts for understanding imperial building history. Most of these publications and research projects focus on building structure, construction materials and methods, use of the building and sites, or the design process.

As a category of building type in history, imperial architecture was created with immense resources, built with the highest standard of construction, and imbued with greater symbolic significance than other building types. With all the available sources of information, there would be room for further study and gaps of knowledge to fill. In *What the Emperor Built*, Campbell focuses on Emperor Yongle 永樂 (r. 1402–1424) and his empire-wide building projects. Described as “one of the greatest imperial builders in all of Chinese history” (p. 3), the Yongle emperor, together with his monumental projects, comes under Campbell’s careful scrutiny utilizing many original sources into the political circumstances, the emperor’s personality, and his approach to emperorship. The projects Campbell selected out of the many of Yongle include the northern capital (Beijing), wooden halls constructed with precious *nanmu* 楠木, imperial temples at Mt. Wudang 武當山, and the Gautama Monastery. The first project is at the city scale, with innovative planning principles. The second views from the building scale, focusing on the main material used for construction. The last two building projects are religious architecture for the Daoist and Buddhist communities. While Emperor Yongle had been involved in countless imperial building projects, the projects under analysis must have been selected by the author as significant to demonstrate the emperor’s political, social, religious, and aesthetic ambitions.

The most significant project narrated in *What the Emperor Built* must be the capital city of Beijing. In the imperial history of China, only a small number of

emperors were directly involved in the capital building process. Most would have inherited the capital of their forebears. And about those emperors who commissioned a new capital, we have ample information regarding the building of three capitals—Chang'an 長安 of the Sui dynasty (581–618), and Nanjing and Beijing of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The author suggests rightly that “Yongle directly modeled the palaces in his new capital in Beijing on those of his father in Nanjing to project a sense of continuity with Hongwu and to disguise his illegitimacy” (p. 9). However, as the author continues to claim: “Yongle’s capital did not passively mimic the architecture of Nanjing. Rather, it perfected upon that architecture in order to project Yongle’s status as the supreme ruler of All Under Heaven and his new capital’s place at its center” (p. 23). In order to demonstrate that Yongle followed his father’s Nanjing in layout but surpassed it in terms of the materials procured for the building of Beijing, the author meticulously outlines the locations where the building materials for Beijing came from (pp. 33–35). This analysis has been most illuminating, as it is seldom carried out in most publications on Chinese architecture history.

In the discussion of a New Imperial Architecture seen in the construction of the new capital (pp. 42–49), the author describes the evolution of the structuring system of an imperial building from the Tang (618–907), through the Song (960–1279), to the Ming dynasty. Without going into much detail of the analysis of a comparative structuring system, as amply outlined in the book, the author draws two conclusions: One is that a new architecture style emerged in the Ming, characterized by a simplicity of structure and a standardization of form throughout the empire. The second conclusion is that the style “ultimately served as a metaphor for the emperor himself” (p. 49). The first conclusion is possibly derived from abundant research conducted since the work of Liang Sicheng 梁思成 (1901–1972) in unravelling the differences between building structures of different historical periods. The use of the word “style” by the author is probably to identify and differentiate these periods. I would argue that Chinese imperial architecture evolved slowly, differing from period to period not in terms of the drastically alteration in built forms, construction methods, or materials used, but more of the advancement in the technological knowhow, as indicated by the author (p. 45). To me, it would be misleading to describe the form of architecture during the Ming as a new imperial architectural style, but more likely a slow evolution of the bracketing system due to various reasons. This is similar to calling different phases of the English Gothic architectural style a different name, such as Early Gothic, Decorated Gothic, and Perpendicular Gothic. It is also possible to trace the “simple and uniformity” expression of Ming imperial architecture in other physical forms, such as Ming furniture, again as a result of the progressive modification of the form.

The second conclusion of this chapter echoes the author's earlier statement:

Deploying court-style architecture was yet another way in which Yongle asserted his imperial presence throughout his empire. During his reign a new court architectural style was developed in the capital and disseminated across his empire through his great construction projects. (p. 7)

This is possibly reading too much into the incremental changes in the architectural structural and constructional system during the Yongle reign. As the author explains, in the building of the northern capital, craftsmen from all corners of the empire were assembled, and, thus, a simplified form would be easier as a common language of architecture among craftsmen from diverse constructional traditions (p. 49). This might better explain the form of Ming architecture. In an autocratic society, every cultural form can ultimately be traced to the emperor. To identify the “new” architecture form as an embodiment of the Yongle emperor is, to me, unnecessary.

The second chapter of the book traces the procurement of *nanmu* as the main timber used for the construction of imperial architecture of Yongle, and the subsequent use of *nanmu* in imperial construction till the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The author cleverly weaves imperial legitimacy with the sacredness in nature represented by *nanmu*. Not only is *nanmu* beautiful and the highest quality of wood due to its density, it is also extremely difficult to procure. There had to be well-connected waterway from south-west China to Beijing to transport the wood. And due to the weight of the tree, eight hundred to one thousand men were required to carry the tree down the steep hill. As the author illustrates the difficulty in the procurement of the wood with texts found in official records and local texts from Sichuan and Yunnan, she is able to connect the rarity and “sacred” nature of the wood with the power and authority of the emperor.

This connectedness between the power, legitimacy, and sacredness associated with the emperor, what the author termed as emperorship of Yongle, can be seen developed in the last two projects narrated in the book. These two religious projects—one on Mt. Wudang for the Daoist deity, Northern Emperor Zhenwu 真武, and the other being the Gautama Monastery in present-day Ledu 樂都, Qinghai province, for a Tibetan lama—are similar in nature and treated similarly by the author. The central message in both chapters is to demonstrate how the Yongle architectural style served to express the central authority of the emperor through the standardization of the architectural constructions, far from the capital city. Regarding both religious sites, the author has cleverly amassed relevant and rare textual and pictorial materials to discuss the sites' background in relation to Yongle's emperorship. Northern Emperor Zhenwu was said to have aided Yongle to usurp the throne from his nephew. This was said to be the main reason Yongle lavished imperial patronage on Mt. Wudang, the abode of Zhenwu. Campbell outlines the various interventions, including the reordering

of the mountain's sacred landscape into three realms, in line with the legend of the deity. In addition, the construction of the main halls in each realm in standardized imperial style is also important evidence of the author's thesis of architectural project aiding the authority of and connectedness to the emperor. Likewise, Yongle was looking to Tibetan master Palden Zangpo for prayer for the protection of the country (pp. 138–42). He also appointed Palden Zangpo as abbot of Gautama Monastery and bestowed many buildings and images to the monastery. Obviously, the location of the Tibetan monastery in Amdo, at the western border of China, allows the author to suggest this to be an illustration of the central imperial authority through the architecture at the borderland (p. 129).

In the case of the two religious establishments patronized by Yongle, Campbell has combed robustly through a variety of sources for understanding the context and process leading to the building of the temple complexes in Wudang and Amdo. The description of the events and people involved leading up to the completion of the projects is extremely clear and representing the vigorous scholarship of the author. It is a common practice for the emperor to patronize religious organizations since the introduction of Buddhism to China. Imperial sponsorship in the past included providing funding for the construction of monasteries, buildings in a monastic compound, or cave-temple sites. Emperors were also keen to sponsor sutra translation, printing, Buddhist images, and other meritorious acts. However, based on her copious literature search, Campbell has illustrated the unprecedented close relationship between Emperor Yongle and the communities in Wudang and at the Gautama Monastery, more so than any imperial households in history. Yongle was not only interested in providing the finance but was also involved in shaping the sacred landscape. Through edicts and memorials between the emperor and his advisors, the author reconstructed the process of building between 1412 and 1418, to “achieved a newfound level of thematic and architectural coherency” (p. 92). Similarly, the sacred space of the monastery in Amdo region was also reorganized from a mandala form to a palatial compound, again for establishing the authority of the emperor as the Cakravartin of the monastery (pp. 128–29). Campbell goes on to describe the architectural building processes involving officials and imperial craftsmen sent from Beijing to these two sites. The standardization of the nine halls on Mt. Wudang and the Hall of Jewel Light in the Gautama Monastery is said by the author to indicate the emperor's attempt to create “a kind of parallel to Yongle's imperial palaces in Beijing” (pp. 124–25).

Campbell has successfully presented the imperial architecture of the early Ming in the context of the life and ambition of Emperor Yongle. She has mastered all the relevant evidence, textual, pictorial, and physical, and weaved a convincing narrative of

the intention of the emperor in these four major constructional projects. It is not very common for a book on an aspect of Chinese architecture history to rely extensively on textual sources. Campbell has successfully established:

The sacred authority of Yongle's architecture extended and endured in a profusion of texts and images, described in imperial edicts and official histories, carved onto woodblocks and stone stelae, and illustrated in printed books and painted handscrolls—all paying tribute to the sanctity of the sites. (p. 167)

There are different models of emperorship. Clearly, Yongle was proactive in proving the legitimacy of his position, authority of his reign, and his vision to extend his power from the capital he established to the borderland. As Campbell puts it, "Architecture was thus a critical means by which Yongle consolidated his role as emperor and confirmed the legitimization of his rule, thereby contributing to the empire-wide imaginary of imperial power that shaped his remarkable legacy" (p. 171). The historiography, the research method, and the architectural analysis are exceedingly well weaved in *What the Emperor Built*. Through the detailed elucidation of the monumental architecture and city planning of Emperor Yongle, Campbell has convincingly established his ultimate objective in emperorship.

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