PART TWO

Interactions
Remonstrating Against Royal Extravagance in Imperial China

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Soon after the Wanli emperor (r. 1572–1620) came to the Ming throne as a boy of nine, his tutor Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582) compiled an illustrated book about the good and bad actions of past rulers, chronologically arranged, titled The Emperor’s Mirror, Illustrated and Discussed. It consisted of seventy-two examples of wise actions taken by kings and emperors and thirty-six examples of unwise actions. Each started with a picture, followed by a passage in classical Chinese drawn from original sources, and ended with a paraphrase and discussion of the case in vernacular language, a rare concession to the ruler’s age. The examples of good and bad acts range in date from high antiquity to the Song dynasty (960–1276). The admirable practices included accepting advice, rewarding critics, dismissing flatterers, inviting scholars to lecture on the classics, paying respect to the elderly, and maintaining good relations with brothers. Many of the negative examples revolved around extravagance or self-indulgence of one sort or another, including indulging the whims of a favourite concubine, building huge palaces, giving valuables to favourites, and taking long hunting trips or other travels. Some of the acts condemned were truly evil, such as killing people for no reason; at the other extreme we find peccadillos, such as being overly fond of music or sneaking out of the palace incognito.

Let me translate three of the shorter examples. The first concerns the emperor whom Chinese scholars found easiest to condemn, the Legalist unifier of China, the First Emperor of Qin (reigned as ruler of all of China, 221–210 BCE):

The Qin histories relate: The First Emperor considered the palaces he had inherited from the earlier kings [of Qin] to be cramped, so he built palaces south of the Wei River and in Shanglin park. He first built the front hall for Epang palace. It was 400 paces east to west, and 500 feet north to south. It could accommodate ten thousand people inside, and

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in the courtyard could display banners 50 feet tall. All around it he built elevated walled walkways, planning to extend them from the palace to South Mountain, on the top of which he would put a gate tower. The elevated walkways crossed over the river to Xianyang [Palace]. Altogether he had 300 palaces, all filled with banners, musical instruments, and beautiful women, each of them assigned to a fixed place.²

After paraphrasing this passage in colloquial Chinese, Zhang Juzheng drew the moral lesson:

Since antiquity, rulers have had to treat the people's strength carefully and not lightly make use of it. By understanding the people's feelings, they can know whether they will keep or lose Heaven's Mandate. The First Emperor exhausted the people's strength to build palaces and lavishly adorn them for his own pleasure. But the hearts of the people turned away from him and they rebelled, and [his palaces] were in the end reduced to ashes by [the rebel general] Xiang Yu. Take warning!³

Clearly, any ruler who presses the people to build palaces for no purpose other than his own pleasure risks losing the people's support and even his throne.

One of the shortest passages in the Mirror for Emperors concerns a more recent emperor, the Tang emperor Zhongzong (r. 683–84 and 705–710), who reigned twice. Not long after taking the throne, he was deposed by his mother Empress Wu. Then twenty-two years later when he was returned to the throne, he let his wife, Empress Wei, have her way more than critics approved:

The Tang histories record: In the first month of spring [during the lantern festival], Zhongzong and his Empress Wei left the palace secretly to view the lanterns in the city.

Perhaps because the evil in this incident is not obvious, Zhang Juzheng elaborates at some length:

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³ Zhang Juzheng, Dijian tushuo, 361.
It is highly unsuitable for someone as noble as the Son of Heaven to view lanterns in the city, to mix with low-born commoners, and moreover, to walk together with the empress. First, such acts ignore differences in rank. Second, they go against safety precautions. Third, they violate palace rules. And fourth, they are dissolute. For one action to violate four important prohibitions makes this a cautionary example for ten thousand generations!4

Zhang Juzheng’s language here is so strong that one almost suspects that he thought Wanli would like nothing more than some time off from his duties as emperor.

The third example of royal misconduct in the Emperor’s Mirror concerns a ninth-century Tang ruler, Jingzong (r. 824–826), who came to the throne at the age of fourteen (16 sui).

The Tang histories record: When Jingzong first took the throne, he would go out and amuse himself with no sense of restraint. In the palace, he would play polo and perform music. He made uncountable gifts to his attendant musicians. He also selected strong young men to stay by his side morning to night. He liked to hunt foxes, shooting them himself. Only two or three times a month would he hold audiences; consequently his top officials rarely got to bring matters to his attention.5

Although the illustration (fig. 1) puts its emphasis on playing polo in the palace grounds, the text itself does not distinguish among Jingzong’s offenses, suggesting that they were all equally bad: a ruler who spent his time with boon companions (rather than his much older officials) would waste his time on amusements, such as playing polo within the palace grounds and hunting outside them, while avoiding the officials trying to govern for him. Even his enjoyment of music was detrimental because it led him to spend exorbitantly on musicians. Zhang Juzheng, in his elaboration, pointed out that Jingzong was assassinated after only two years on the throne. He added that it was a great pity that Jingzong had not studied hard when he was young and so was misled by petty people.

4 Zhang Juzheng, Dijian tushuo, 441, based on Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑 (Beijing, 1956), 209.6639.
5 Zhang Juzheng, Dijian tushuo, 455, based on Sima Guang, Zizhi tongjian, 243.7833, 7851.
FIGURE 1  ‘Playing Polo in the Palace Grounds’ From the Dijian tushuo (1573) Hou 82, East Asian Library and Gest Collection, Princeton University.
REMONSTRATING AGAINST ROYAL EXTRAVAGANCE IN IMPERIAL CHINA

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I have started with a primer for a sixteenth-century boy emperor because I want to underline that the ideas I discuss in this essay were still considered eternal truths in the early modern period. Although the ideas can be traced back to the Warring States (403–221 BCE) and the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), Zhang Juzheng and other Confucian scholar-officials still considered them of utmost importance in the late Ming.

Zhang Juzheng felt authorised to address the emperor in this moralising way because of the long tradition of royal remonstrance. Chinese rulers, like rulers elsewhere, were frequently flattered, but admonishing them was considered a much nobler activity. The *Analects* quotes Confucius as saying no one is truly loyal to another unless he admonishes him (14.8), and Mencius said the person who loves his lord restrains him (1.2). In the primer for Wanli, Zhang Juzheng picks up on these ideas when he declares that loyal officials urge their rulers to be frugal and restrained, even when the ruler does not want to hear their message. Those who tell the ruler what he wants to hear and encourage his wilfulness are treacherous and can do unlimited harm.

The Chinese critique of royal extravagance and pleasure-seeking is relevant in more than one way to the effort to think comparatively about Chinese and European courts in the early modern period. The force of this rhetoric may have moderated the actions of Chinese rulers, who seem to have spent proportionally less on magnificence than European rulers did. They also spent less of their time travelling and as a consequence were seen by their subjects less often. From the tenth century on, non-Han dynasties ruled substantial parts of north China (the Kitan Liao and Jurchen Jin dynasties) and twice all of China (the Mongol Yuan and Manchu Qing dynasties), and their rulers were regularly on the move. Maintaining their traditions as mounted warriors, they took frequent trips to hunt, lead armies, or move among their multiple capitals. The Chinese dynasties of the same era, the Song (960–1276) and Ming (1368–1644) dynasties, were different. Song and Ming court officials worked hard to keep their rulers inside the palace grounds and out of view. Equally important, the critique of royal extravagance shaped how royal activities were discussed and recorded during these dynasties. Historians of Chinese courts thus need to know when accusations of extravagance can be taken literally and when they

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7 Zhang Juzheng, *Dijian tushuo*, 469.
should be understood as political gestures. They also need to recognise which types of royal expenditures would be less likely to evoke charges of extravagance. Spending on a lavish but classically sanctioned ritual was an approved way to add lustre to the throne, but long trips to visit relatives or scenic spots were not.

**Rhetoric**

The trope of the ruler who loses his throne because of his personal indulgence was an ancient one. In the classic commentary, the *Zuo zhuan*, even an interest in fashionable dress or decorated carriages could lead to the destruction of a state, never mind grandiose construction projects requiring conscripted labour. In the *Analects*, Confucius eulogises the ancient sage king Yu because he was frugal to the point of parsimony:

> The Master said, ‘I can find no fault with Yu. He was sparing in his food and drink, yet served the spirits and gods with utmost filial piety. His ordinary clothes were shabby, but his sacrificial garments and hats were of the finest beauty. He lived in humble rooms and halls, devoting his entire energy to opening irrigation ditches and channels. I can find no fault with Yu.’ (8.21)

Yu, thus, would not dream of building himself an elegant palace when there still was much he could do that would directly help the common people, such as constructing waterworks.

The early thinker who put the greatest weight on frugality was Mozi (fifth century BCE), who charged that when the ruler decorates his houses, carriages, and clothing, he not only takes from his hard-working subjects to pay for ostentation, but also encourages others to imitate him, resulting in even more hardship, since ordinary people in the end supply everything. All a building really needs is to keep out wind, rain, and cold; yet rulers of his day put heavy tax demands on the people so that they can ‘make palaces, dwellings, towers and pavilions of intricate appearance, and to adorn them with green and yellow engravings.’ Mozi’s own influence declined after a couple of centuries, but his critique of extravagance was largely absorbed into Confucianism.

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The emperor most frequently cited for his excessive building was the First Emperor of Qin. Despite the opprobrium heaped on him, several later rulers built with comparable abandon, including the second Sui emperor, Yangdi (r. 604–618). In justifying building a second capital at Luoyang, Yangdi embraced the discourse against extravagance and asserted that frugality would characterise his construction project. The *Sui History*, nevertheless, asserts that the official given charge of the project knew that Yangdi did not really want something modest, so he designed the city to be ‘absolutely splendid and spectacular’, to Yangdi’s great joy.\(^{10}\) The eleventh-century historian Sima Guang (1019–1086) wrote of Yangdi:

Not a single day passed without the emperor getting involved in some palace project. Although there were numerous parks, gardens, pavilions and basilicas in the two capitals and the Jiangdu area, [Yangdi] grew tired of them over time. When he toured these places for pleasure, he would look right and left. Not satisfied with any of these, he would be at a loss where to go. In consequence, he gathered maps of mountains and rivers under Heaven, and personally examined them, in search of places of beauty for palaces and parks.\(^{11}\)

Many memorials were written over the centuries to urge royal moderation or even austerity. The emperor was directly addressed in the memorials, but the intended audience included other officials and the educated class more generally. Memorials could be read in the widely circulated court gazette. They were also included in officials’ collected writings and outstanding examples were published elsewhere as well. In 1416, for instance, a 350-chapter compilation of hundreds of model memorials was published.\(^{12}\)

Sometimes emperors adopted the rhetoric of royal moderation themselves. The second Tang emperor, Taizong (r. 626–649), who killed his elder brother and deposed his father to take the throne, worked hard to present himself as a conscientious, morally aware ruler. In the preface to a series of poems he wrote, he associates imperial extravagance with the ruin of empires, singling out construction projects and travels as especially ruinous:

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12 Yang Shiqi 楊士奇 (1365–1444), *Lidai mingchen zouyi* 歷代名臣奏議 (Siku quanshu ed.).
Back in the days of the [ancient sage kings] the Yellow Emperor [Xuan], Fuxi [Hao], Shun, and Yu, there were truly no failings whatsoever. But when it came to the Qin Emperor and King Mu of Zhou, then to Han Wudi and Wei Mingdi, their lofty domes and graven walls showed the utmost excess and decoration in the extreme. Their taxes and exactions depleted the universe; the tracks of their carriages covered the whole world. China's nine regions had no way to meet their exactions, and all the rivers and seas could not satiate their desires. Was it not fitting that they were overthrown and collapsed in ruin?13

Taizong also wrote about the reasons to avoid extravagance and uphold frugality in his Plan for an Emperor, addressed to his heir. Two of the twelve injunctions were to guard against excess and esteem frugality. Among the examples of activities to avoid are travelling for pleasure, adding decoration to either clothing or buildings, and stocking hunting parks. Properly modest rulers are satisfied with buildings made of rough-hewn timbers and roofs of thatch. Unchecked desires invariably lead to ruin.14

Naturally, there were also cultural logics that encouraged rulers to spend lavishly on palaces. With the unified empire, the palace came to stand for the centre of the empire and even the centre of the cosmos. Given their symbolic role, palaces needed to be as grand as the empire. The Han dynasty rulers who followed the First Emperor in time built palace complexes that would rival the First Emperor’s.15 The great historian Sima Qian, writing about 100 BCE, recorded a conversation between the first Han emperor and his chief minister concerning the construction of his palace. When the emperor objected to the excessive scale of the project during a time of war, the minister reportedly told him that creating an impressive palace would help stabilise his rule. ‘It is precisely because the fate of the empire is not yet settled that we need to build palaces and halls like these. The true Son of Heaven treats the four quarters as his family estate. If he does not dwell in magnificent quarters, he will have no way to display his authority, nor will he establish the foundation for his heirs to

13 Stephen Owen, ‘The Difficulty of Pleasure’, Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident 20 (1998), 9–30 (quote at 15). In a similar vein, Chen, Poetics of Sovereignty, 76, translates a passage in which Taizong is quoted as saying that the rulers’ immoderate desires lead to oppressive taxation and eventually to the ruin of the state.
These sorts of justifications did not work in the case of ‘detached’ palaces outside the city walls, sometimes at a considerable remove, more commonly associated with pleasure-seeking. When Tang Taizong planned a trip to one of his detached palaces, a court official objected, ‘Excursions to visit detached palaces were the deeds of the Qin emperor and Han Wudi and certainly not the behaviour of [the ancient sage kings] Yao, Shun, Yu and Tang.’

It would be easy to offer many more examples of complaints about overly ornate or costly palaces, but the other charges in the Emperor’s Mirror are also worth some discussion. The second one cited above concerned an emperor sneaking out to amuse himself and mix with people at the Lantern Festival. Incognito excursions are recorded for many rulers, but I have not found any writers who justify the practice. No one argued that the ruler who wanted to know what people really thought should disguise himself to mingle with them. Rulers attracted to the lively amusement quarters were especially suspect. Even if the ruler was merely trying to visit one of his officials without all the bother of going with a large retinue, officials would object. In the early twelfth century, a censor was quick to condemn Huizong (r. 1100–1125) when he learned that the emperor had visited his grand councillor Cai Jing in his home five or six times in the past year. The emperor should never leave the palace without a full formal retinue. It was a cliché for officials or the emperor to say that he lived behind nine layers of walls and could not witness everything that went on in the empire. Finding surreptitious ways to see more for himself, however, was not an acceptable solution. Rather, an emperor should depend on his officials to serve as his eyes and ears.

Most royal excursions were not done in secret, of course. Trips taken with a full complement of guards and retainers could be justified on several grounds: to lead troops into battle, to review troops in peacetime, to make inspections of local conditions, and to hunt, though even these reasons could provoke protest. Because the classics refer positively to ‘tours of inspection’, such tours offered the best excuse for an excursion. Mencius holds up for admiration the Son of Heaven who makes tours of inspection to the lands of his vassals so that he can see for himself ‘if new lands are being reclaimed and the fields well cultivated, if the old are cared for and the good and wise honoured, and

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17 On Tang detached palaces, see Chen, *Poetics of Sovereignty*, 283, 293–95, 348–49.
18 Chen, *Poetics of Sovereignty*, 293.
Men of distinction are in positions of authority. Mencius is offering an idealised vision of the way true kings travelled that was at the same time a critique of more usual practices of his day. In the Record of Ritual, the Son of Heaven makes a tour of the fiefs every fifth year, going in a different direction in each season. The Bohu tongyi, of 79 CE, adds the qualification that such tours are made only after ‘great peace’ is attained.

Confucian critics judged some emperors’ tours excessive. Again an extreme case was the First Emperor, who travelled back and forth across the newly unified country, in the end expiring on one of his journeys. After the second reunification in 589, Sui Yangdi (r. 604–618) became almost as great a traveller. Arthur Wright characterised Yangdi as a restless man who abhorred routine and loved travel. He reportedly criticised the rulers of the Southern Dynasties for not making tours of inspection: ‘They sat in the innermost palaces without ever meeting their people face to face’, as though they were women. In 605 Yangdi travelled by boat to Yangzhou on a huge, four-deck dragon boat, accompanied by thousands of lesser ships, the procession reportedly extending about 100 km and requiring 80,000 men to tow. After his return, he took an overland trip to the northern border to meet with the khan of the Turks, finding many opportunities to go hunting on the way. The early Tang emperors were not quite as active in touring and tried their best to make their trips seem acts of benevolence. On some of his trips, Taizong made gifts of grain and silk to the elderly, widows, widowers, orphans, and the childless. Emperors on the road also would sometimes pardon crimes, remit taxes, and visit the elderly. Still, in 669 when Gaozong proposed a lengthy trip west into Gansu, his officials said such a tour would not be appropriate. When he countered that the classics said he should take a tour every five years, most of his officials fell silent, but one did step forward to say that, by touring, the emperor would be putting too great a burden on his soldiers, still recovering from the Korea.

20 Mencius VI 2.7.
24 Xiong, Emperor Yang, 35–42.
campaign, and also on the thinly settled population of the area, who would have to supply provisions.\textsuperscript{26}

Another legitimate reason for rulers to leave the capital was to perform rituals in distant places. In Han times, such rituals took rulers in several directions, with the longest journey to Mount Tai in Shandong to perform the \textit{feng} and \textit{shan} sacrifices.\textsuperscript{27}

Hunting trips are in some ways special cases. According to Thomas Allsen, ‘the vast majority of the royal houses and aristocracies of Eurasia made some use of the chase in the pursuit and maintenance of their social and political power.’\textsuperscript{28} In Chinese rhetoric, however, these events were still problematic, even though they are mentioned in the classics. According to David Keightley, the Shang king ‘displayed his power by frequent travel, hunting, and inspecting along the pathways of his realm...sacrificing to the local spirits, giving and receiving power at each holy place, and thus renewing the religious and kin ties that bound the state together.’\textsuperscript{29} By Han times, however, criticisms of royal hunting were regularly voiced. Sima Xiangru expressed his objections to the hunting parties of Emperor Wu.\textsuperscript{30} He also wrote a rhapsody on the imperial hunt which first describes its joys but then points out its negative side:

\begin{quote}
Galloping and riding all day long,
Tiring the spirit, straining the body,
Exhausting the utility of carriages and horses,
Sapping the energy of officers and men,
Wasting the wealth of treasuries and storehouses,
While depriving the people of generous beneficence;
Striving only for selfish pleasure;
Not caring for the common people,
Ignoring the administration of the state,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Wechsler, \textit{Offerings of Jade and Silk}, 165–67.
\textsuperscript{30} Sima Qian, \textit{Shi ji}, 117.3053–54.
Craving only a catch of pheasants or hares: These are things a benevolent ruler would not do.\textsuperscript{31}

Condemnation of hunting as pleasure-seeking was often mixed with condemnation of the waste of land set aside for huge hunting parks and stocked with animals, especially the Shanglin (Supreme Forest) park initiated by the First Emperor and expanded under Han Wudi to a circumference of about 100 km (200 \textit{li}). It had woods, streams, marshes, ponds, observation towers, palatial lodges, trees of all kinds, rare animals, including elephants and camels, and a staff of game keepers. Even at the time the court official Dongfang Shuo argued that the park was too large, its facilities too extensive, and that such lavish expenditure often brought ruin.\textsuperscript{32} A tactic for remonstrating with the ruler developed in this period was to describe something in such elaborate detail that what appeared to be praise was at the same time a warning to the ruler.\textsuperscript{33}

A century later Yang Xiong criticised Emperor Wu’s imperial hunting on the grounds that the hunting lodges, the carts and horses, the weapons, all were ‘excessively ostentatious and grandiose.’\textsuperscript{34} In the Later Han period, a critic described the emperor’s hunting as ‘wanton wilfulness.’ He claimed that the moral heroes Yao and the Duke of Zhou had warned against ‘idle excursions’ and finding pleasure in hunting trips.\textsuperscript{35}

Similar objections were voiced many times during the Tang and Song periods.\textsuperscript{36} Wei Zheng, in 640, was brought along on one of Taizong’s hunting

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} David R. Knechtges, \textit{Wen Xuan or Selections of Refined Literature by Xiao Tong}, vol. 2 (Princeton, 1987), 113.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Knechtges, ‘Criticism of the Court’, 56. The rhapsody concerned a hunt held in 10 BCE by Emperor Cheng, which is contrasted with Emperor Wu’s, but still is described as lavish, until the emperor turns away from extravagance. See Knechtges, \textit{Wen Xuan}, 2: 115–36.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Yang Shiqi, \textit{Lidai mingchen zouyi 歷代名臣奏議}, 287.1b; cf. Michael G. Chang, \textit{A Court on Horseback: Imperial Touring and the Construction of Qing Rule, 1680–1785} (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 47.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Yang Shiqi, \textit{Lidai mingchen zouyi}, 287.5bff.
\end{itemize}
trips and used the occasion to criticise the practice of hunting, bringing up Sima Xiangru’s protests and adding that a ruler who put the country first would not indulge himself in that way. In 725, when Emperor Xuanzong took time out to hunt on a trip to the sacred Mount Tai, an official objected because the emperor was exposing himself to danger. In 1101, during Huizong’s second year on the throne, a censor warned Huizong against hunting. He reported that he had heard a rumour that someone had entered the Rear Garden with falcons for hunting birds. ‘How could a ruler who is benevolent busy himself with going hunting?’ He shouldn’t have the leisure to seek the pleasure of hunting. As the censor saw it, the only justification for hunting in the classics is to obtain meats for ancestral offerings. Not only is the activity dangerous, it is also expensive. ‘When someone gets a bird, there is a lot of congratulating and gift-giving, ignoring expense.’ Such extravagance shows no respect for the hard work of ordinary people, the source of all government funds. He told the story that the Tang founder Gaozu loved to ride and shoot. A critic submitted a remonstrance that said this was merely something that young princes should do. ‘Since you are the emperor, should you still be doing it?’ The censor concluded his memorial by urging the ruler to do his hunting in the fields of benevolence and righteousness and to take his excursions in the gardens of the Six Classics.

Arguments against hunting and other pleasure trips draw not only on the distrust of pleasure, already discussed, but also on ideas about how to manage the ruler. Already in the Warring States period, political thinkers were discussing how court officials could manage the ruler and limit the damage an inept ruler could cause. Yuri Pines, in Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era, argues that in the third century BCE, some political thinkers who saw an absolute monarch as essential still wanted ways to keep him from active involvement in policy-making. ‘Just like his teacher, Xunzi, Han Feizi promulgates the vision of the ruler, whose symbolic presence is important but whose personal impact should be reduced to the minimum.’ Han Feizi turns the ruler into a ‘nullity, a non-personal’, with no ‘possibility of exercising his true will.’ Pines sees the resulting contradiction between the

37 Wu Jing 吳兢, Zhenguang zhengyao 真觀政要 (Siku quanshu ed.), 10.7b–8b.
38 Yang Shiqi, Lidai mingchen zouyi, 287.5a.
39 Zhao Ruyu 趙汝愚 (1140–1196), Songchao zhuchen zouyi 宋朝諸臣奏議 (Shanghai, 1999), 11.101–3.
40 Yuri Pines, Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thoughts of the Warring States Era (Honolulu, 2009), 105–6.
ruler’s theoretical omnipotence and the limits on his political involvement as a source of tension that ‘plagued the Chinese empire ever afterward.’

One way to keep a ruler from active policy-making was to convince him of the superiority of ruling through non-action (wuwei). As Mark Lewis notes, in the Laozi, several passages suggest that ‘the ruler, the sage, and the Way are powerful because they are hidden from the knowledge of ordinary men.’ Han Feizi, similarly, argues that the ruler can protect himself by concealing himself and his desires. The First Emperor adopted these ideas and went further than anyone before or after him in keeping out of sight. He had elevated walkways built so that he could walk from one palace to another without revealing his location. He even decreed death to anyone who revealed his location. Lewis remarks that this ‘withdrawal of the emperor from the gaze of the populace and even of the court became a principle of imperial political power. Throughout the imperial era, the Chinese ruler was sequestered behind a series of walls.’ Michael Nylan suggests that keeping the Han ruler out of sight might have been in part because ‘the ruler invisible’ ‘can be all things to all people’ and also that ‘the hidden ruler’ motif might have been ‘devised to screen from view the everyday realities of the Han court,’ such as power in the hands of maternal relatives. One probably should distinguish between cases like the First Emperor, who himself chose to remain concealed, and later emperors who were pressured to stay inside the palace complex by their court officials and would themselves have happily moved about more freely, either openly or incognito.

When Song and Ming officials opposed imperial travel, they could make several sorts of arguments. One was that unforeseen events might occur which those attending the emperor could not fully control. In other words, the emperor might be accidentally injured or even killed. After all, the closer the emperor got to subjects the more difficult it would be to prevent assassination plots. Besides these worries that critics could openly cite, they often seem to have had other concerns. A ruler who saw conditions outside the capital region might form his own opinions and want to change routines in ways officials might not approve. The more varied the experience of the emperor, the harder

42 Lewis, Construction of Space, 155.
he might be to manage. Court officials who did not want to get the country into
war seem to have worried that a ruler with a taste for hunting might relish the
chance to go to war. Thomas Allsen argues that Tang officials decried the chase
in order to prevent ‘emperors from spending extended periods away from the
capital and the influence of the literati, and spending it in the company of
“undesirables”—military men, frontier officials, and foreigners.’

Practice

Did the long tradition of cautioning rulers about their tendencies toward
extravagance and self-indulgence have any impact on royal behaviour? Espe-
cially when an author seemed merely to be repeating time-worn arguments,
it would be easy for the sovereign to tolerate the criticism but then do as he
pleased. Strong emperors—especially dynastic founders—would not have
found these objections much of an impediment to pursuing their own plans.
This discourse of frugality certainly had an impact on what emperors said
(or officials said drafting their edicts), which we have seen already in the pro-
nouncements of Tang Taizong.

Still, I think there may have been some impact on what rulers did. In Song
and Ming times both palaces and excursions seem to have been scaled back
considerably. After the extensive palace-building of Han Wudi, the palace
complex in Chang’an seems to have reached the size of about 5 km². The
Tang palace complex was even larger. Chang’an’s Palace City was 4.2 km²
before Daming Palace was built, and 7.5 km² afterwards. The Northern Song
palace in Kaifeng, by contrast, amounted to only about 0.4 km² until 1113 when
Huizong built an addition to the north, expanding the palace grounds to per-
haps 0.6 km². Moreover, Song did not have any detached palaces like Tang had.
By and large, the Ming and Qing dynasties kept their Beijing palaces to the
scale of Song ones (the Beijing Forbidden City is 0.72 km²), though there were
also summer palaces.

What about imperial travel? The objections of court officials did not keep
emperors from sneaking out, though it is likely that they had officials or
eunuchs helping them. Certainly when they left to visit an official at his home,
that official was cooperating. Publicly recognised travel seems to have been

45 Allsen, Royal Hunt, 109. See also Chen, Poetics of Sovereignty, 35–36.
46 See the map in Wu Hung, Monumentality, 150.
47 Heng Chye Kiang, Cities of Aristocrats and Bureaucrats: The Development of Medieval
Chinese Cityscapes (Honolulu, 1999), 137.
more extensive in the earlier Chinese dynasties (again, not counting non-Chinese dynasties). In Former Han times, emperors from Wudi on did quite a bit of travelling, despite officials’ protests. They often left the palace to go hunting or travelled to other parts of the country for any of a number of reasons, with leading troops, moving to another palace, and visiting holy places probably the most common. Michael Loewe mentions trips by Emperor Wu in 134, 122, 119, 116, 113, 110, 108, 107, 106, 104, 102, 100, 99, 98, 94, 93, 90, 89, 88 BCE and by his successors in 61, 56, 55, 45, 44, 40, 39, 38, 37 BCE. In some of these years there were multiple trips. Later Han emperors also took many trips, even several decades after the founding. One emperor died on a tour in 125 CE.

In Tang times, with two capitals (Chang’an and Luoyang) that were regularly used, moving from one capital to the other was a recurrent reason for major expeditions. The Tang rulers also had detached palaces at a considerable distance from the capitals that they visited with some regularity. In the early Tang, in Howard Wechsler’s view, the political return on such imperial tours made them worthwhile. People in the regions traversed would see or hear about ‘the glorious transit of the Son of Heaven, in magnificent train, making solicitous inquiries about the disadvantaged or freely dispensing largesse, and evoking potent images of and identification with revered political ancestors, who, in the course of performing similar rituals, had also passed this way so long ago.’

Dynasties were, of course, not founded by cloistered emperors—they were founded by military men who had campaigned across the realm, defeating rivals far and near. The first three Song emperors did travel. Taizu (r. 960–976) and Taizong (r. 976–997) were generals and subjugating the other rival states took much of their energy. Zhenzong was raised in the palace, but made several trips outside of the capital district—in 1004 to Shanyuan, nominally at least to lead the troops resisting the Khitan, in 1008 to Mount Tai to perform the feng and shan sacrifices, in 1111 to Fenyn to sacrifice to earth, and in 1114 to Bozhou to visit the shrine to Laozi there. Subsequent emperors did much less travelling. In 1047, when Renzong (r. 1022–1063) wanted to go out hunting a
second time, many officials submitted memorials objecting till he finally cancelled his plans.\(^{52}\) From Renzong on, the Song emperors largely stayed in the capital and its environs. The Song officially had four capitals, one for each of the cardinal directions, but the emperors did not pay regular visits to them, remaining in the Eastern Capital, Kaifeng, for decades at a time. Officials tried to negate the rhetoric of the kingly ‘tour of inspection’, which they declared a practice of high antiquity that could not be restored. In their own day, they asserted, inspections were carried out by specially appointed officials.\(^{53}\) This was true even though in the larger society travel had become quite common in Song times. Literati and officials travelled to the capital for schooling, to take civil service examinations, and if successful to posts anywhere in the country. They also enjoyed tourism, taking side trips to notable places, often for the scenery or historical associations.\(^{54}\) In Song and Ming times, the emperor was being denied the sorts of experiences that had become common for the elite of his land.

In Ming times, similarly, the founder, the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398), and his fourth son, the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424), were military men who did not stay put. Yongle made Beijing the main capital, but made regular visits to Nanjing, reduced to the secondary capital, and spent much of his time on the road. Ming emperors were proud enough of their hunts and military campaigns that they had paintings made showing them far from the palace accompanied by large retinues. Nevertheless, Ming court officials tried to discourage travel, especially after the Zhengtong emperor (r. 1436–1449) took to the field with his army and was captured by the Mongols. When his successor wanted to travel, officials expressed concerns about his safety and the strain his trips put on the populace. In 1519, 146 high officials protested when the Zhengde emperor (r. 1506–1521) wanted to lead an army; in the end eleven of the protesters were executed.\(^{55}\)

\(^{52}\) Li Tao 李燾 (1115–1184), Xu zizhi tongqian changbian 續資治通鑒長編 (Beijing, 1985), 160.3866–67; Zhao Ruyu, Songchao zhuchen zouyi, 11.95–96.

\(^{53}\) Xu Song 徐松 (1781–1848) et al., Song huiyao jigao 宋會要輯稿 (Beijing, 1957), Zhiguan 2.13.

\(^{54}\) Cong Ellen Zhang, Transformative Journeys: Travel and Culture in Song China (Honolulu, 2011).

\(^{55}\) Chang, Empire on Horseback, 65–70. See also Susan Naquin, Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900 (Berkeley, 2000), 151–52. For some paintings, see Craig Clunas, Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644 (Honolulu, 2007), 161–167, 168.
Ray Huang, in *1587: A Year of No Significance*, emphasises the constraints on Ming emperors’ mobility. He notes that bureaucrats shared ‘the notion that the emperor’s place was in the palace’, and by 1500 were remarkably successful in curbing imperial travel. The eleventh Ming emperor, Jiaqing (r. 1521–1566), who was not raised in the palace but adopted as an heir after reaching adulthood, was able to visit his birthplace in 1539, but never left the capital during the subsequent twenty-seven years. His successor, the Longqing emperor (r. 1566–1572), in his six years on the throne got away from the capital only once for a four-day trip to the imperial tombs. His successor, the Wanli emperor, did make a few trips to the imperial tombs in his earlier years, but during the last thirty-one years of his reign never left Beijing.56 Ray Huang characterises him as ‘less the Ruler of All men than a prisoner of the Forbidden City’. He described ‘an effort to dehumanise the monarchy’ since the bureaucracy ‘needed only a cloistered sovereign to act as its presiding officer.’57

Keeping emperors within the palace complex also meant that ordinary subjects did not get to see them. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), in the early seventeenth century, was struck by how little the residents of Beijing saw the Ming emperor. Concerned about safety, ‘the kings of modern times abandoned the custom of going out in public.’ In the past when the ruler had made rare excursions, he was hidden from public view in one of many sedan chairs, and secret service men secured his route. ‘One would think he was making a journey through enemy country rather than through multitudes of his own subjects and clients.’58

How could a ruler who sought magnificence get around the rhetoric of royal frugality? Given this rhetoric and the bureaucratic techniques to render emperors harmless, what could a ruler who wanted to display his greatness do? There were certain strategies widely available to emperors and their advisors. The most direct was to make use of the more spectacular of the rituals specified for kings in the classics and laid out in detail in successive dynasties’ ritual codes. When these involved the transit of the emperor, they were done in a very visible and colourful way. The grandest sacrificial offering ceremony was the sacrifice to Heaven held at the winter solstice in an altar in the southern suburbs. In Song times about twenty thousand men participated in the procession, most

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57 Huang, *1587*, 93, 86.
wearing bright colours.\(^59\) Even within the palace there were opportunities to make a great show. The New Year’s audience involved banqueting for hundreds of officials and foreign envoys, with an orchestra and dancers all providing entertainment. Rituals were not the only avenue for demonstrating greatness. Ambitious emperors could sponsor literary projects or assemble collections, in both cases creating something that would outlast them and add lustre to their reputation.\(^60\) The many Buddhist and Daoist temples built in the capital by the throne provided royal grandeur that ordinary people would have opportunities to observe.\(^61\)

**Implications**

By way of conclusion, let me consider the historiographical implications of the rhetoric against royal extravagance. The first is to recognise that Chinese authors rarely wrote positively about royal magnificence. Actions that may well have been motivated by the desire for magnificence had to be framed differently. If one wanted to praise the emperor, acts such as building new palaces had to be presented as ways to fulfil obligations to the ancestors, display virtue, perform rituals, ‘recover antiquity’, and the like. If one wanted to criticise the ruler, of course, such acts could be called profligate and extravagant.

One should be careful not to assume that the surviving memorials criticising the spending habits of a ruler are a good sign of how much he in fact spent. The truly loyal subject/minister should do his best to urge restraint on his ruler, no matter how cautious the ruler might already be. Officials in posts where admonishing the ruler was part of the job would warn even quite circumspect rulers against doing anything dangerous or costly. Thus the number of extant memorials warning against extravagance usually has more to do with the fame or literary ability of the author and the tolerance of the ruler for criticism than with his spending habits. To give an example, the fourth Song emperor, Renzong, was considered the most tractable of Song emperors, respectful to his officials and willing to listen to lectures on the Confucian classics. Zhang Juzheng, in the *Emperor’s Mirror*, includes nine examples of Renzong’s good practices, putting him second after Tang Taizong in admirable traits. Perhaps

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60 For royal collections, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (Seattle, 2008).

because he did not become irate when criticised, many memorials submitted to him to protest costly projects survive. Several even asked to have the lantern festival suspended. The eminent official Ouyang Xiu charged that construction was always going on, without a day’s rest, to the exhaustion of the people and the treasuries, and hinted that eunuchs had probably promoted the projects. Clearly anyone doing research on court life needs to keep this rhetoric in mind and find other sources to assess the material culture of imperial sovereignty.

62 Zhao Ruyu, Songchao zhuchen zouyi, 92.999–1000; 128.1406–11.