Introduction to the Special Issue: The Lone Guardian. Politics, Culture, and Society under the Yongzheng Emperor

When the Kangxi 康熙 Emperor died in December 1722 after sixty years on the throne (1662–1722), his fourth son Yinzhen 胤禛 (1678–1735) succeeded him as ruler of the Qing empire under anything but favourable circumstances. His reign, for which he chose the reign title Yongzheng 雍正 (1723–1735), “harmonious order”, promised a program of tight control but faced doubts about its legitimacy from the outset. The new emperor was accused of patricide, regicide, tampering with his predecessor’s will, and usurping the throne.

Much about this opaque ruler – often overshadowed by the superlatives of both his revered father and his ambitious son, the Qianlong 乾隆 Emperor (1736–1796) – his autocracy, distrust of his brothers, the court, and the bureaucracy, his desire for order and control, as well as his talent for governance, foresight in reforms and necessary social and political changes, his artistic sensibility, and his commitment to nurturing talent – can be explained in part by these unique biographical and historical circumstances.

On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of his ascension to the throne, a workshop titled “The Lone Guardian: Politics, Culture, and Society in China under the Yongzheng Emperor” was held in July 2023 at the University of Naples L’Orientale, examining these and other aspects of the life and reign of the emperor. The workshop originated from a research project funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation on the Guwantu of the Yongzheng Emperor, and we warmly thank the foundation for its support. Furthermore, we thank the Confucius Institute Naples for their generous financial support of the workshop. Last but certainly not least, heartfelt thanks go to my friend and colleague, Dr. Federico Brusadelli, and Prof. Donatella Guida from the University of Naples L’Orientale for their excellent collaboration and invaluable support in organising and conducting our workshop, as well as in editing this special issue – vi ringrazio di cuore!

This publication serves as a florilegium of the papers presented at our workshop. Unfortunately, due to space and time constraints, not all the brilliant papers made it into this volume.
This special issue opens with a contribution by Daniel Knorr titled “A Provincial Legacy of Autocracy: Shandong’s Luoyuan Academy in and beyond the Yongzheng Reign,” in which he discusses how the edict of the Yongzheng Emperor in 1733 to establish academies in provincial capitals was a strategic move to strengthen control over education, which was previously autonomous from the court. Using the case study of the Luoyuan Academy in Shandong, it demonstrates how local actors played a crucial role in the administration of these academies, challenging the perception of strict central control and highlighting the interdependence between imperial policy and local action. This sheds light on the continuity between Yongzheng’s governance and later state-building efforts, leading to a reassessment of concepts such as “autocracy” and “centralization.”

Juul Eijk’s contribution, titled “Compassionate Occupation: Yongzheng’s purposes for relocating the Qing garrison away from Lhasa,” examines the actions of the Qing Dynasty in Tibet during the reigns of Emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng. The study argues that Yongzheng aimed to continue Kangxi’s strategy of weakening the authority of the Dalai Lama by integrating local elites into Qing administration, thereby expanding Qing influence in Tibet. Consequently, the relocation of the garrison was seen as a continuation, rather than an abandonment, of Kangxi’s policy.

In her paper, “In Pursuit of Temporal Illusion: The Reproduction and Imitation of Antiquities under the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723–35),” Ma Kexin examines the imitation of antiquities during the Qing Dynasty, focusing on Yongzheng’s reign (1723–35). The author investigates both two-dimensional representations and three-dimensional objects, using imperial records to understand the transformation and reinterpretation of these artifacts in the cultural milieu of the court. Additionally, the article reconceptualizes the term “antiquities” in the context of Yongzheng and analyses the motives behind the illusionistic replication practice, particularly considering Yongzheng’s duality as a Manchu ruler influenced by Han-Chinese traditions.

Gregor Marius Weimar examines Emperor Yongzheng’s preface in the Great Qing Code of 1740 in his paper titled “‘They will know and fear the law’ – Emperor Yongzheng’s preface in the Great Qing Code of 1740” to explore his autocratic rule and commitment to governance. The analysis of Yongzheng’s preface demonstrates his dedication to the rule of the empire, emphasizing his adherence to Chinese legal principles, reverence for his predecessors, especially his father Emperor Kangxi, and his supreme authority in state affairs. Yongzheng’s commitment to governance spurred reforms, including the revision and publication of the Great Qing Code, aimed at improving imperial
administration and ensuring social stability. The paper highlights Yongzheng’s belief that effective justice and public enlightenment about the laws would lead to societal improvement, emphasizing the emperor’s responsibility to maintain stability and uphold the cosmic order of the dynasty.

The editors and authors of this special issue hope to have made a small contribution to a better understanding of the life and times of the Yongzheng Emperor. We further hope that readers will enjoy reading this special issue of Ming Qing Yanjiu and ask for their understanding regarding the inevitable limitations of this volume.

Phillip Grimberg (Guest Editor)
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