
In October of 2005, an international group of aficionados calling themselves the "Yangzhou Club" met in that city to discuss their mutual love of the place. They convened over cups of tea in historic mansions and theaters, attended musical performances, and toured the city's scenic sites. Included in the Club were specialists in painting, literature, architecture, and theater, as well as more general cultural historians. Five years later, they have published a large and stunningly beautiful book full of erudite explorations of things Yangzhou. An unusually high number of sentences throughout the volume begin with the pronoun "I"—there is a large dose of self-reference here that is related less to scholarly reflexivity or participant-observer questions than to personal travel memoir. There is a souvenir photo of the conference participants, almost exclusively foreigners, sitting with a local opera troupe. And indeed, the major criterion for inclusion of the piece by one contributor, a non-specialist, seems to have been that he visited Yangzhou once or twice.

The question that the reader asks, then, is: is this simply a vanity project of a group of like-minded connoisseurs? Or is Yangzhou so significant that it demands to be "celebrated" (in the words of the book's cover blurb) on such a scale before a wider audience? Or, as one might even hope, does this lovely book tell us something new and important about "lifestyles" in early modern Chinese cities generally? To this reader the answer to the latter two questions is "yes." I learned a great deal, and am very glad I read it.

The book is structured into four parts, dealing respectively with visual aspects of the city (the built environment, gardens, dress), with publishing and literature, with the performing arts (theater and storytelling), and with painting. Conceptually, however, the contents are more effectively organized around several recurring and interrelated polarities: national versus local, state versus society, elite versus popular, amateur versus professional, written versus oral, and classical versus vernacular. In each of these, the lesson from Yangzhou appears to be that the polarities were significant, and yet complicated in various ways. The volume's editors do little in their preface and introduction to draw out and synthesize what the contributors have to say about these general themes. Consequently, in lieu of a critique, let me offer here an attempt to do just that.

Yangzhou local culture, Lucie Olivová tells us, comprised "an identity typified by beautiful women, fine scenery, leisure, and entertainment" (p. 10). It was expressed in "social gatherings" (p. 42), "literary networks" (p. 143), and a wide range of other semi-ritualized performances. The culture contained a barely suppressed undercurrent of homoeroticism (p. 145), and acknowledged addictions to alcohol, narcotics, and gambling. Though in light of the contrast to Shanghai, in many ways its successor city as national tastemaker, it is tempting to see the
Yangzhou lifestyle as embodying elements of a persistent “tradition,” this book makes clear that in fact Yangzhou was characterized by an urge to continually innovate and remain up-to-date: in clothing, to “follow the times” (shiyang 時樣), in popular song to favor the most “current tunes” (shidiao 時調). At the heart of Yangzhou identity were built-in “tensions” and “anxieties”: for instance, that between the competing demands of pious austerity and extravagant consumerism (p. 402), “vulgarity and elegance” (p. 429), “purity and refinement” vs. “wealth and attachment” (p. 430), all of these expressed, as Kristin Loring shows, in the iconography adopted by the city’s renowned painters.

Although the volume’s contributors are understandably eager to portray this lifestyle as a highly particular, jealously guarded, and indeed unique genius loci (p. 1), it participated in complicated ways in both the national and the global. English wool and other European commodities were part of the Yangzhou fashion mix as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Exotic paintings of biansai 邊塞 (frontier) and saibei 塞北 (north of the Great Wall) scenes figured more intensely in elite tastes in Yangzhou than elsewhere because sojourning Shanxi-Shaanxi merchants or their kin or business partners themselves traded there, and because Yangzhou elites personally knew exiles to the northwest, or had at least read their diaries and memoirs (p. 368). Local fascination with Qing expansionism was unusually strong.

From the start, Yangzhou as both place and style was the product of an intensely “interlocking community” of locality and empire (p. 56). The city’s Qing prosperity, after all, was a direct product of its fortune in being granted a central role in the imperial salt monopoly. What we think of as peculiar aspects of Yangzhou’s cityscape, its monuments and even its famous gardens, were in many cases artifacts of imperial southern tours (p. 78). Indeed, Yangzhou as imperial place in many ways preceded the development of its self-conscious local distinctiveness: Margaret Wan, for instance, nicely describes the “increasing consciousness of local identity” among Yangzhou literati at a rather late moment, the turn of the nineteenth century, as seen in their concerned efforts to document what was exclusively “Yangzhou” in the local history, dialect, customs, and styles of entertainment (p. 177).

As Tobie Meyer-Fong sensitively describes it, the aftermath of the devastating Taiping campaigns in the city and its region presented an opportunity for Yangzhou to reassert at the same time its own “prestigious local tradition” and its exemplary “adherence to imperial standards of virtuous conduct” (p. 55). As she argues, the receipt of state honors for local citizens “martyred” by the Taiping or active in the resistance was a key link in the assertion of both the city’s uniqueness and its seamless fit into the imperial order. It was a link, Meyer-Fong suggests, that increasingly atrophied toward empire’s end. That Yangzhou’s post-Taiping decline offers a convenient “metaphor for all China,” as Olivová proposes (p. 17), I am less convinced.

Befitting a city whose economic base was a government-franchised commercial monopoly, staffed by merchants who were for the most part highly educated