Lecture Abstract

Theater played an important role in the formation of court culture in Qing China. Performances associated with court activities took many forms, ranging from spectacular pageantries during ceremonies to small-scale performances in private residences in the Forbidden City. This talk draws upon the archival materials of both Qing court theater bureau and non-theatrical archives, (the Imperial Household Department, Imperial Buttery, Imperial Workshops, and more), and journals by European visitors who participated in court theatrical activities, to examine the pedagogical role of theatrical performances in state-sponsored ceremonial events during the Qianlong reign.

In particular, the case study on Lord George Macartney’s visit to Rehe in 1793 delineates how, as a major form of imperial bestowal, theatrical entertainment became part and parcel of the guest ritual process. Theatrical performances, and the lack thereof, reflected the Wing court’s evaluation of the relation between the guest and the host. Tribute-paying dramas and other ceremonial plays of similar theme are thus politicized dramatization of the guest ritual discourse.

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