# Performing Inaction

## The Courtly Arts of the Wanli Emperor, 1573–1620

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Cover image: Wanli and Zhang Hong in *Imperial Procession Departing from the Forbidden City*. The National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0 @ www.npm.gov.tw

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| CBETA | Zhonghua dianzi fodian xiehui 中華電子佛典協會 [Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association] |
| CENMC | Zhongguo jindai zhongwen baozhi quanwen shujuku: Zonghe zhuanji (1874–1949) 中國近代中文報紙全文數據庫：綜合專輯（1874–1949）[Chinese and English Newspaper of Modern China: Comprehensive Collection (1874–1949)] |
| *GZC* | *Gugong zhenben congkan* 故宮珍本叢刊 [Collection of rare books in the Palace Museum]. Hainan chubanshe, 2001. |
| *SKJC* | *Siku jinhuishu congkan* 四庫禁燬書叢刊 [Collection of books designated for suppression or destruction by the editors of the *Four Treasuries*]. Beijing chubanshe, 2000. |
| *SKQS* | *Jingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書 [Complete library of the four treasuries, Wenyuange edition]. Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983–1988. |
| *SKQSCC* | *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 [Collectanea of books noted but excluded in the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*]. Qilu shushe, 1997. |
| *SKWJ* | *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 [Collection of books not compiled in the *Four Treasuries*]. Beijing chubanshe, 2000. |
| *XSKQS* | *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 [Continued complete library of the four treasuries]. Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002. |

# Introduction

In May 1956, Dingling,[1] the mausoleum of the Wanli emperor (r. 1573–1620; temple name Shenzong) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), was excavated as an experimental trial before the excavation team embarked on another more historically significant project, the Yongle emperor's (r. 1402–1424; temple name Taizong) Changling.[2] The excavation of Changling was ultimately never carried out due to insufficient techniques for preserving the unearthed artifacts. Dingling, the third largest of the mausoleums in the Mountains of Heavenly Longevity (Tianshoushan), northwest of Beijing, is therefore the sole Ming mausoleum to have been excavated to date.[3] The scientific excavation and cataloging of this large-scale project took two years to complete. Beginning in 1958, archaeological reports and scholarly research related to this unprecedented excavation have been published on an ongoing basis.[4]

1. The title of the Wanli emperor's mausoleum, Ding Mausoleum (Dingling), was chosen by the Taichang emperor (r. 1620; temple name Guangzong), who selected it from four suggestions provided by the grand secretaries. Ye Xianggao 葉向高 et al., *Ming Guangzong shilu* 明光宗實錄 [Veritable records of Ming Guangzong] (Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962), 4:101. According to the practice of awarding posthumous titles, the title "Ding" represents deep foresight, ensuring stability for the people, adhering to ancient practices, and correcting faults from previous reigns; see Guo Lianghan 郭良翰, *Ming shiji huibian* 明謚紀彙編 [Compilation of posthumous titles in the Ming dynasty], *SKQS*, vol. 651, 2:469–70.
2. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 et al., *Dingling* 定陵 [The imperial mausoleum of the Ming dynasty: Dingling] (Wenwu chubanshe, 1990), 1; and Fan Shuzhi 樊樹志, *Wanli zhuan* 萬曆傳 [Biography of the Wanli emperor] (Renmin chubanshe, 1995), 453. Yongle was the first Ming emperor to designate Beijing as the imperial capital, marking a significant shift in political geography from Nanjing to Beijing, and the first Ming emperor to be buried in the Mountains of Heavenly Longevity.
3. For studies of the Thirteen Ming Mausoleums in Beijing, see Hu Hansheng 胡漢生, *Ming shisanling* 明十三陵 [Thirteen Ming Mausoleums] (Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1998); and Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture: A History* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 240–42.
4. For the earliest reports, see Changling fajue weiyuanhui gongzuodui 長陵發掘委員會工作隊, "Dingling shijue jianbao" 定陵試掘簡報 [Summary report on the excavation of Dingling], *Kaogu,* no. 7 (1958): 36–37; and Changling fajue weiyuanhui gongzuodui 長陵發掘委員會工作隊, "Dingling shijue jianbao (xu)" 定陵試掘簡報（續）[Continuation of the summary report on the excavation of Dingling], *Kaogu*, no. 7 (1959): 358–68.



**Figure 0.1:** Spirit seat of the Wanli emperor in Dingling. Photo by Ka-yi Ho.




**Map 0.1:** Satellite view of eleven Ming mausoleums in Changping. Map Data: Google, ©2025 Airbus, CNES / Airbus, Landsat / Copernicus, Maxar Technologies, Map data ©2025.

Dingling supplies copious firsthand materials crucial for research on the Wanli reign. The discoveries from Dingling include Wanli's body, as well as that of Empress Xiaoduan (1564–1620), Wanli's principal consort, and that of Empress Dowager Xiaojing (1565–1611), the birth mother of the Taichang emperor (r. 1620; temple name Guangzong). Also found were the coffins of Wanli and the two empresses, made of high-quality *nanmu* and *songmu* timber, in addition to many of their personal belongings, including their garments, jewelry, and even Wanli's medicine pots, as well as spirit seats (*shenzuo*) (fig. 0.1) and ritual objects associated with the three tomb occupants.[5] The unearthed evidence offers insights ranging from the physiological condition of Wanli and his empresses to the objects they possessed during their lifetimes or were posthumously bestowed upon them. In addition, the makers' marks on the mausoleum structure and the excavated objects shed light on the institutions and personnel involved in building Dingling and producing the artifacts found in Dingling.

However, the excavation of Dingling also has a tragic aspect. Because of inadequate preservation conditions and technology, the objects excavated quickly deteriorated after being unearthed. In addition, during the Cultural Revolution (*wenhua dageming*, 1966–1976), Wanli was accused by the Revolutionary Committee (*geming weiyuanhui*) of being a leader of the landlord class, which motivated the deliberate destruction of his and his empresses' bodies and coffins.[6] In fact, damage to Dingling motivated by unfounded accusations had begun even earlier than the Cultural Revolution. During the late Ming and early Qing periods, Dingling's above-ground architectural structure received more severe damage than did the other twelve Ming mausoleums in the Mountains of Heavenly Longevity. Situated along the route of peasant rebel troops entering Beijing, Dingling—alongside the Zhengde emperor's (r. 1506–1521; temple name Wuzong) Kangling and the Longqing emperor's (r. 1567–1572; temple name Muzong) Zhaoling—had already suffered damage (map 0.1).[7] During the early Shunzhi reign (1644–1661), amid the Qing court's efforts to restore maintenance for and the performance of sacrificial rituals at all of the other Ming mausoleums, Dingling not only had its guards removed but also had its Sacrificial Hall (*Xiangdian*) destroyed under the directive of Dorgon (1612–1650), who believed that Wanli had demolished the mausoleums of his ancestors.[8]

5. For the comprehensive archaeological report, see Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo et al., *Dingling*.

6. Yang Shi 楊仕 and Yue Nan 岳南, *Fengxue Dingling—Dixia xuangong dongkai zhimi* 風雪定陵——地下玄宮洞開之謎 [Dingling amidst wind and snow: The mystery of the opening of the underground palace] (Xinshijie chubanshe, 1997), 336–45; and Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 458.

7. Ho Koon-piu 何冠彪, "Liukou, Qingren canhui Mingling chuanwen kaobian" 流寇、清人殘毀明陵傳聞考辨 [An investigation into the authenticity of the legendary destruction of the Ming tombs by the peasant rebels and the Manchus], *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 76, no. 1 (2005): 184.

8. Ho, "Liukou, Qingren canhui Mingling," 187–94; and Qinggui 慶桂 et al., *Da Qing Gaozong Chun Huangdi shilu* 大清高宗純皇帝實錄 [Veritable records of the Gaozong Chun emperor of the Great Qing] (Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 1226:4a–4b.

Since the Kangxi period (1662–1722), there has been a growing discourse attributing responsibility for the demise of the Ming dynasty to Wanli.[9] According to the *Official History of the Ming Dynasty* (*Mingshi*), Wanli's self-seclusion and his failure to distinguish virtuous officials from those of lesser character led to the escalation of the factional strife that plagued the later years of the Ming dynasty.[10] In his ground-breaking monograph of Wanli's reign, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*, Ray Huang affirms this long-held belief but also offers a defense for Wanli's actions. Huang argues that Wanli's physical separation from his officials was a form of retaliation against their opposition to his appointment of Zhu Changxun (1586–1641), the son of his favorite consort, Honored Consort Zheng (Zheng Guifei, n.d.–1630), as the heir apparent.[11] Furthermore, Huang argues that the extensive bureaucratic apparatus of the Ming government, along with the ceremonial nature of the Ming emperor's role, could continue operating even during the emperor's prolonged period of non-attendance. This also facilitated Wanli's passive-aggressive self-seclusion.

In contrast to negative moral judgments of Wanli's actions, recent scholarship has started to portray him from an utterly different perspective—as an engaged and decisive ruler.[12] In the context of military affairs, Wanli actively led the Ming troops in the Three Great Campaigns (*sandazheng*) in Ningxia, Korea, and Bozhou between 1592 and 1600, as well as in the Liaodong campaign in 1619.[13] The historian Kenneth M. Swope

9. Li Zhiting 李治亭, "Ming wangyu Shenzong bian" 明亡於神宗辨 [A refutation of the claim that the Ming dynasty collapsed under Shenzong], *Shixue jikan*, no. 2 (1998): 26–31; Ho Koon-piu 何冠彪, "Qingchao guanfang de 'Ming wangyu Shenzong' shuo" 清朝官方的「明亡於神宗」說 [The Qing dynasty's official narrative of "Shenzong caused the demise of the Ming dynasty"], *Guoli bianyiguan guankan* 28, no. 1 (1999): 255–72; and Yang Cheng-hsien 楊正顯, "'Mingwang zhi yin' de zhuilun yu yiding"「明亡之因」的追論與議定 [The debate and determination of the "cause of the demise of the Ming dynasty"], *Mingshi yanjiu*, no. 26 (June 2016): 53–54.

10. Zhang Tingyu 張廷玉 et al., *Mingshi* 明史 [Official history of the Ming dynasty] (Dingwen shuju, 1962), 21:294–95. Contemporary historians also began to adopt this interpretation. For example, Zhao Yi (1727–1814) reasoned that Wanli's interest in the mining enterprise had caused rebellions that led to the overthrow of the Ming dynasty; see Zhao Yi 趙翼, *Nian'ershi zhaji* 廿二史劄記 [Annotated notes on the twenty-two histories] (Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 35:796–97.

11. Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (Yale University Press, 1981), 75–129. For Ray Huang's views on the Wanli emperor, also see Ray Huang, "The Lung-ch'ing and Wan-li Reigns, 1567–1620," in *The Cambridge History of China,* Volume 7, *The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 1*, ed. Frederick W. Mote and Denis C. Twitchett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 514–17.

12. Fan, *Wanli zhuan*, 227–55; Kenneth M. Swope, "The Three Great Campaigns of the Wanli Emperor: Court, Military, and Society in Late Sixteenth-Century China" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2001); Kenneth M. Swope, "Bestowing the Double-Edged Sword: Wanli as Supreme Military Commander," in *Culture, Courtiers, and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644),* ed. David M. Robinson (Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 61–115; Kenneth M. Swope, *A Dragon's Head and a Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great Asian War, 1592–1598* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2009); and David M. Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 369–70.

13. For the Three Great Campaigns, see Mao Ruizheng 茅瑞徵, *Wanli sandazheng kao* 萬曆三大征考 [A study of the Three Great Campaigns of the Wanli emperor], *XSKQS*, vol. 436, 1–42; Zhuge Yuansheng 諸葛元聲, *Liangchao pingrang lu* 兩朝平攘錄 [Records of pacifying the realm over the two reigns], *XSKQS*, vol. 434, 151–232; and Gu Yingtai 谷應泰, *Mingshi jishi benmo* 明史紀事本末 [Topical history of the Ming dynasty] (Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 62:963–80; 63:981–91; 64:993–1003. For the battles in Ningxia and Bozhou, see Qu Jiusi 瞿九思, *Wanli wugong lu* 萬曆武功錄 [Records of the military campaigns of the Wanli reign], *XSKQS*, vol. 436, 1:134–51; 5:336–51; and Huang, "Lung-ch'ing and Wan-li Reigns," 563–74. For the Liaodong campaign in 1619, see Ray Huang, "The Liao-tung Campaign of 1619," *Oriens Extremus* 28, no. 1 (1981): 30–54.



**Figure 0.2:** Anonymous, "Shenzong of the Great Ming (Posthumously Xian Emperor)" (*Da Ming Shenzong Xian Huangdi*) from *Album of Emperors and Empresses of the Ming Dynasty*. Album leaf, ink and color on silk, 65.1 × 51.4 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0@www.npm.gov.tw.

highlights Wanli's hands-on involvement in these military endeavors. He states, "During the Three Great Campaigns, Wanli made appointments, issued commands, overruled the recommendations of censors and civil officials, and even expressed a desire to go to the battlefront in Ningxia himself."[14] While debate continues regarding the financial crisis that these expensive military engagements may have imposed on subsequent Ming reigns,[15] Wanli's role as a decision-maker has recently been recognized. This perspective resonates with the assessment of Wanli in *Veritable Records* (*Shilu*), which emphasizes his reclusion within the palace while wielding sole authority in governance.[16] As a result, he was honored with the temple name "Divine-Ancestor" (Shenzong), which signified that he was a deity beyond the perception of ordinary people (fig. 0.2).[17]

Drawing inspiration from Ray Huang's seminal study examining the nuanced reasons for Wanli's conduct and expanding on the claim of recent scholarship that Wanli was a

14. Swope, "Bestowing the Double-Edged Sword," 76.
15. Chen Hung-wen 陳宏文, "Ming Wanli sandazheng junfei zhi yanjiu" 明萬曆三大征軍費之研究 [The military expenditures of the Three Great Campaigns of the Wanli reign of the Ming dynasty] (master's thesis, National Chung Hsing University, 2021).
16. Gu Bingqian 顧秉謙 et al., *Ming Shenzong shilu* 明神宗實錄 [Veritable records of Ming Shenzong] (Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1962), 1:3.
17. Gu et al., *Ming Shenzong shilu,* 1:3. For the meaning of "*shen,*" also see Guo, *Ming shiji huibian*, 3:479.

proactive and strong-minded ruler, this book explores the intriguing ways in which Wanli counteracted the challenges to his rule by exercising his imperial prerogative to commission court projects including paintings, books, a mausoleum, and Buddhist sponsorships.

The Ming court did not leave behind a systematic inventory of its art collection, such as *Xuanhe Catalogs of Paintings, Calligraphy, and Antiquities* (*Xuanhe huapu*, *Xuanhe shupu*, and *Xuanhe bogu tulu*, respectively) of Song Huizong (r. 1100–1126) or the series of *Catalogs of Painting and Calligraphy* (*Shiqu baoji*, 1745; *Shiqu baoji xubian*, 1793; and *Shiqu baoji sanbian*, 1816) of the Qing court.[18] Neither did it keep a detailed record of the production process of court art, such as *Archives of Activities in the Workshops of the Imperial Household* (*Zaobanchu gezuo chengzuo huoji qingdang*, 1723–1911) of the Qing court.[19] In addition, Ming emperors, including Wanli, were known for distributing their confiscated painting and calligraphy collections to princes and officials for political or financial purposes.[20] Consequently, Ming emperors' interests regarding art collecting and art patronage remain more opaque than those of their Song and Qing counterparts.[21]

18. For the study of Song Huizong's collections, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (University of Washington Press, 2008). For studies of imperial collections of the Qing dynasty, see Gerald Holzwarth, "The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing," in *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson (Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 41–53; and Nicole T. C. Chiang, *Emperor Qianlong's Hidden Treasures: Reconsidering the Collection of the Qing Imperial Household* (Hong Kong University Press, 2019). For an overview of imperial collections in China, see Lothar Ledderose, "Some Observations on the Imperial Art Collection in China," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 43 (1978–1979): 33–46; and Wang Yao-t'ing 王耀庭, "Zhongguo huanggong de shuhua shoucang zongjie: Guoli gugong bowuyuan" 中國皇宮的書畫收藏總結：國立故宮博物院 [A summary of the calligraphy and painting collection in the Chinese imperial palace: National Palace Museum], *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, no. 247 (October 2003): 12–17.

19. Hou Hao-chih 侯皓之, "*Huoji dang* de youlai yu qizhong de manyu hanyi" 活計檔的由來與其中的滿語漢譯 [The origin of the *Archives of the Imperial Workshops* and its Chinese translation of the Manchu language], *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, no. 285 (December 2006): 74–84; Chi Jo-hsin 嵇若昕, "Cong *Huoji dang* kan Yong Qian liangchao de neiting qiwu yishu guwen" 從《活計檔》看雍乾兩朝的內廷器物藝術顧問 [Artistic advisors on court decorative arts under the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors: Insights from the *Archives of the Imperial Workshops*], *Dongwu lishi xuebao*, no. 16 (December 2006): 53–105; and Lin Li-na 林莉娜, "Cong *Huoji dang* kan Yongzheng chao de gongting huihua huodong" 從《活計檔》看雍正朝的宮廷繪畫活動 [Examining court painting activities during the Yongzheng reign from the *Archives of the Imperial Workshops*], *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, no. 319 (October 2009): 38–51.

20. For the Hongwu emperor bestowing calligraphy and paintings from the palace treasury on the Prince of Jin, Zhu Gang (1358–1397), and the Prince of Lu, Zhu Tan (1370–1390), see Chiang I-han 姜一涵, "Yuan neifu zhi shuhua shoucang (xia)" 元內府之書畫收藏（下）[Painting and calligraphy in the Yuan imperial collection (part II)], *Gugong jikan* 14, no. 3 (1979): 29–32; Richard M. Barnhart, "*Streams and Hills Under Fresh Snow* Attributed to Kao K'o-ming," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, ed. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Princeton University Press, 1991), 227–30; and Craig Clunas, *Screen of Kings: Royal Art and Power in Ming China* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 101–4. For the use of the imperial collection to compensate officials, see Huiping Pang, "Competition and Confiscation: Reconstructing the *Siyin* Seal Networks in Late-Ming China," *Artibus Asiae* 75, no. 2 (2015): 231–32, 245. Ledderose also used Wanli as an example in arguing for the correlation between the accumulation and distribution of imperial collections and the political prowess of a dynasty; see Ledderose, "Some Observations," 39.

21. For a study of the painting and calligraphy collection in the Ming court, see Zhao Jing 趙晶, "Mingdai gongting shuhua shoucang kaolüe" 明代宮廷書畫收藏考略 [A brief survey on the collection of painting and calligraphy in the Ming court], *Zhejiang daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexue ban)* 48, no. 3 (2018): 160–71.

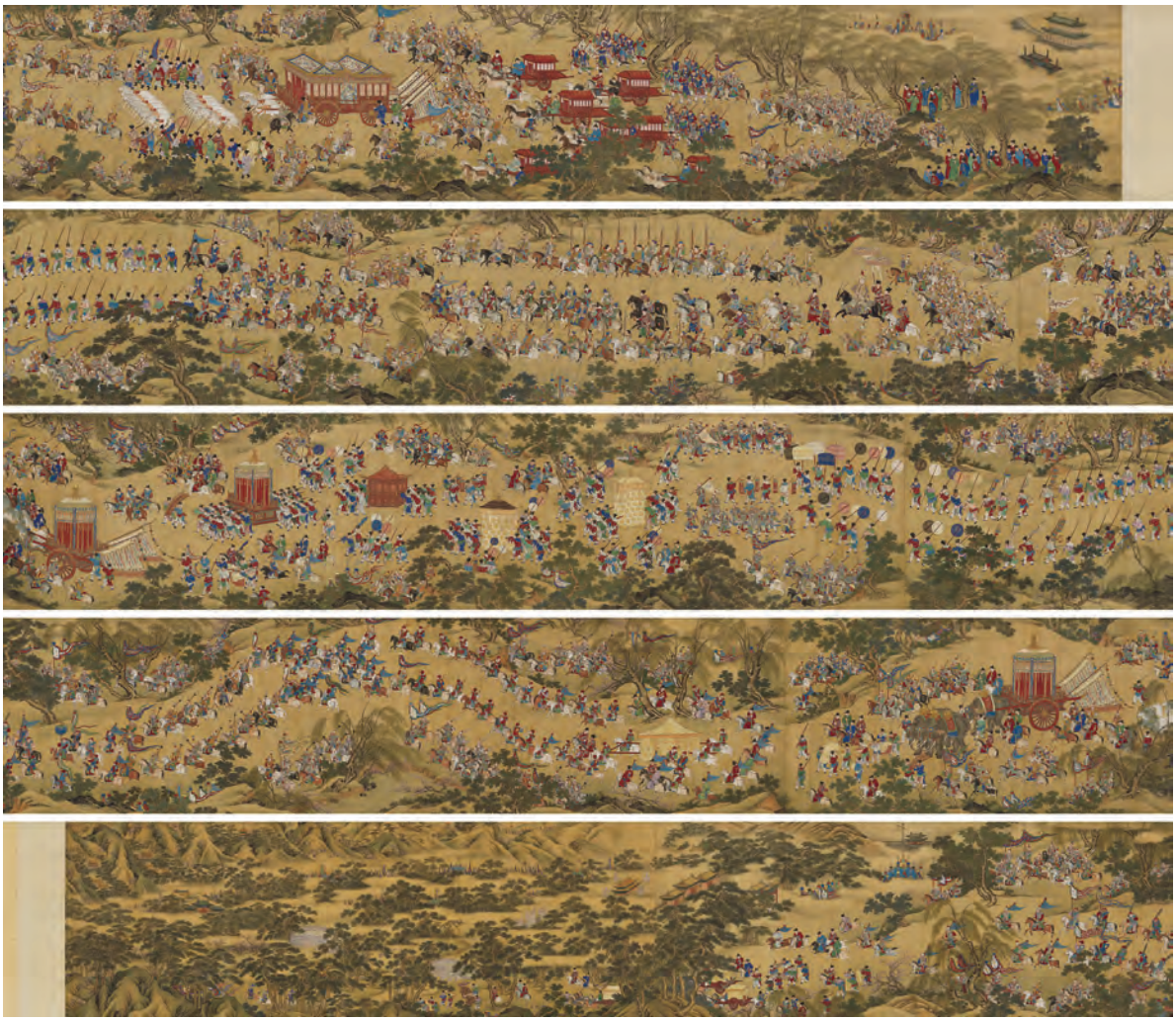


**Figure 0.3:** Anonymous, *Imperial Procession Departing from the Forbidden City*. Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 92.1 × 2601.3 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0@www.npm.gov.tw.

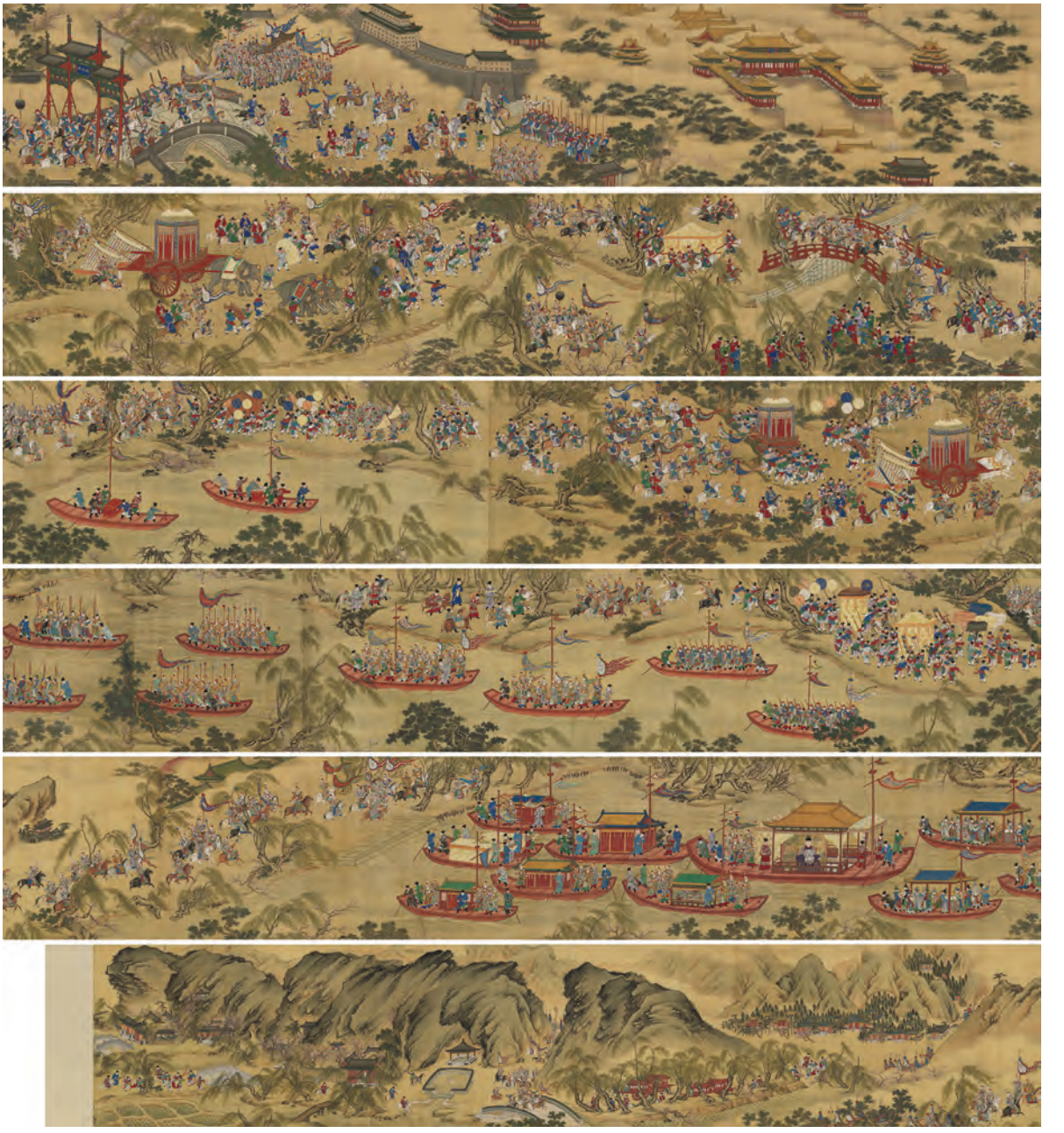


**Figure 0.4:** Anonymous, *Imperial Procession Returning to the Forbidden City*. Handscroll, ink and color on silk, 92.1 × 3003.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0@www.npm.gov.tw.

This is especially true for Wanli. *Imperial Procession Departing from the Forbidden City* (*Chujing tu*, fig. 0.3) and *Imperial Procession Returning to the Forbidden City* (*Rubi tu*, fig. 0.4) (hereafter collectively referred to as the *Imperial Processions*), now housed in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, represent a rare extant painting project that has recently been acknowledged for its association with Wanli.[22] The lack of accounts by Wanli or his courtiers and the absence of textual records concerning these splendidly produced paintings have led generations of scholars to misidentify the depicted emperor as either the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566; temple name Shizong) or the Zhengde emperor.[23] Fortunately, the debates about the causes and results of the events depicted were documented in *Imperial Diaries* (*Qijuzhu*) and *Veritable Records* of Wanli, leaving traces for us to explore the constant challenges to Wanli's emperorship from officials and how Wanli counteracted these challenges with tokens of his legitimacy as emperor. This book therefore endeavors to clarify the reasons for the commissioning of the *Imperial Processions*, an ambitious but lesser-known art project filled with symbols of Wanli's emperorship, and to discern the dynamic artistic activities in the imperial court and the visual traits of court art during Wanli's reign.

## A Paradoxical Reign

The *Imperial Processions* are magnificent in both their physical scale, as the two paintings measure approximately 26 m and 30 m in length, respectively, and in their meticulously depicted details of approximately two thousand figures, eleven hundred horses, twenty-one vehicles, twenty boats, and countless imperial emblems.[24] These paintings depict Wanli's journey back and forth between the Forbidden City and the Mountains of Heavenly Longevity in the intercalary second month of the eleventh year of his reign

22. Chu Hung 朱鴻, "*Mingren chujing rubi tu* benshi zhi yanjiu"「明人出警入蹕圖」本事之研究 [A study of the subject matter of *Imperial Processions Departing from and Returning to the Forbidden City of the Ming Dynasty*], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 22, no. 1 (2004): 183–213.

23. For a fuller discussion of the two paintings, see chapter 3. For studies identifying the *Imperial Processions* as paintings of the Jiajing court, see Qinggui 慶桂 et al., *Guochao gongshi xubian* 國朝宮史續編 [Sequel of the palace history of our dynasty] (Beijing guji chubanshe, 1994), 96:949; Hu Jing 胡敬, *Nanxundian tuxiang kao* 南薰殿圖像考 [A study of the imperial portraits in the Hall of Southern Fragrance], *XSKQS*, vol. 1082, 2:29–30; and Na Chih-liang 那志良, *Mingren chujing rubi tu* 明人出警入蹕圖 [Imperial processions departing from and returning to the Forbidden City of the Ming dynasty] (Guoli gugong bowuyuan, 1970), 1–7; Lin Li-na 林莉娜, "*Mingren chujing rubi tu* zhi zonghe yanjiu (shang)"「明人出警入蹕圖」之綜合研究(上) [A comprehensive study on *Imperial Processions Departing from and Returning to the Forbidden City of the Ming Dynasty* (part I)], *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, no. 127 (October 1993): 58; Wen C. Fong, "Imperial Portraiture of the Ming Dynasty," in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum*, ed. Wen C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; National Palace Museum, 1996), 332–33; Cheng-hua Wang, "Material Culture and Emperorship: The Shaping of Imperial Roles at the Court of Xuanzong (r. 1426–35)" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1998), 226; and Dora C. Y. Ching, "Icons of Rulership: Imperial Portraiture During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 199–207. For the identification of the emperor in the paintings as the Zhengde emperor, see Yinghe 英和 et al., *Qinding shiqu baoji sanbian* 欽定石渠寶笈三編 [Third compilation to the catalog of painting and calligraphy compiled according to the [Jiaqing] emperor's order], *XSKQS*, vol. 1081, *Nanxundian cang er*:416.

24. For the calculation of the numbers of figures and objects depicted in the paintings, see Hu, *Nanxundian tuxiang kao*, 29–30.

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# Performing Inaction

## The Courtly Arts of the Wanli Emperor, 1573–1620

"*Performing Inaction*, which explores the impact of the interests of the Wanli emperor and Empress Dowager Cisheng, is an important addition to the study of late Ming dynasty art. The focus on the intersectionality between mausoleums, paintings, and illustrated books provides an intriguing reexamination of court patronage at the time, as well as the purported role played by Wanli in the dissolution of the Ming dynasty."

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*Performing Inaction: The Courtly Arts of the Wanli Emperor, 1573–1620* is a fresh portrayal of the Wanli reign through the commissions of the Wanli emperor and his mother Empress Dowager Cisheng. Utilizing a trove of textual and visual evidence, Ka-yi Ho challenges long-standing narratives depicting Wanli as a neglectful ruler responsible for the demise of the Ming dynasty. Through a comprehensive examination of Wanli's and Cisheng's commissions—including paintings, books, mausoleums, and Buddhist sponsorships—Ho shows how their meticulous curation according to the long-standing customs of the Ming court revealed the ambitions and moral aspirations of the misunderstood Wanli and his highly esteemed mother. Unveiling vibrant yet rarely examined artistic activities within the Wanli court, *Performing Inaction* also endeavors to integrate the discourse of Wanli court art with the dynamic visual culture of late Ming China.

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