Introduction: The circulation of maps, money and cultural media

Shane McCausland

When and where is the 19th century? If it lies firmly in the past, as history, we are also in it here and now, as a collective of its historians from the conference *China's 1800s: Material and Visual Culture* held on 8 and 9 June 2023. As late moderns, we can certainly relate to and perhaps be inspired by the iconoclasm of late Qing China's creative actors and activists, their anti-Confucian and anti-canonical activism which has been so inspiring particularly for the female half of the audience, who have seen themselves represented in this display perhaps for the first time within a balanced history. Our having to be radical to make a properly balanced history become normal – how has it taken this long? In yet another way, the 19th century is in our future, or rather, *also* in our future since it is as much a part of our future as it is of the past and in the present. On the evidence of this meeting, it is certainly going to help launch the careers of some talented historians and art historians of the late Qing.

We have reached this point of a major exhibition on the late Qing in the British Museum not much more than a century after late Qing China hit a remarkable low point in the international value system for art. Consider that, shortly before he died here in London in 1908, art historian Ernest Fenollosa chose to remark about what he called 'Modern Chinese Art', that 'there has been no great art in China since early Ming' and that '[t]he long line of fall of Chinese art has not been exaggerated. The end may be seen to-day in any Chinese house or shop, where the most trivial brush scratches appear to deck the walls.'[1] What has changed fundamentally is our estimation of the quality, interest and value of late Qing art and its diverse makers and patrons. Collectively we have determined that the late Qing is worthy but that it is also complicated, even conflicted, being politically corrupted and yet resilient and innovative, artistically derivative and yet also creative, all at the same time.

The long 19th century will no doubt continue to be instrumentalised as the 'century of humiliation' or as marking the beginning of modernity at whatever date one wants to fetishise – 1919 (New Culture Movement), 1912 (new Republic), 1911 (fall of Qing), 1860 (Second Opium War), 1842 (First Opium War) and so on – but it can also be intrinsically a period of interest in itself.

I would contend that the 19th century we get will not emerge on its own or simply through revisionism, as valuable and necessary as that is as a precondition. What matters is what lies beyond, the collective vision for this history as its horizons come into view and its substance takes shape from the character, quality and interests of its researchers, among them the ones in this panel. Unruly, rigorous, playful, demotic, responsible, even decolonial – these words convey something of the texture of what we have seen and heard in these conference proceedings, in what is patently not a command economy for research.

The range of cultural media, of things that circulate, to be explored in this section moves the debate beyond even the usual realms of vernacular art or even visual culture, to include maps, books and book contents in the broadest sense, lithographs and photographs, and even money. The authors in this section continue the pattern of giving agency to things and to people who had the ability to condition their

world, as well as giving voice to the subaltern, in a new canon beyond the patriarchal hierarchy, in a way which is not so much idealising as making a new reality. Doing this kind of research well is the shaping of cosmopolitan culture. It is labour of value and quality and the finest riposte to binaries and other kinds of rancorous claim to exceptionalism.

A binary approach is not very helpful for the materials or issues examined in this section, which have circulation, exchange or currency as their leitmotif – each a kind of world in itself, a body of knowledge. Take cartography, the topic of Xue Zhang: here is the mapping of places, topographic features (including rivers, which are strategically significant for security, agriculture, transport, trade and legitimacy), but perhaps more importantly for the Qing, people, especially indigenous people in the borderlands which served to define Qing's in/out, inner/outer, us/them, core/periphery. Zhang investigates the role of map representations in the visual culture of palace memorials intended for secure communication between the imperium and Manchu military officials on campaign. Here, the illustrated appendices speak in unexpectedly candid ways to the social-geographical challenges of military control and policy responses, including the plantation and settlement of agricultural Han workers in former forests and among indigenous peoples in the borderlands of Xinjiang. . If Laura Hostetler's *Qing Colonial Enterprise* addressed this broad topic for the long 18th century, Zhang now looks at a case in the next and final dynastic phase. Here is the promise of discovering what high-level images of the fringes of empire were made and for whom, how they were used through fast, securitised channels at court, and what impact they had on late dynastic policy development.

With Emma Harrison's essay, we are in the cultural world of books, paper, script, writing and printing and their histories as material objects beheld by readers, containing knowledge and embodying knowledge in their forms. Harrison asks whether, across a diverse body of documents from the late Qing, there is evidence of a common human urge or desire to try to impose taxonomic and other order on knowledge and knowledge systems. Partly this would be as a practical way to amass and make sense of information but it would also seem to have been a way to shape culture, or even a nascent sense of national culture. As an undercurrent, the pace of change in daily life was palpably accelerating, exemplified by the appearance of photography from late 1830s, of new technologies like rifling in guns, steam shipping and railways from the mid-century, and by the century's end, electricity and gas lighting, all giving context to the advent of mass media and newsprint as the foundations of a new public opinion.

Bringing us to the world of photography, and how the technology meshed with Victorian representations of others, Amy Mathewson explores how China and its people were represented by British Victorians in the popular imagination, as seen in the practice of a pioneering woman photographer. While travelling around China, Isabella Bird had to manage the many dozens of men upon whom she depended, including the Western missionaries and the ordinary Chinese who sailed her boat, carried her and her possessions and translated for her. How did she, already in a privileged position as a Westerner but also a subaltern one as a woman in a patriarchal world, refer to these men and deal with their moods, portray them in her photographs (and later, her magic lantern shows) and get them to do what she wanted?

Helen Wang and Joe Cribb show us the money, portraying through a detailed survey of brassy coins, lambent bars of silver and all manner of printed notes, the complex and volatile history of money in circulation over preceding centuries and into the late Qing period. We take particular note of the Qing's having been drawn ineluctably into a wider early-modern global economy of silver and silver exchange, first through the Spanish trans-Pacific trade framework and later as the world's military powers coercively advanced their economic interests across their empires and spheres of influence. We learn also about the intersection of entrenched conservatism in Qing political thinking and its implications, with the shadow world of international counterfeiting of Qing money and with efforts to document and publish hard-won knowledge of the complex exchange mechanisms and monetary systems that prevailed as a result.

Since we are thinking in centuries, we might wonder what categories, in a century's time, future researchers will consider us to have omitted in this section on cultural objects in circulation. The time will surely come for stamps, light displays, postcards, *cartes de visite* and all manner of other things on the move.

Notes

1 Fenollosa 1912 (1921), vol. 2, 158.