

Tropical Feathers and the Manchu Body: The Maritime Reach of Qing Material Culture

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In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Qing empire witnessed the growth of a rich plumage culture stimulated by the Southeast Asian feather trade. The arrival of unprecedented tropical feathers, previously absent from the Manchus' rustic lifestyle, stimulated new courtly practices, behavioral norms, and forms of self-fashioning. This talk reveals the maritime turn in Qing material culture by placing the feathers of the green peacock and kingfisher within the contexts of ecological devastation, the long durée of maritime exchange, and the global passion for plumage since the sixteenth century. Specifically, it traces the trajectory of the peacock feather's distribution—from the Qing inner court to the empire's battlefields and coastal workshops—reconstructing the operation of this imperial honor from its inception. When the court was inundated with lustrous kingfisher feathers, Manchu imperial women invented a new type of feathered coronet (Manchu: *šoŝon i weren*) as a parallel to the Chinese phoenix crown. This rapid change captures a processual moment of the Manchus formulating their identity and their position in relation to others—specifically the Han Chinese—through their engagement with tropical feathers. With these examples in mind, this talk adopts the maritime historians' perspective and envisions a decentralized reading of the Manchus' participation in the seaborne network of the tropical world. While Manchu women shimmered with kingfisher blue from maritime Southeast Asia, the empire's body was clothed in peacock green, redolent of the sea.

Lianming Wang, Associate Professor, Department of Chinese and History, City University of Hong Kong. He received his Ph.D. (2014) in East Asian Art History from Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. Previously, he has held positions and fellowships at the University of Würzburg, Heidelberg University, the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, the University of Cambridge, and the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies. Wang received the Hengstberger Prize (2018), the Academy Prize (2021, from the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften), as well as an honorable mention for the 2021 ICAS Book Prize (German Language Edition) for his monograph, *Jesuitenerbe in Peking: Sakralbauten und transkulturelle Räume, 1600–1800* [Jesuit Legacy in Beijing: Sacred Buildings and Transcultural Spaces] (2020). His research interests include global encounters of art and architecture in early modernity, object and diplomatic gift exchanges, East Asian maritime exchange, and Qing garden and court art. Wang is finishing a Gerda Henkel Stiftung-sponsored book project (AZ 47/V/20) titled *The Hunter's New Horizons: Animals, Barbarians, and the Natural Fringes in the Qing Empire, 1644–1796*.

Wednesday, 9 September 2026

6:00 pm Drinks

6:30 pm Talk, in English

7:45 pm Dinner

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