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Parrots at the Chinese Imperial Court and Their Representation in Japan and Europe

Images and Descriptions of an Imperial Bird Book from 1761 in the Context of Cultural History

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Parrots were and are very popular with the public - their often colored feathers and their ability to speak make them stand out from their peers. So it is not surprising that not only rulers and potentates as well as wealthy citizens in Europe kept parrots, but also the Emperor of China, his highest officials and rich merchants owned and valued such birds. The emperors were particularly open to exotic tastes and set up arenas in their palaces, especially in the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan), where the Qianlong Emperor had a European-style aviary built.

The emperors' inclination went beyond just looking at the cages; they also wanted to know more, and so the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662–1722) commissioned a comprehensive bird handbook, illustrated by the first court painters, with 360 bird species in China and abroad, mostly painted from nature and described by experts.

Excerpts from it reached Japan, and the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735–1796), who was also an art enthusiast, had a new version made with a Manchurian text, his family's native language. These masterfully painted albums, influenced by Western painting techniques, also featured 21 species of parrots, which were apparently highly prized.

The present presentation reproduces the colored plates from the albums, which were only rediscovered around twenty years ago in the Palace Museums in Taipei and Beijing,

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together with the descriptions, and compares them with images from Japan, South and Southeast Asia and, above all, Europe, creating exciting results for the cultural history. It may come as a surprise that in some ornithological questions, Chinese bird experts were ahead of European ones.

The introduction deals with the history of these unique albums, an appendix tells the chronology of parrot knowledge and draws a parallel between Prince Eugene's parrot house in the Vienna Belvedere and the parrots in the Qianlong Emperor's aviaries.

The book has a detailed bibliography and an index. The book is written on a scholarly level, but you needn't be a scholar for making friends with the feathered imperial pets.

Albert Koenig, Ph.D. (Cornell University), associate professor, taught environmental engineering at the University of Hong Kong until his retirement and has since been affiliated as an adjunct professor. He is particularly interested in the transfer of Western water technology to China and other cultural-historical topics with a connection to East Asia.

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