

The Qing Court, Europe and Japan: Webbing the Production of *Album of Birds* and its Proliferation in Asia

Lai Yu-chih
Institute of Modern History
Academia Sinica

Abstract

Album of Birds, its full name being “After Jiang Tingxi’s *Album of Birds* by Yu Sheng and Zhang Weibang,” has a total of twelve volumes; the first four are located at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, and the remaining eight volumes are in the Beijing Palace Museum. Except of the last volume containing 32 leaves, each volume has thirty leaves, with image on the right and text on the left, which are written both in Chinese and Manchu. This work records as many as 361 kinds of birds. The initial compilation project began in 1750 and was not finished until 1774, taking totally eleven years. In 1774, the Qianlong emperor asked that “E-mo bird”—with its image and text originating in a European source—be added, becoming the 361st kind of bird in this collection.

This was an unprecedented production in terms of both quantity and scale. It not only demonstrates the new direction in natural studies during the Qianlong reign, but it also shows a crucial development in court painting style and the range of its usage. What is worth noting is that this particular *Album of Birds* is not the only *Album of Birds* produced at the Qing court. Judging from its full title, we know it was based on Jiang Tingxi’s *Album of Birds*. Moreover, if we browse the catalogue of the imperial art collection, *Precious Book Box of the Stone Drain* (*Shiqu baoji*), we find that there exist at least three sets of *Album of Birds*. The question naturally occurs as to the relationship between Qianlong’s *Album of Birds* and its predecessor. Why did Qianlong embark on such an ambitious project? What is this project’s main concern?

Although we do not have any other *Album of Birds* surviving, especially the ones before Qianlong’s, there are fortunately at least two versions of *Album of Birds* attributed to Yu Sheng and many Japanese artists’ copies of them surviving in Japan. Both were documented as being imported to Japan in 1737 by some Chinese merchant. A detailed study of these two Japanese versions and their relationship with the extant

Qianlong *Album of Birds*, will, I believe, on one hand, shed light on our understanding of the earlier versions of *Album of Birds* at the court and, most importantly, help re-evaluate the importance of Qianlong's making of *Album of Birds*. On the other hand, it will also reveal how the court workshop interacted with locals and trace how the *Album of Birds*, supposedly made at the court, could travel to Japan. Hopefully, this story will reveal how natural studies as a field was engaged actively in various kinds of dialogues and interactions, not only in knowledge production itself, but also in image-making, and not only between Asia and Europe, but also within Asia itself.

Key words: Album of Birds, Sino-European exchanges, natural studies at the Qing court