



BOOK REVIEWS

Painting Architecture: Jiehua in Yuan China, 1271–1368

By Leqi Yu. 216 pp. Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2022.

Aurelia Campbell

Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

Email: aurelia.campbell@bc.edu

Leqi Yu's *Painting Architecture: Jiehua in Yuan China, 1271–1368* is the first English-language monograph on Yuan Dynasty *jiehua* 界畫. *Jiehua* are traditionally understood as paintings that depict detailed tectonic structures, such as buildings or boats, which are often executed with rulers and other instruments to create precise lines. Yu defines *jiehua* as 'paintings that include architecture as a subject' (p. 1); however, as she explains in the introduction, *jiehua* was an evolving term whose meaning changed depending on the time and context. Yu provides a detailed analysis of the different possible meanings of the term *jiehua* based on close readings of its usage in historical dictionaries, painting catalogues, and contemporary scholarship (pp. 3–16). She concludes that, due to the multiplicity of meanings embodied in the term *jiehua*, it is impossible to translate it sufficiently into English (p. 16).

In the introduction, Yu also explains why she focuses on *jiehua* during the Yuan Dynasty. One reason is that scholarship on *jiehua* has tended to examine the Song (960–1279) and Qing periods (1644–1911), while studies of Yuan painting have mainly addressed orthodox literati paintings (p. 18). And yet, according to Yu, the roughly 100 Yuan *jiehua* that survive today reveal that painters during this time perfected the genre in their use of a 'unique modular system' and 'unsurpassable plain-drawing tradition' (p. 18). Of the many artists working in *jiehua* in the Yuan, Yu focuses on Xia Yong 夏永 (active mid-fourteenth century), whose significance has, according to Yu, been overlooked both by traditional literati artists and by scholars today (p. 20). Only a handful of Xia Yong's paintings, now scattered in museum collections across the globe, survive, though in some cases their attribution to Xia is questioned. One of the greatest strengths of this book is the impressive depth in which Yu analyzes these paintings as well as their accompanying inscriptions, which she uses to reconstruct Xia's life and career.

Yu outlines several reasons why she concludes that Xia Yong worked as a professional painter even though his use of poetic inscriptions aligns him more closely with 'amateur' literati artists (p. 36). In contrast to literati *jiehua* masters of the time, who employed larger and more labour-intensive hanging and hand-scroll formats, Xia's paintings were done on small fans and album leaves, which enabled them to be produced in great numbers and made them more affordable for customers (p. 129). Xia's paintings also exhibit characteristics of workshop practices, such as participation from a number of different hands: Xia painted the buildings, while specialists in calligraphy and landscapes executed other elements (p. 129). The 'successful teamwork' involved in the production of the paintings helped ensure high-quality products and also maximised profits by encouraging

efficiency (p. 129). Xia's status as a professional painter is furthermore implied by his omission from the *This is correct Precious Mirror of Painting* (*Tuhui baojian* 圖繪寶鑒, 1365)—a comprehensive catalogue of Yuan painters that reflects the elitist favouritism of 'amateur' over 'professional' artists prevalent at the time (p. 20).

Yu explains that the main audience of Xia Yong's *jiehua* were most likely educated clerks and lower-status literati living in the Jiangnan region (p. 131). Although these men were unable to get recruited into the Yuan government positions, they were cultured and educated, and enjoyed collecting paintings, especially those that were linked to the landscape traditions of Han-ruled dynasties (p. 131). According to Yu, Xia Yong, along with other professional painters in the Yuan, may have catered to the tastes of these men by incorporating the landscape styles of popular Jiangnan literati artists into his paintings (p. 108). He likely selected architectural subjects from Tang (618–907) and Song literature for the same reasons (p. 130). More specifically, Xia painted grand palaces associated with historical figures who were admired for their great talent and virtue, but who had been demoted or exiled (p. 133). Xia's clients may likewise have purchased these paintings, 'linked to unvalued talent', as a means to 'express personal grievances' against the Yuan state (p. 134).

Yu contrasts professional *jiehua* artists, as represented by Xia Yong, with artists who produced *jiehua* for the Mongol court, as represented by the celebrated painter Wang Zhenpeng. According to Yu, this second group of *jiehua* artists mainly constituted elite Jiangnan scholars seeking positions in the Yuan bureaucracy. Because the traditional literati route into government, the civil service examination, was temporarily suspended in the Yuan, literati painters often presented their *jiehua* to the throne in order to get noticed by the Mongol emperors and be hired as court artists (pp. 112–14). However, they often had to adapt their paintings, such as by using gold and colourful pigments, to suit their patrons' opulent taste (p. 100). The Mongol emperors were attracted to *jiehua* on account of its technical sophistication, especially paintings of famous historical buildings that could communicate the power or bolster the legitimacy of the Mongol empire (pp. 114–18). Paintings of ships were also valued for their ability to convey the Mongol rulers' 'war-winning maritime capability' (p. 117).

In analyzing the two predominant histories of *jiehua* during the Yuan Dynasty, Yu thus presents an important case study for how analogous works of art produced around the same time period could speak to different audiences and be used for different purposes. On the one hand, elite literati artists created *jiehua* for Mongol imperial patrons, who were drawn to the complex architecture represented within them, as well as to the messages they sent about the greatness of their empire. On the other hand, professional *jiehua* artists produced paintings for disaffected and low-status literati, who admired the paintings for their abilities to subtly critique the Yuan state, as well as to reflect these men's personal grievances about their own undervalued talent. *Jiehua* lent itself to political purposes on both sides of the spectrum because it often depicted historical buildings, whose mythologised histories could be manipulated to fit whichever messages the artists wanted to communicate.

While *Painting Architecture* is full of good information and intriguing ideas, it does not quite reach the author's stated goal of 'reconstructing a systematic Yuan history of *jiehua*' (p. 35). In part, this is on account of the rather unsystematic organisation of the book. The introduction investigates the history of the term *jiehua* and presents an overview of some of Xia Yong's representative works. The first chapter, 'Painting and architecture', attempts to determine whether Xia Yong's *jiehua* depicts actual architecture. The second chapter, 'Painting and painter', investigates the relationship between Xia Yong and Wang Zhenpeng. The third chapter, 'Painting and politics', examines *jiehua* artists working at the Mongol court. The conclusion returns to Xia Yong to discuss the audience of and

market for his paintings. The incoherence of the chapters combined with the overall brevity of the book suggests that its content may have been more effectively presented in the form of separate articles.

It is furthermore sometimes easy to lose sight of the overarching arguments of the book given the great attention Yu devotes to asking questions with seemingly obvious answers. For example, the first chapter aims to understand whether the buildings represented in Xia's paintings were modelled on existing architecture; however, judging by their fantastic structures, it is immediately clear that they only give the impression of real buildings by combining standard elements such as pillars, brackets sets, and gable roofs. Yu eventually reaches the same conclusion (she calls the combination of elements a 'modular system'), but far less effort could have been spent on developing this argument. Much of the second chapter likewise involves trying to determine whether Wang Zhenpeng may have served as Xia Yong's direct master, as some scholars have suggested on account of the stylistic similarities in the artists' architectural representations, particularly in their use of the 'plain drawing' (*baimiao* 白描) technique. Yu ultimately refutes this claim based on a lack of textual evidence but, in the meantime, the reader encounters much more than is probably necessary about Wang Zhenpeng's already well-studied paintings and artistic circles.

Painting Architecture provides an engaging and informative introduction to Yuan Dynasty *jiehua*. One of the greatest contributions of the book are the copious inscriptions and other historical records about painting that Yu has meticulously translated into English. These original texts, combined with the many paintings reproduced throughout the book, give readers a deep dive into the lives of artists working in the Yuan and into aspects of their artistic processes that are often absent in art historical scholarship. The book will be of interest to art historians wanting to understand what made *jiehua* produced during the period of Mongol rule so distinctive, as well to scholars interested in how politics shaped painting practices more generally.

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A History of Herat: from Chinggis Khan to Tamerlane

By Shivan Mahendrarajah. xvi, 379 pp. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

Stefan Kamola

Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria

Email: Stefan.Kamola@oeaw.ac.at

Our knowledge of medieval Iran suffers from major gaps. Because the most accessible sources are narrative chronicles written at royal courts, modern scholarship has traditionally focused on the political activities of imperial elites, at the expense of local and socio-economic histories. More recently, scholars have dug into new sources and read familiar sources in new ways to push back against this tradition. Shivan Mahendrarajah quotes two such efforts in his opening pages: the 'view from the edge' advocated by his M.A. mentor Richard Bulliet and a