"Heaven and Earth Grant Me This Life at Leisure": An Analytical Study of Yongzheng's Leisure Poetry

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Abstract

The Qing dynasty reached its climax during the reigns of three emperors: Kangxi (r. 1661–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723–1735), and Qianlong (r. 1736–1796). Much has been discussed about Yongzheng’s political strategies as his strict governance and political reform laid the foundation for the consolidation of the Qing empire. Yongzheng’s works in poetry, in contrast, has drawn little scholarly attention. In the preface of Yongdi Ji (Collection of Prince Yong’s mansion), a collection of poetry the young Yinzhen wrote before enthronement, Yongzheng repeatedly addressed himself as “the most leisure (xian 闲) person in the world.” In fact, the word xian appeared frequently both in titles and bodies of this group of poems. Historians have traditionally interpreted Prince Yinzhen’s pursuit of xian—simple pleasures of living in idleness and keeping oneself away from officialdom—as a strategy to disguise his political ambition and by so doing, distinguished himself from other potential heirs and eventually won the favor of his father—the Kangxi emperor. Through re-reading his leisure poetry, I argue that Yongzheng did enjoy his life as a prince at leisure, which allowed him, as he put it, “to chant for the morning flowers and evening moon.” Yongzheng is a person who knows his position. He fulfilled his obligations at different stages of the public and private life, which contributed to the seeming discrepancy of him as a prince and as an emperor.