4. The Return of the Elephants: A Social History of Elephant Watching in Early Modern China

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Abstract: This chapter examines the social history of watching elephants in late imperial China. Elephants were native to early China, but they had migrated to the southwestern margin of the country and Southeast Asia by the tenth century. After the Song dynasty, they were brought back to the capital as tributary animals or diplomatic gifts. They entered the public arena by, for example, being used in imperial parades. In the Ming dynasty, the washing of elephants in the city moat outside the imperial palace in early summer evolved into a captivating urban spectacle. This phenomenon instigated the creation of various artworks but also took on additional layers of social significance.

Keywords: Elephant, *xixiang tu* 洗象, xiangfang 象房

While multiple philosophical discourses in East Asia highlighted the concept of nature (*ziran*, *shizan*), the societies that gave rise to these ideas were predominantly human-centred. The significance of animals, their roles, functions, and symbolic meanings were largely defined by their interaction with human society. The elephants, the largest terrestrial creatures today, serve as an illustration of how animals have been treated: they were ascribed auspicious and noble meanings on one hand; yet, on the other, they were subjected to ruthless exploitation as useful resources. Informed by Wen Huanran's research, Mark Elvin directs the attention of Western readers towards the enduring conflict between elephants and humans throughout the history of China.[1] "Retreat" in the title of his book, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, captures the ill-fated destiny of wild elephants, which migrated to the southernmost reaches of the continent in the tenth century due to climate change and, more importantly, the expansion of human

1 Wen Huanran et al., *Zhongguo lishi shiqi zhiwu yu dongwu bianqian yanjiu* (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanse, 1995), pp. 186–215. Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 9–18.

Fan Lin and Doreen Mueller (eds), *Picturing Animals and Plants in Early Modern China and Japan. Innovation, Experiments, and Anxieties*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2025
DOI: 10.5117/9789048559091_CH04

activities. At the end of the first millennium, human interaction with elephants shifted to trained ones. In the coming centuries, these creatures were transported from Southeast Asia and southwest China, predominantly to the capitals in north China as diplomatic gifts as well as tributary animals.

Mainly used in court rituals, such as imperial processions and daily morning courts, elephants returned to the capitals as exotic, regal animals as an urban spectacle and generated new cultural meanings. Recent research by Cheng Minsheng, Liu Xiangxue, and Hui-Chun Yu has revealed interests in the provenance of these elephants and their institutional roles in imperial rituals from the Song (960-1279) to the Qing (1644–1911) periods.[2] Elephant performances came to be institutionalised in the Song dynasty in the sense that their acquisition, domestication, and training were made possible under recently installed policies and facilities. The underlying logic of keeping elephants for court rituals was maintained until the end of the Qing dynasty. Hui-Chun Yu argues that elephants were imperialised by the palace machine, which "provided the framework and incentive to acquire, possess, domesticate, train, transform, rank and integrate them into the political performances of the Qing monarchy."[3]

This chapter mainly focuses on a different side of the story of the 'return' of the elephants, that is, elephant watching. In social reality, elephants never existed on their own; they were often targets of urban gaze. Although elephant keeping and training were part of the imperial machine, the intended grandeur of their performance could only be realised while they were being watched by the populace. During this process, however, elephant watching gradually shifted away from the imperial vision and was woven into the fabric of urban life. This chapter first problematises the timeless symbolism of elephants as auspicious animals and then examines the connotations of elephants in cosmic-political rhetoric. The second part investigates how the image of elephants as 'political animals' was received among urbanites in the capitals. When the elephants on the training ground started to ignite public interest, the meaning of elephants was given an innovative twist towards an entertaining dimension. The third part examines a special phenomenon, elephant bathing. It examines why, although elephants, as performers of court rituals, had to be bathed regularly, their bathing only became an urban spectacle in the Ming (1368-1644). The last part of this chapter examines the relationship between elephant bathing as an urban event and as a theme of Buddhist paintings. From a visual culture

2 Liu Xiangxue, "Mingdai xunxiangwei kaolun," *Lishi yanjiu* (2011.1): 51–66; Cheng Minsheng, "Songdai daxiang de ziran yu shehui shengtai," *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* (2021:3): 56; Hui-Chun Yu, "When There Is Peace, There Are Elephants," in Marina Siebert, Chen Kai Jun, and Dorothy Ko, eds., *Making the Palace Machine Work: Mobilizing People, Objects, and Nature in the Qing Empire* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pp. 271–290.

3 Yu, "When There Is Peace, There Are Elephants," p. 272.

perspective, during the *longue durée* from the Song to the late Ming, when Chinese empires witnessed gradual urbanisation and vernacularisation of court practices, it was the watching and bathing of elephants in public spaces that removed elephants from the political arena and created multifaceted, interconnected meanings of their existence in popular culture in early modern China.

New Concepts: Wild vs. Tamed Elephants

The Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) saw a critical phase in the trajectory of the elephants' fate. In the first decade of the dynasty, wild elephants were spotted for the last time in central China and the mid-south (present-day Henan, Hubei, and Hunan provinces). This was the time when the Chinese climate started to cool down and urbanisation gained momentum. The temperature on the East Asian continent started to drop systematically from the eleventh century, prompting profound ecological changes as well as migration of humans and animals to the south.[4] In addition, expanded human settlements encroached into the habitat of elephants that usually travelled long distances in search of food.[5] Although elephants in early and medieval China were symbolically auspicious, wild elephants were treated in a different category. In many cases, their visits to human settlements were unwelcome. In 962, it was reported that an elephant wandered into the woods in Huangpi county (in Hubei province) and ruined people's crops. After it had travelled a surprisingly long distance, from An prefecture to Fu, Xiang (in Hubei province) and Tang (in Henan province) prefectures, it was finally captured at the end of 963 and executed in Nanyang (in Henan province), with its tusks and skin being removed and submitted to the court.[6] Alongside other entries about elephants, the above-mentioned anecdote is recorded as an abnormal phenomenon of wild animals in the 'Treatise on the Five Phases' (Wuxing zhi) in *Song History* (Song shi). Since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the 'Treatise on the Five Phases' had been the official interpretation of how all abnormal, mostly harmful phenomena could reflect the gains and losses of the rule of government and court. Therefore, in a political-cosmic reading of these events, most of these wild elephants, just like other wild animals such as tigers, symbolised destructive potency, posing threats to the proper order of the cosmos.

By contrast, trained elephants presented a different image. Just like other tributary animals, a trained elephant was a sign of submission to the authority of

4 Zhu Kezhen, *Tiandao yu renwen* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2006), pp. 77–94.

5 Wen Huanran, "Zaitan lishi shiqi de yexiang fenbu," *Zhongguo lishi shiqi zhiwu yu dongwu bianqian yanjiu*, pp. 205–206.

6 Tuotuo, *Song shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 66/1450.

the central court. In 961, three tributary animals, namely, a yellow parrot, a tamed elephant, and a white hare, appeared on the banner used for the Southern Suburban Sacrifice, the most significant court ritual that offered sacrifice to Heaven once every three years.[7] In the third month in 968, a tamed elephant was recorded as "having arrived in the capital by itself" (*zi zhi jingshi*). The officials immediately composed memorials in praise of this event.[8] In the sixth month, four musical episodes on themes of the elephant, a piece of auspicious wood, a white horse, and a white sparrow, were presented at the suburban sacrifice.[9] The eulogy for the episode on the elephant reads as follows,

> Magnificent, that tamed elephant!
> Submitting itself to the realm of the emperor,
> Its nature cultivated in the southern regions,
> It offers auspicious service to the central area.
> The emperor's benevolence called upon the giant beast to arrive,
> The emperor's virtue placated the distant and the wild.
> The elephant was moved by this resonance,
> And its miraculous transformation is boundless.[10]

Here, the tamed, tributary elephant was staged as an auspicious animal paying respect to far-reaching imperial power. In the early Northern Song, although the court repeatedly issued orders forbidding the capture of wild elephants in the Lingnan region (in present-day Guangdong and Guangxi), capturing wild elephants, which were deemed life-threatening, was still a common practice in central and mid-south China.[11] It was not until 967 that an Office for the Care of Elephants (Yangxiang suo) was established after a contingent event. In the eighth month of that year, ten days after a wild elephant meandered into the capital, the court allegedly sent five hundred soldiers to capture it and subsequently established the office.[12] By the end of the first decade of the Northern Song, tamed elephants serving as exotic animals in court activities had replaced the image of wild elephants in public memory.

Cheng Minsheng makes the shrewd observation that, in Tang China (618–906), elephants were kept together with horses and oxen in imperial stables and trained for

7 Zhao Sheng, *Chaoye leiyao* (Zhi bushuzhai edition, 1813), 1.3b.

8 Li Tao, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), vol. 1, 9/201.

9 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, Chengdu: Sichuan daxue, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2008), Zhiguan 23.3.

10 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, 134/3130.

11 It is worth noting that government measures of prohibiting the killing of wild elephants in the Lingnan region was made exactly because this was happening on the ground. Xu Song, "Daojia xiang," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, in Yufu 3.15. Also See Cheng Mingsheng, "Songdai daxiang de ziran yu shehui shengtai."

12 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3.

musical performances but were not considered a distinct category.[13] It was only during the Song that elephant domestication and training were systematically carried out. The above-mentioned Office for the Care of Elephants was built in Yujin Garden, the imperial garden outside Nanxun palace gate in the capital. The office soon received more elephants within and outside the Song empire.[14] Eventually, the number of the elephants reached forty-five. Like soldiers in processions, elephants were also trained to follow orders, and banners were made for this purpose. A piece of land measuring fifteen *qing* (about one square kilometre) in Yujin Garden provided hay to feed the elephants.[15] Given the fact that an elephant would consume 150 kilograms of food and forty litres of water a day, it was impossible for the city to keep this number of elephants at this venue throughout the year. Therefore, to herd the animals from the fourth to the ninth month, a second elephant stable was built one hundred kilometres away from the capital, near Bian River in Ningling county (in Henan province).[16]

The practice of using elephants in court rituals continued in later dynasties. After the Yuan court (1279–1368) established itself in Beijing, it continued with the practice of keeping elephants. The first elephant stable was built to the north of Haizi Bridge, a popular location connecting the Grand Canal and the lake of Jishuitan. Scholar Xiong Mengxiang (fourteenth century) witnessed the arrival of an elephant to the stable on the first day of the first month in 1297. This elephant was said to be taller than normal elephants and moved as fast as a horse. Given the location of the bridge and the date, it is possible that the event was planned to create a festive effect. In the late Yuan, the elephant stables were moved to Qincheng, a Beijing suburb, where hot springs were available for their bathing.[17]

In the Ming dynasty, a considerable number of elephants were used in the morning court service and imperial procession. In addition to Guangdong and Guangxi, trained elephants were also imported from Yunnan and other tributary states including Annam, Champa, Chenla, Siam, and Myanmar.[18] The increase in the number of

13 Cheng Mingsheng, "Songdai daxiang de ziran yu shehui shengtai," p. 56, endnote 3. Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 7/140, 8/166, 28/1058; Li Longji comp., *Tang liu tian*, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), vol. 595, 17.11b-12a (171). Cheng Minsheng, "Songdai daxiang de ziran yu shehui shengtai," *Zhongyuan wenhua yanjiu* (2021:3): 56.

14 Take the records in the "Fanyi" section in *Song Huiyao jigao* as an example, the Song court received elephants from Guangxi in 1051, 1055 (5.61, 7.29), Wuyue (907-978) in 976 (7.6), Đại Việt (present-day northern Vietnam) in 998, 1001, 1046–1047, 1055–1056, 1063, 1146, 1156, 1161, 1174 (4.25, 4.33–34, 4.44, 4.47, 7.13–7.14, 7.27, 7.30,7.46, 7.47, 7.49, 4.55), Champa (present-day central and southern Vietnam) in 983, 1042, 1061 (4.64, 4.70–71, 7.26, 7.30), Chenla (present-day Cambodia) in 1155 (7.47), Lavo (present-day Thailand) in 1155 (7.47).

15 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3.

16 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3.

17 Xiong Mengxiang, *Xi jin zhi jiyi* (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1983), pp. 212, 232.

18 Huang Yong, "Mingdai jingshi chaoxiang laiyuan kao," *Gugong xuekan* (2008): 159–171. Liu Xiangxue, "Mingdai xunxiangwei kaolun," *Lishi yanjiu* (2011.1): 58.

elephants was accompanied by further regulations concerning elephant keeping. During the Hongwu Era (1368–1398), an Elephant Training Guard (Xunxiang wei) was established in Siming prefecture and later moved to Hengzhou prefecture (both in Guangxi).[19] As it functioned on the frontier of the empire, its purpose was not only to procure elephants but also to guard the territory. The so-called guard (*wei*) was the main military operation unit in the Ming dynasty. A guard usually comprised of 5,600 soldiers under the command of a guard commander (*zhihui shi*).[20] Other peripheral regions likewise presented elephants. In the year 1388 alone, Guangdong presented 123 elephants;[21] after the conquest of the Luchuan headmen (*tusi*), thirty-seven elephants were presented to the capital, and the captives were kept as mahouts at the Elephant Training Guard;[22] Yunnan presented five hundred elephants and three hundred mahouts;[23] Siam presented thirty elephants;[24] Chenla presented twenty-eight elephants as well as thirty-four mahouts;[25] Taiping and Siming prefectures (in Guangxi province) also presented unknown number of elephants.[26]

During the Ming, the captured elephants were first transported to the Elephant Training Office (Xunxiang suo). This was a unit of the Embroidered-Uniform Guard (Jinyi wei), where mahouts trained elephants for the purpose of court audiences, drawing carriages, and carrying treasures.[27] After the Ming capital was moved to Beijing, elephants were usually kept at the elephant stable (xiangfang), which was located at the Shooting Battalion (She suo) on western Chang'an Street.[28] Elephant stables were first built on the old Yuan dynasty site near Haizi Bridge and in 1495 new stables were built near Xuanwu Gate of the inner city (Figure 4.1a).[29]

Elephant Watching

From the Northern Song onwards, a certain number of elephants were always kept in capitals, where they could easily be accessible for ritual performance. *Records of the Prosperity and Scenic Sites* (Fansheng lu) by the Elder from the West Lake

19 Liu Xiangxue, "Mingdai xunxiangwei kaolun," 54.

20 Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 53–54.

21 *Ming shilu* (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, 1963), Taizu/188/2816-17.

22 *Ming shilu*, Taizu/189/2860, Taizu/192/2886.

23 *Ming shilu*, Taizu/190/2868.

24 *Ming shilu*, Taizu/193/2893.

25 *Ming shilu*, Taizu/193/2904.

26 *Ming shilu*, Taizu/193/2905.

27 Zhang Tingyu, *Ming shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 76/1862.

28 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), p. 607.

29 Shen Shixing, *Da Ming huidian* (Taipei: Guofeng chubanshe, 1963), 187/2560.2.

(Xihu laoren) of the Southern Song (1127-1279) states that elephants were part of the daily morning court ritual.

> Foreign countries sent six elephants and two camels. Among them is a female elephant, which is called Little Girl Number Three. An elephant park was built outside the gate of Jian Bridge to settle them. Every day, they went with palace officials to the front of the palace to make a greeting, and returned after the court audience was finished. In front of them, there were teams of drum and gong players and thirty to forty people holding flags in multiple colours; on the back of each elephant was a person wearing a hat, holding a hook, and donning a purple gown. All the retinues wore robes and hats. On their way, they struck drums and gongs to guide the elephants back to the elephant park.[30]

It is doubtful if the elephants' procession was practised every day, as the morning court audience usually took place once every five days in the early hours of the morning.[31] Nonetheless, it is likely that elephant processions were regularly rehearsed and thus drew public attention. As an flaneur-like observer of urban life, the author, the so-called Elder from the West Lake, probably had ample opportunity to see these scenes.

Although reserved for court rituals, elephant watching became a source of entertainment, often taking place in imperial parks. In 1012, the court held a banquet at Yujing Garden, where exotic tributary animals including elephants and lions were on view.[32] In addition, these elephants were also considered a must-see especially for envoys from the northern countries. During the Northern Song, the viewing regularly took place at Yujin Garden. During the Southern Song, due to the limited space in the capital, the viewing took place at the camel stable, which also kept elephants. In 1145, when the camel stable was not available, elephants were brought to the hostel of the envoys.[33] The commoners would also have access to satisfy their curiosity. Serving staff tended the gardens; farmers cultivated crops and fruit trees. Moreover, city dwellers could visit imperial parks on special occasions or by paying the gatekeepers.[34] It was in this way that the Japanese monk Jōjin (1011–1081) was given a guided tour at the elephant stable in Ningling. Jōjin was shown seven elephants. Each elephant first bent its hind legs, then crouched and lowered its head, and finally made a trumpeting sound as instructed. After each step of this performance, the elephant keeper asked Jōjin to pay fifty coins, amounting to 350 coins for the whole tour. The performance of the elephants, as described by Jōjin, closely resembled their

30 Xihu laoren, *Fasheng lu*, in *Quansong biji* (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2017), vol. 8.5, p. 324.
31 Zhao Sheng, *Chaoye leiyao*, 1b-2a.
32 Xu Song, *Song huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 36.45.
33 Xu Song, *Song huiyao jigao*, Fangyu 3.17.
34 Wang Deli, "Songdai de Yujinyuan," *Huanghe keji daxue xuebao* 14 (2012.5): 76–80.

performance at the court ceremony. In 1073, an edict titled *Official Instructions for the Elephant Performance at the Southern Suburban Sacrifice* was issued summoning all seven elephants from Ningling to the capital to participate in the ritual.[35] The seven elephants Jōjin saw may have been the same ones that took part in the Southern Suburban Sacrifice. Significantly, the keeper's request for cash makes it clear that keeping elephants for the purpose of court ceremonies was turning into a commercial, monetised performance and a spectacle accessible to the wider public.

In the capital, elephants were undoubtedly a genuine urban spectacle. Elephants had been used in imperial parades as early as the Han dynasty. In the imperial inspection tour to the state shrines in Ganquan (in Shaanxi province) and Fenyin (in Shanxi province), an elephant-drawn carriage accompanied by thirteen musicians formed an impressive feature of the retinue of the emperor.[36] Elephants were used as draught animals, like horses. As mentioned above, seven elephants were summoned to the capital, but usually only six were used in the inspection tour; the seventh was probably a substitute.[37] Trained elephants usually formed the head of the procession (*yinjia*) in court-centred public activities, especially imperial processions.[38] In 968, six elephants were used in the Southern Suburban Sacrifice, and this number was maintained throughout the Northern Song dynasty.[39] According to *Song History*, in the imperial procession, each elephant was adorned with a wooden lotus seat on its back, a purple embroidered harness on its head, and brass bells and apricot leaf shaped plates on its chest and hips. It was also decorated with a crimson-coloured whisk made of yak's tail. Four soldiers guided the elephant, which carried a mahout from Nanyue (present-day Northern Vietnam) on its back. All soldiers wore patterned headwraps, tight red embroidered clothing, and silver belts.[40]

Although the *Illustration of the Imperial Guard of Honor* (Dajia lubu tu) does not include the elephants, the inscriptions accompanying this long hand scroll state that six elephants are placed at the head of the procession for events such as the Southern Suburban Sacrifice, followed by 5,481 officials and soldiers, seventy-one vehicles, 2,873 horses, two ponies, thirty-six oxen, 4,330 musical instruments, and ritual weaponry. Such an arrangement had practical reasons; with their massive weight and size they could test the span and supporting power of bridges. The procession for the Southern Suburban Sacrifice usually started on the winter solstice, considered to be the right

35 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3.

36 Liu Xin, *Xijing zaji* (Baojingtang congshu edition, Beijing: Zhili shuju, 1923), 2.11a–b.

37 Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3.

38 Cheng Minsheng, "Songdai daxiang de ziran yu shehui shengtai": 1–14. Edward Schafer also discusses war elephants, see Schafer, *War Elephants in Ancient and Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 1957).

39 Ouyang Xiu comp., *Taichang yinge li*, in *Congshu jicheng chubian* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), vol. 1044, 28/174.

40 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, 148/3461. Also Xu Song, "Yangxiang suo," in *Song Huiyao jigao*, Zhiguan 23.3, 23.9.

beginning of a new year. Mounted by mahouts from Nanyue, the elephants were made to draw large carts carrying musicians. They were placed right after the ritual guards and the palace guards. The ritual guards held the placard of the Minister of Rites and played compositions known as *The Ode to Inner Solemnity* (Zhongyan) and *The Ode to Outer Affairs* (Waiban); they were followed by the palace guards on horses in armour and rounds of regalia.[41] Taking place once every three years, the procession must have ignited the curiosity of the public. Even before this official 'performance,' the two months of rehearsals could have drawn more spectators.

> In years of great ritual, a rehearsal of carts and elephants started two months in advance. They marched from Xuande Gate to the outside of Nanxun Gate, and then returned. [...] There were seven elephants. In front of them dozens of vermilion flags and dozens of brass gongs and hand-drums were arrayed. The ritual started with two strikes of gongs, followed by three strikes of drums. Flag carriers wore purple garments and hats. Each elephant was shepherded by a mahout wearing a headwrap with crossed hanging bands and a purple gown. The mahout rode on the neck of the elephant, carrying a short-handled brass hook with a sharp blade. He hit the elephant when it disobeyed. When the elephants arrived in front of Xuande Gate, they turned around a few times to stand in line and were made to salute north. They were also capable of making greetings. Every day, the households related to the royal families and the households of noble origins called the elephants to their own residences to watch them, gifting them coloured silk. The Imperial Street was crowded with joyful visitors and observers. Little elephants made from rammed earth or wood powder as well as paper images of them were sold. People who had seen this brought them home as souvenirs.[42]

One gets the impression that the training of the elephants was more attractive than the actual performance. The elite and the commoners in the Song capital were equally enthusiastic about watching the rehearsals. The path from the Nanxun Gate to the Xuande Gate connected the inner palace and the liveliest marketplace in the capital. During the two months before the inspection tour, souvenirs turned the elephants into commodities and collectibles. The rehearsal of elephant processions continued in Lin'an (Hangzhou, in Zhejiang), the capital of the Southern Song, but only two elephants were used in the same ritual. They were displayed in front

41 Zhongguo guojia bowuguan ed., *Zhongguo guojia bowuguan guancang wenwu yanjiu congshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), p. 15. For an earlier illustration of the procession, see Patricia Ebrey, "Taking Out the Grand Carriage: Imperial Spectacle and the Visual Culture of Northern Song Kaifeng," *Asia Major* 12.1 (1999): 33–65.

42 Meng Yuanlao, *Dongjing meng Hua lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 10/883. For the translation of the full passage, see Ebrey, "Taking Out the Grand Carriage," 38.

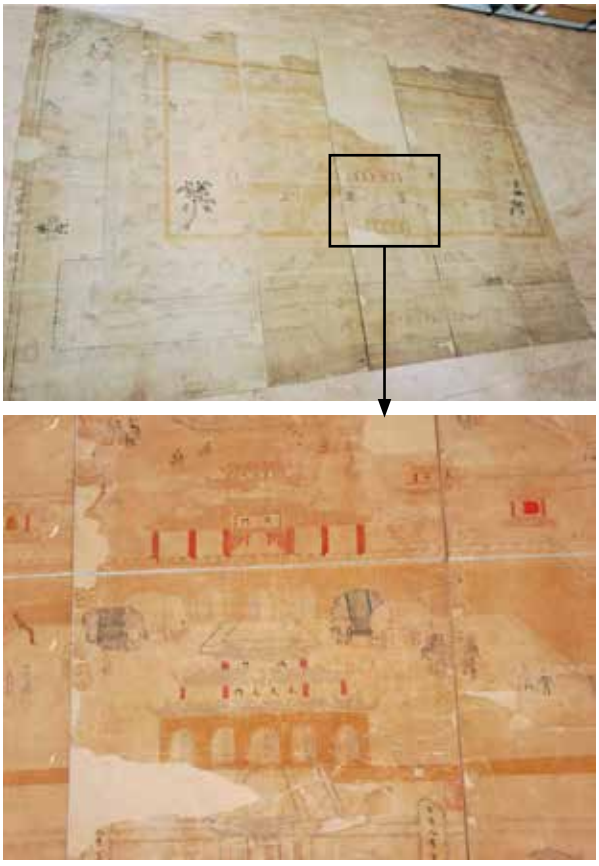

Figure 4.1: *Map of the Capital of the Ming Dynasty*. 217 cm x 160 cm. Colours on paper. Ming dynasty. The Courtesy of Leiden University Libraries. (a) detail of the elephant stable; (b) detail of Wu Gate.

of the Ancestral Temple and the Gate of Grandeur and Uprightness. Like in the Northern Song, spectators were more interested in the rehearsing of the elephants than in the solemn ceremony. Similarly, travellers to Lin'an (*waijing ren*) who had seen them returned to their homes outside Lin'an with figurines and paintings of elephants.[43] To use Susan Stewart's words, these souvenirs offered "the possibility of incorporation," in the sense that they moved the idea and image of elephants from the market space into the wider world and created an aura of urbanity.[44]

Grand processions continued during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Kublai Khan (1260–1294) was known to travel annually in a carriage drawn by four elephants between two capitals, Xanadu (in Inner Mongolia) and Dadu.[45] The distance between the two capitals is about 450 kilometres. In a set of paintings depicting Emperor

43 Wu Zimu, *Mengliang lu* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1981), p. 31.

44 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 132–151.

45 Song Lian, *Yuan shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 79/1974, 167/3925–3926.

Figure 4.2: Anonymous, *Inspection Tour* (*Chujing tu*), detail. Colours on silk. 300 cm x 50 cm. Ming dynasty. Courtesy of The Palace Museum, Taipei.

Shenzong's (r. 1572-1620) inspection tour, we also see four elephants drawing a carriage, each of them carrying a vase on its back (Figure 4.2). As the word, 'vase' (*ping*) puns with 'peace,' and 'elephant' also means 'sign' or 'phenomenon,' the image of placing a vase on an elephant was understood as a 'sign of peace.'[46] Interestingly, the image features two attendants carrying a bridge on their shoulders, symbolising the elephants' role as the vanguard of the parade.

Elephants Bathing as an Urban Spectacle

As mentioned above, the elephant stable was built near Xuanwu Gate in the inner city close to the lively commercial neighbourhood in the southern part of Beijing (Figure 4.1a).[47] In the late Ming, when grand ceremonies were held at Fengtian Palace

46 Lin Wanxuan, "Zhizuo taiping – Qingdai gongting 'Taiping youxiang' chenshe," *Gugong wenwu yuekan* 457 (2021.4): 62–74.

47 Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

on occasions such as the birthday of the emperor, New Year's Day, and the Winter Solstice, about thirty elephants were used: one carrying a treasure box, two drawing the jade carriage and two the grand carriage; four in front of Fengtian Gate, four in front of each of the side gates to the east and west, six at Wu Gate, four at Duan Gate, four at Chengtian Gate, and four on both sides of Chang'an Gate.[48] In quite a few surviving maps of the Ming capital, six elephants are the only type of animal shown (Figure 4.1b). At a regular morning court service, six elephants were used in front of Wu Gate.[49] This is depicted in a genre of figure painting typically entitled *Painting of Waiting for the Morning Court Hour* (Dailou tu). In the version housed in Nanjing Museum, six elephants are already standing in front of the closed Wu Gate; the official in the foreground is waiting for the gate to be opened (Figure 4.3). Images of six elephants standing between Duan and Wu Gates not only point to the morning court service, but also signify the authority of the palace.

Also in the late Ming, public interest had shifted from merely watching elephants to watching elephants bathing. Water is essential for elephants. They need to drink a large amount of water and regularly bathe in a river or lake.[50] Moreover, domesticated elephants, especially those used in rituals, had to be bathed and cleaned properly. During the Yuan dynasty, the elephants' first stable, as mentioned above, was close to the Grand Canal and their second stable in Qincheng had direct access to hot springs in winter.

Elephant bathing at Xuanwu Gate was a truly popular urban spectacle in the Ming dynasty. Written records often associate elephant bathing with the sixth day of the sixth month. That day had become significant for the Song court as the day on which Emperor Zhenzhong (r. 997–1022) was allegedly bequeathed a heavenly scripture in 1011.[51] However, although the court and Daoist temples held annual rituals to commemorate this day, it was not celebrated as a festival among commoners. During the Ming, the day was stripped of its religious meaning and acquired a larger impact on people's daily lives. It was turned into a special day on which both court and commoners exposed stored goods to the air or cleaned things with water. Elephant bathing was thus incorporated into the day's practices, which added to the festive character of the custom. According to an entry titled

48 Shen Shixing, *Da Ming huidian*, 228/3008.2. For more information about the use of elephants in Ming court rituals, see Liu Xiangxue, "Mingdai xunxiang wei kaolun," *Lishi yanjiu* (2011.1): 63. Only twenty-nine elephants are listed here; the one left was probably used as a substitute.

49 Occasionally, four elephants are represented. For more versions of these theme, see Huang Xiaofeng, "Zijingcheng de liming – Wanming de dijing jingguan yu guanliao xiaoxiang," in *Yu zaowu you: Wanming yishushi yanjiu* (*er*), edited by Li Anyuan (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2017), pp. 7–52.

50 Thomas Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 26.

51 Tuotuo, *Song shi*, 8/147.

'The Sixth day of the Sixth Month' in *Collected Accounts Gathered in the Country during the Wanli Period* (Wanli yehuo bian),

> The sixth day of the sixth month was originally not a proper festival, but only a day when the Archive of the Imperial Household Department aired boxes of veritable records and imperially composed proses of all past emperors. Now it happens every year. As for the women who followed the custom of the time, if they washed their hair on this day, the hair never gets greasy or dirty. As for cats and dogs, they would also be bathed in the river. Elephants would also be bathed outside of the city on this day, and only once every year. They would copulate in the water, with the female facing up and the male facing down like human beings.[52]

Similar accounts may be found in several poems, prose texts, and notebooks (*biji*) of the late Ming dynasty.[53] However, the copulation mentioned above might not have happened at all, as domesticated elephants are almost never bred.[54] However, the author added a layer of fantasy to the sensation of the exoticness of the scene. In the late Ming notebook of urban life in Beijing, *An Overview of Sights and Affairs of the Imperial Capital* (Dijing jingwu lue) added that chariots and clothing were aired in the palace, and books and cotton garments of commoners were also put under the sun. It also documented how elephants were bathed:

> With flags and drums, the Embroidered-Uniform Guard Unit led the elephants out of Shuncheng Gate (aka Xuanwu Gate). After the bathing sluice had been opened, the elephants entered the river one by one, like the collapse of a black mountain. After a while, they returned with their heads raised. Their trunks sucked and sprayed water, powerful like a dragon. The elephant mahouts held the reins and sat on their backs; one could see their bound-up hair from time to time. On each bank, tens of thousands of people were watching.[55]

The above two quotations from *Collected Accounts Gathered in the Country during the Wanli Period* and *An Overview of Sights and Affairs of the Imperial Capital* offer us a glimpse to understand how the day gained a festive dimension. Since the sixth day of the sixth month was considered the hottest day of the year, sun and water on that day were believed to be particularly efficient for cleaning and washing.

52 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, pp. 619-620.

53 Liu Dong and Yu Yizheng, *Dijing jingwu lue* (Beijing: Beijng guji chubanshe, 1983), p. 78. Xie Jie and Shen Yingwen, *Wanli Shuntian fu zhi* (1593 edition), 1/15b.

54 Thomas Thautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 60.

55 Liu Dong and Yu Yizheng, *Dijing jingwu lue*, p. 69.

Since the city moats where the elephant bathing took place were connected to Lake Taiye to the north, water was easily accessible. The Xuanwu Gate was located in the south of the inner city, the concentrated neighbourhood of commoners. In addition to elephants, horses from the imperial stables were also bathed in rivers and lakes.[56] However, it was the bathing of elephants that turned the custom into a spectacle. As mentioned above, the elephants must have been regularly cleaned for court processions, but their bathing on this special day was a different issue. It was intended to be a secular, non-political event. Initiated by the Elephant Training Guard, a unit of Embroidered-Uniform Guard, it only became an urban event because of the vast public interest. In the city moats, the elephants ceased to be the embodiment of political rituals but were brought into a vernacular, urban context. In comparison with elephants in court rituals that were often associated with the palace gates and imperial processions, elephants that were bathed in the city moats and watched by enthusiastic urbanites were clearly the focus of an urban spectacle.

Elephant Bathing in Visual Images

The theme of elephant bathing in art historical narratives first appears to have connections with India. Unlike in medieval China, elephants in ancient India were trained to serve the court and played a significant role in economic and religious life.[57] The *Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings* (Xuanhe huapu), completed in 1120 under the auspices of Emperor Huizong (r. 1100–1126), lists four paintings titled *Scrubbing an Elephant* (Saoxiang tu) by Zhang Sengyou (479–?), Yan Liben (601–673), Sun Wei (active in the late ninth century), and Sun Zhiwei (tenth to eleventh century).[58] None of these paintings have survived, but in the late Southern Song, Zhou Mi (1232–1308), a renowned scholar and connoisseur, had the opportunity to see the painting attributed to Yan Liben. According to Zhou, Yan drew a foreign monk wetting a broom to wash a black elephant and an attendant standing next to him scrubbing the elephant with a cloth. Although in the *Xuanhe Catalogue*, all four paintings are listed in the category of 'Daoism and Buddhism', Zhou Mi admitted that he had no knowledge of the original meaning of the painting. The earliest visual example of this theme is a rubbing of a Song inkstone collected by the Qing court (Figure 4.4). The inkstone bears the mark of the Xuanhe reign era. Unlike Yan Liben's rendition of the scene, the elephant here is only accompanied by a foreign-looking attendant. The Qing description of the inkstone identifies him as a mahout (*xiangnu*) but based

56 Yu Minzhong, *Rixia jiuwen kao*, in *Yingyin Wenyuange Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), vol. 497, 54/39.1 (765).

57 Chen Huaiyu, *In the Land of Tigers and Snakes: Living with Animals in Medieval Chinese Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), pp. 23, 29.

58 Zhao Ji, Yu Jianhua ed., *Xuanhe huapu* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1964).

Figure 4.3: Anonymous, *Painting of Waiting for the Morning Court Hour* (Dailou tu); also titled *Painting of the Inner Palace* (Beijing gongcheng tu). Colours on silk. 100 cm x 189 cm. Ming dynasty. Courtesy of Nanjing Museum, Nanjing.

on the brass headband the figure is wearing, he could also be identified as a monk. The pictorial design on the rubbing has a dynamic composition: the elephant turns its head towards the attendant who is scrubbing it with a piece of cloth. The cloud pattern in the upper register and the two lotus flowers in the lower register point to the auspicious nature of the animal. However, just like Zhou Mi, we cannot deduce the metaphorical meanings of the theme, if there are any, from the rubbing or the title of the paintings in the *Xuanhe Catalogue*. It is, though, safe to conclude the following: first, in addition to an elephant, paintings of this kind always include a foreign-looking attendant or a foreign-looking monk, or sometimes both; second, the elephant is a rather mundane animal, which is black and with two tusks.

Paintings entitled *Scrubbing an Elephant* and *Elephant Bathing* (*xixiang*) gained popularity in the late Ming. Most of these paintings were attributed to a few renowned painters, including Qian Xuan (1239–1299), Ding Yunpeng (1547–1628), and Cui Zizhong (1597–1644). Art historians agree that most paintings attributed

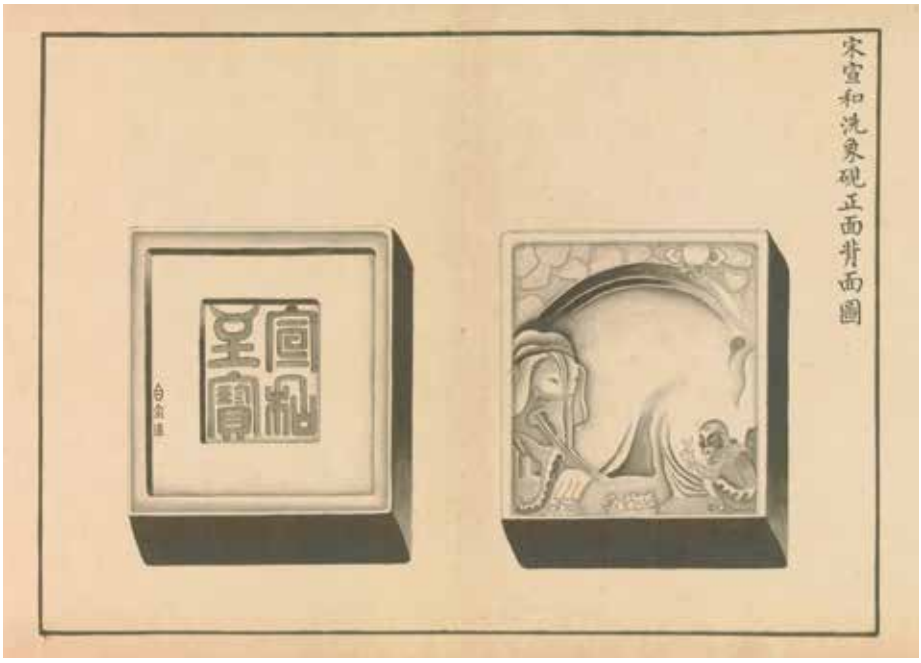

Figure 4.4 Anonymous, Drawings of the "Elephant Bathing Inkstone of the Xuanhe Era in the Song Dynasty" (Song Xuanhe Xixiang yan), front and back, in Yu Minzhong et al., *Imperially Endorsed Catalogue of Inkstones from the Chamber of Western Purity* (Qinding Xiqing yanpu), *juan* 7, p. 35. Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica.

to Qian Xuan were counterfeited in the late Ming (Figure 4.5).[59] Paintings attributed to Qian shared the same composition: a monk, a white elephant, and a few mahouts; paintings attributed to Ding Yunpeng and Cui Zizhong also include a bodhisattva. Although the theme of elephant bathing became popular in the late Ming, its meaning was never articulated in a concrete, definitive manner. Until the early Qing, the identity of the bodhisattva remained unclear, as it was sometimes identified as Mañjuśrī (Wenshu) and other times Samantabhadra (Puxian).[60] It

59 Julia Andrews, "The Significance of Style and Subject Matter in the Painting of Cui Zizhong" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1984); Lan Yujing, "Wanming Qingchu de *Caoxiang tu* yanjiu" (MA Thesis, Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, 2009). More recent research include Wang Zhongxu, "Chuan Qian Xuan Xiangxiang tu zhenwei kaobian – Jianji wang Ming zhiqian dui Xixiang tu de renshi," *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan* (2017.3): 107–124; Zhu Wenqi, "Ming Wanli Xixiang tu yanjiu—Yi Ding Yunpeng he Cui Zizhong weili" (MA Thesis, Nanjing Art Academy, 2020), pp. 1–3.

60 Wang Zhongxu, "Qianlong yurong hua jiqi kongxiang guan – Ding Guanpeng Saoxiang tu, Lang Shining Qianlong guanhua tu," *Gugong xuekan* 18(2017): 97–108. Although the meaning of elephants was more diverse in Buddhist texts, their visual representations in paintings as well as on sculpture are mainly associated with two themes: (1) the birth of Shakyamuni, as Queen Maya, the future mother of Shakyamuni, had a dream in which a white elephant with six tusks entered her womb before the birth

Figure 4.5: Attributed to Qian Xuan, *Elephant Bathing* (*Xixiang tu*). Colours on paper. 124 x 52 cm. Replica made during the Ming dynasty. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art. Washington D.C.

was also in the Qing that *xixiang* or *saoxiang* came to be understood as a Buddhist metaphor for the purification of the mind, as the character 'elephant' (*xiang* 象) and 'phenomenon/form' were often used interchangeably.[61]

Nevertheless, the underlying connections between the practice and the visual representation of elephant bathing are worth noting. The paintings gained popularity when elephant bathing came to be a popular scene in the capital. The Japanese woodblock printed book, *Illustrations of Famous Places in China* (Morokoshi meisho zue), lists elephant bathing as one of the most eye-catching scenes in the capital. It provides three images, including elephants in processions, elephant bathing, and tools used by mahouts (Figure 4.6). Although the scene of elephant bathing is not set outside the city wall, it does catch the liveliness of the spectacle. The image of the tools further augments the sense of reality. In the Ming–Qing contexts, even

of the buddha; (2) the bodhisattva Samanthabhadra (*Puxian pusa*), as the six-tusk white elephant is believed to be the attribute animal of Samanthabhadra. Kumārajīva, *Miaofa lianhua jing*, in *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō*, edited by Junjirō Takakusu and Kaigyoku Watanabe (Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daīzōkyō Kankōkai, 1960–1978) T9.262, 28.61a–b. The white colour of an elephant was not only associated with Buddhism, but was also understood auspicious in general. See Zou Zhenhuan, "Dongya shijie de 'xiang' ji," in *Zaijian yishou: Mingqing dongwu wenhua yu zhongwai jiaoliu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2021), pp. 153–154.

61 Wang Zhongxu, "Chuan Qian Xuan Xiangxiang tu zhenwei kaobian – Jianji wang Ming zhiqian dui Xixiang tu de renshi," pp. 123–124.

if the elephant is depicted as a sacred being, with a white skin or six tusks, it is always attended by mahouts and the image includes a river. In fact, both Ding Guanpeng and Cui Zizhong must have seen the bathing of elephants, as Ding served as a professional painter at the imperial court in Beijing and Cui Zizhong lived in Beijing for decades during the Chongzhen Era (1628–1644). A poem that the Ming loyalist Wu Weiye (1609–1671) inscribed on a painting entitled *Elephant Bathing* by Cui Zizhong might be enlightening. Wu composed this poem in 1653, nine years after the collapse of the Ming dynasty, lamenting the good times of enjoying Cui's paintings and the spectacular bathing scene.

> Throughout his life, [Cui] was skilled in painting the bathing of elephants,
> When in the mood, he wielded his brush over the unfolded scroll.
> The red cover on the elephant has the decorative patterns from Erhai,[62]
> With its white tusks, it stands in front of Hanyuan Hall.[63]
> To Chengtian Palace Gate, it drove the emperor's cart,
> With a banner bearing the *luan* bird, the sun, and the moon.
> Beneath the two pavilions, roosters crowing, bells striking[64]
> The elephant stood firm, towering like Mont Kunlun.
> Shouldering aside the stablemen and imperial guards,
> The commoner Cui held paper and brush in his hands.
> He looked up, seeing the trained elephants coming down the imperial street,
> After returning home, he contemplated for ten days.
> …Following the customs of the capital, people came to see the bathing of elephants,
> The jade river in the spring was pure and clean.
> Black mahouts were barefoot, each fastening two brooms on his back,
> All the streets were filled with carts of gentlemen and ladies.
> The elephants lifted their trunks, making thunder-like sounds in the northern pavilion;
> Water was trampled, being splashed like snow in the West Mountain.
> The painting that Cui completed was hung in the market of the capital,
> Viewers by the roadside marvelled at its excellence.
> Being unique, Cui did not like making paintings to meet the demand;
> The price was raised high, and only the powerful and the rich could snatch them…[65]

62 Erhai is located in Kunming (Yunnan province), one of the places where elephants were native.

63 Hanyuan Hall was the main hall in the Tang imperial palace. Here it refers to the imperial palace in general.

64 The 'two pavilions' usually refers to the pavilions in front of the imperial palace, and thus is the synecdoche for imperial palace.

65 Wu Weiye, *Wu Meicun quanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), vol. 1, 11/305–307.

Figure 4.6: Okada Gyokuzan, Oka Yugaku, and Ohara Toya, *Illustrations of Famous Places in China* (*Morokoshi meisho zue*) (Kawachiya Kichibei, 1806), vol. 4, 14a-b, 15a-b.

The poem can only be found in Wu Weiye's anthology. It is therefore unclear which painting this poem refers to. However, all extant paintings attributed to Cui have the same transcendental theme, which includes a six-tusk elephant bathed by two mahouts, a bodhisattva, and a monk (Figure 4.7). It is very likely that Wu Weiye's poem was inscribed on a similar painting. Wu's poem clearly indicates that Cui's painting was inspired by the actual scene of elephant bathing in the capital. Cui turned the ordinary black elephant into a white, sacred one, and has the barefoot, black mahouts carrying brooms. Just like the souvenirs during the Song, Cui's paintings were sold on the market.

Figure 4.7: Cui Zizhong, *Scrubbing the Elephant* (*Saoxiang tu*). Colours on silk. 50 x 152 cm. Ming dynasty. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art. Washington D.C.

Conclusion

After wild elephants had moved to the southern edge of the Song empire, they were 'returned' as tamed, tributary animals to the capitals Kaifeng, Hangzhou, and Beijing. Their performance in court rituals, including imperial processions on various occasions and at the morning courts, was meant to be a visual confirmation and reinforcement of imperial power. It was in this context that tamed elephants were sent into the capital, and policies and facilities were developed to accommodate them. As a result, elephants entered public consciousness as a political phenomenon. However, the display of elephants could only achieve such an effect when it was seen

by the general public. Among the urbanites in the capital, the watching of elephants increasingly broke away from the political agenda of the court. Already in the Song, people were drawn to the imperial processions, but they were also keen on seeing the elephants in training or rehearsal and enthusiastically bought elephant souvenirs. The decoupling between the political meaning of elephants and their popular image became more evident in the Ming when elephant bathing rather than their service in the imperial context ignited the interest of the public. The performative scene of their bathing contributed to turning the sixth day of the sixth month into a festival. It was originally the traditional cleaning and airing day, but elephant bathing turned it into a carnival-like festival. Paintings of elephant bathing could also be understood along this line. The motif, first appearing in the Song, includes a foreign-looking mahout or monk beside a river. From the late Ming onwards, the motif combined bodhisattvas and was assigned religious meanings, but, as Wu Weiye's poem shows, it still had an underlying relationship with the popular practice of elephant bathing.

The political, religious, or cultural meanings of elephants could only make sense when they or their images were watched by spectators. In the eyes of the city dwellers, the exotic animal had many faces. They were sacred animals in Buddhist anecdotes and scriptures, political animals that were brought from afar to serve the court, and exotic animals to be watched for fun. In comparison with the elephants guarding the palace and leading the emperor's processions, the elephants in the city moats in apolitical, urban contexts were more ready to show their true nature.

Glossary

An	安
Beijing gongcheng tu	北京宮城圖
Bian	汴
biji	筆記
Chang'an	長安
Chengtian	承天
Chongxin	崇新
Cui Zizhong (1597–1644)	崔子忠
Chujing tu	出警圖
Dadu	大都
Dailou tu	待漏圖
Dajia lubu tu	大駕鹵簿圖
Dijing jingwu lue	帝京景物略
Duan	端
Erhai	洱海
Fansheng lu	繁勝錄

Fengtian	奉天
Fenyin	汾陰
Fu	復
Ganquan	甘泉
Guangdong	廣東
Guangzhou	廣州
Haizi	海子
Hanyuan	含元
Hengzhou	橫州
Huizong (r. 1100–1126)	徽宗
Jian	薦
Jiangdu	江都
Jinshui	金水
Jinyi wei	錦衣衛
Jishuitan	積水潭
Jōjin (1011–1081)	成尋
Huangpi	黃陂
Jianlong	建隆
Jiaozhi	交趾
Lin'an	臨安
luan	鸞
Lingnan	嶺南
Luchuan tusi	麓川土司
Meng Yuanlao	孟元老
Ningling	寧陵
Nanxun (Gate)	南薰門
Puxian pusa	普賢菩薩
Qian Xuan (1239–1299)	錢選
Qincheng	秦城
qing	頃
Saoxiang tu	掃象圖
Shaozhou	韶州
She suo	射所
Shenzong (r, 1572-1620)	神宗
Shuncheng	順承
Siming	思明
Song shi	宋史
Sun Wei (active late ninth century)	孫微
Sun Zhiwei (tenth–eleventh century)	孫之微
Taiping	太平
Taiye	太液

Tang	唐
Wanli yehuo bian	萬曆野獲編
Wen Huanran	文煥然
wei	衛
Wu Weiye (1609–1671)	吳偉業
Wu Yue	吳越
Wuxing zhi	五行志
Waiban	外辦
xiangfang	象房
xiangnu	象奴
xixiang	洗象
Xiang	襄
Xihu laoren	西湖老人
Xiong Mengxiang (fourteenth century)	熊夢祥
Xuanhe huapu	宣和畫譜
Xuanwu	宣武
Xunxiang suo	馴象所
Xunxiang wei	馴象衛
Yan Liben (601–673)	閻立本
Yangxiang suo	養象所
Yinjia	引駕
Yujin	玉津
Zhenzhong (r. 997–1022)	真宗
zhang	丈
Zhang Sengyao (479–?)	張僧繇
Zhongyan	中嚴
Zhou Mi (1232–1308)	周密
zhihui shi	指揮使
ziran (Chin.)/*shizan* (Jap.)	自然
zi zhi jingshi	自至京師

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