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A Splendid Party: Zhou Lianggong (1612–1672) and His Friends in Literary Nanjing, 1669

Qing official and art patron Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612–1672) held a party for twenty Nanjing-affiliated painters and poets on a fine winter’s day in 1669. This party allows us to observe cultural life twenty-five years after the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. Despite Nanjing’s political significance as a former Ming capital, it was literary sociability, not political contestation, that dominated the social life of Nanjing’s artists and literati members in the late seventeenth century.
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This is the story of an elegant party. It was given by the Qing official and art patron Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612–1672) in his Pavilion for Viewing Paintings on a fine winter’s day in 1669. Over twenty Nanjing-affiliated painters and poets gathered there. Among his guests were some of the greatest artists of the age. Zhou’s student, Huang Yují 黃虞稷 (1629–1691), described the gathering and celebrated these cultural luminaries in a ninety-line ballad. The party was so successful that Zhou claimed that it was “the most splendid event in Nanjing over several decades.” Such was his affection for his guests that he not only collected their works, but wrote a biography of them, published posthumously by his son.

I use Zhou’s party as the keyhole through which to observe cultural life twenty-five years after the Ming-Qing dynastic transition. This single episode affords us broader views of friendship networks, interactions between Qing government officials and Ming loyalists, and discourses on art practices and milieu in the late seventeenth century. I argue that, despite Nanjing’s political significance as a former Ming capital, it witnessed little artistic and literary resistance against the Qing rule during this period. Instead, it was literary sociability, not political contestation, that dominated the social life of Nanjing’s artists and literati members in the late seventeenth century.

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