

Art and Ritual in Asia

December 10, 2018

In the Eye of the Beholder:

The Spread and Industrialization of Ancestral Portraits During the Qing Dynasty

In China, ancestor worship is considered a cornerstone of the culture. In the ancient culture, the rituals dedicated to the ancestors were meant to honor them and invoke the ancestors' spirits which would bestow blessings of health and prosperity on their descendants<sup>1</sup>. These portraits were kept within the family home and not meant to be seen by outsiders, like many other burial items for tombs. It was even seen as taboo to have another families' ancestral portraits in possession. At the fall of the Qing Dynasty, many portraits were put on the marketplace to evade financial loss for families. Of the portraits found, many were painted in workshops by anonymous artists. While Western museums and galleries treat Chinese ancestral portraits like isolated pieces of fragile work regardless of the material used and period created, the practice of ancestral portraits was commonplace and varied from imperial portraits made on silk that were created regularly to a solitary family portrait that would have been illustrated on cotton and expensive for the family to afford. The social, political, and economic context of the workshops that created the portraits is a key reason for the spread of the portraits in China.

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<sup>1</sup> "Press Room," Freer|Sackler: The Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art, , accessed December 11, 2018, <https://archive.asia.si.edu/press/past.asp>.

Portraits like *Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Man* will help explain the purpose of memorial portraiture and its practices by using the historical timeline of Qing Dynasty portraits alongside the industrialization of portraiture making. The influence of the Mongol rulers from the Yuan Dynasty can be seen in the evolution of self-representation. Under Mongol rule, the political control of dress regulation and evolution of portraiture is affected by European influence<sup>2</sup>. The imperial court wore costumes that were a symbol of Manchu authority and social harmony. Certain colors and designs were intended for the Emperor, his Heir, the Empress, and the family. Other members of court had specific colors, and commoners would dress in the most basic attire.

This heavily affected how sitters for portraits were displayed and what was included in the portrait. The Mandarin Square is a symbol of rank that was featured in military and civil portraits, and could even be edited posthumously to elevate the status of the family. The materials and techniques used to create the portraits and the industrialization of the market for them play a huge role in the abundance of portraits that we have to student presently. There are finer quality portraits that still remain in situ, in their original locations, as examples of the dominance of the culture, but the abundance of them reveal a commercialized production of everyday items.

*Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Man* is a hanging scroll of ink and color on paper by an unknown artist. It is an ancestral portrait made during the Qing Dynasty between 1644 and 1911. The subject of the painting is the elderly man seated on an elaborate

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<sup>2</sup> Jothsn Elverskog, "Elverskog, J. (2004) 'Things and the Qing: Mongol Culture in the Visual Narrative'," *The History of Mongolia (3 Vols.)*, 2004, 150-159, doi:10.1163/9789004216358\_038.

armed pedestal holding a Mandarin Square. He is dressed in formal attire, wearing an official black robe and a simply decorated hat. He is seated in an armed chair on a pedestal holding a small bordered image. The composition has a vertical focus from the top of his hat leading downwards, immediately to his face, then his outfit and ends at the base of the pedestal. His eyes are focused straight ahead in an ideal depiction of the man that emphasizes his status. The focus and posture of the ancestor, his attire, and the decorations of the objects included in the portrait emphasize the importance of having an image to represent the deceased during ritual services.

While his outfit is covered by the black overcoat, *Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Man* uses the undercoats to emphasize intricate details and designs. The neckline is painted in a way that gives the blue very vivid shading. His hands are not shown but the blue and green sleeves peak out from under the black overcoat. The same method is used at the elder's feet. Only the bottom of his shoes are visible, but they draw focus to the inner layers of his attire. His stance allows more of the inner coat to be seen. The blue cloth is also plain, but his green innermost layer is decorated with circular patterns and swirling shapes. The swirls and floral patterned circles add movement to the attire in a way that would not be captured by a sedate theme.

There is a novelty to Chinese portraiture because they were unknown to other parts of the world. In the West, funeral effigies usually portrayed the person with animated gestures and expressions as if they are still in the world of the living<sup>3</sup>. Rather than revealing the identity and personality of a human being through facial and bodily

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<sup>3</sup> Jan Stuart and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, 2001), 52-53.

expressions, the portrait of Chinese ancestors depicts the deceased in a static, frontal and conventional posture. Only the face is personalized, but without expression, as if they exist in a peaceful realm elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. This trait of formal portraiture creates a sense of timeless space and ritual authority, and implies the importance of physiognomy during this dynasty. Outward fidelity in painting had been scorned in previous Song and Yuan Dynasties but was encouraged and dramatically increased in the Qing Dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

The previous tradition of Chinese portraiture was for an artist to create a series of portraits. The compilation of the images into a single handscroll originally showcases the illustrated biography of the sitter and evolved into the specific recording of the face. In the production of portraiture, physiognomy played an important factor partially stemming from the belief that the spirit could be captured through the pupils of the eyes<sup>6</sup>. When drafting for the portraiture, artists would ask family members to pick out examples of facial features that best matched the deceased. This placed more emphasis on the visual prototypes and references of the *wenren* world that were superimposed onto the subject<sup>7</sup>. This procedure was known as *zhuiying*, retrieving the soul, in which relatives' memories of the subject were triggered from similar already drawn physical characteristics.

The use of workshops also exposes how common it was for ancestor portraits to be created posthumously. Sometimes, the portraits inscription would include if it had

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<sup>4</sup> Charleux, Isabelle. *Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 48, no. 124 (2003): 139-140.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> Vishakha N. Desai and Denise Patry. Leidy, *Faces of Asia: Portraits from the Permanent Collection* (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 1989), 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Wenren refers to the ancient landscape portraits that featured serene backgrounds of nature <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.903.3514&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

been altered, but the practice of creating indistinguishable reproductions hinders historians from timestamping the images. The terms used to describe a painting created during life or after death were also interchanged too often to be told apart, and created the binomial *yixiang*, meaning “portrait left behind”<sup>8</sup>. It was possible to add a rank to a deceased family member or even delay the creation of the portrait if one expected an addition or correction to be made soon. This term encompasses many types of ancestor images. The overarching goal would be to achieve fidelity of the outward appearance.

The process of creating the portrait took place mostly in unnamed workshops and the term associated with this method was known as *maitaigongs*, the purchased visage<sup>9</sup>. The portraits were the artistic endeavor of at least two or more artists. There were many shops that produced a wide range of illustrations of living people and historical figures, but it was the specialization of ancestor portraits that became very successful. These shops would even add the installation of scroll mounting with the hanging portraits. Workshops would either create the portraits in a rapid succession one after another, or would create them in stages. The bodies of the sitter were generalized because it was the clothing that was differentiated. The master of the workshop was most likely the one who would specialize in painting the face. The ability to paint a good face took years of practice and the materials used were sometimes trade secrets in order to preserve the old tradition. It was more realistic to have a stockpile of basic body images that could be customized later on when commissioned. This method was very efficient and the finished product could be delivered in time for the funeral.

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 94

<sup>9</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 95-96

Workshops were also discernable by the props they used in the background of the portraits or by what the sitter would hold. The chair *Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Man* is seated on appears to be made of wood and is stylized with intricate carvings. The cloth draped around the chair falls to the floor and is decorated with a cloud and flower motif. The cloth is divided into two sections with a minimal red swirling and leaf like pattern on most of the material and the sleeves decorated brightly. The bottom of the cloth is also detailed with a pattern of blue circles. This draws the viewer's focus to the distinctive animal claws that serve as the legs of the chair. The chair ties in well with the pedestal the man is seated on. Although small, the pedestal aids in elevating the stature of the seated elder. The detail on the bottom also shows that the piece is important and not an everyday item.

The stiff overcoats of the *Elderly Man* and the *Elderly Woman*<sup>10</sup> represent their authority but the individualization is scene in the intricate swirls, flowers, and circles that add more elegance to the portrait in the undercoats. They all draw attention to a motif of completion and wholeness. The closure of the black overcoat emphasizes a symmetric distribution throughout the entire portrait. The contrast of the red drapery against the cloak is stark and draws attention to the Mandarin Square, an important piece of identification. The pedestal uses blunt layers of color that are not otherwise used in the portrait. The yellow and pink stripes stress the space between the body of the elder and the pedestal he is presented on. It is an added element of depth to the portrait. If a patron wanted a certain style, it was possible to visit a specific shop. Workshops would

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<sup>10</sup> **Figurae 2. Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Woman, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE)**

have also been able to adapt the style and textiles featured in the portrait to fit the needs of the patron<sup>11</sup>.

Painting techniques varied depending on the price a patron was able to pay and the quality of portrait requested. Stencils have been used since the Tang Dynasty, allowing for many copies to be made from an original sketch. Every motif from the sketch was copied and could then be individualized for a patron by enhancing the hues used for different parts of the painting, creating special effects. Grid patterns is another method that was used to create balanced and symmetrical bodies for portraits<sup>12</sup>. The charcoal was easy to erase and then execute the drawing over the remaining contour lines. This technique is apparent in *Beauty Holding an Orchid* was painted on silk, as if the artist corrected the appearance of her face and edited portions of the portrait<sup>13</sup>. Her face was painted at a different time from when the body was, causing the misjudgment by the artist.

This issue resulted in a third method of adding the face to a portrait: pasted head images. A more skilled artist could integrate painting the head in a way that integrated the existing painting with the new addition, but it was cheaper to create a separate work and paste it onto the body. The *Portrait of the Elderly Couple* showcases that when done expertly, the portrait can still appear well made<sup>14</sup>. While none of the methods are done poorly, it is apparent in the final product the skill of the artist. Imperial and highly

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 95-96

<sup>12</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 100-105

<sup>13</sup> *Beauty Holding an Orchid (Portrait of Lady Liu)*, Qing Dynasty (mid-18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century)

<sup>14</sup> Figure 4. *Portrait of an Elderly Couple*, Qing Dynasty (19<sup>th</sup> –mid 20<sup>th</sup> century)

ranked families had more expensive portraits done using the grid or stencil methods, and families with less financial resources were able to afford the pasted head method.

The techniques used to paint the portrait also influence the canvas that is used for the commission. The *Elderly Man* and *Elderly Woman* were created on paper, but *Beauty* was created on silk. The quality of the portrait reflects the class of the family. Many ancestor portraits that are in collections are of the social and political elite but others can be found on a scale of familial wealth. More modest portraits sometimes deviated from the rigid standard of symmetry and otherworldly background in order to include a symbol of good fortune since they might have only been able to commission one in their lifetime or for many generations. These symbols would be much less likely to appear in portraits of families in higher standing<sup>15</sup>.

Portraits that are viewed at museums tend to be single sitter, and from wealthy families. Multigenerational portraits would allow for the family to include as many members as possible but that number was also regulated by authorities for worship purposes. Another difference between upper class and lower class portraits was if they were full length, bust length, or half length. Wealthy families would have been able to afford the more expensive full length portraits while poorer families would have had to opt for smaller representations. These could be seen as less powerful images for veneration because the whole image of the ancestor was not displayed. A poorer family would have only been able to afford one portrait while the imperial family did sittings for

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<sup>15</sup> Stuart and Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors*, 59-64



different occasions and other wealthy families would do new portraits for marriages or promotions.

A common view of Chinese ancestor paintings is that they should be treated as novel illustrations but there is a vast history of the popularity and commonality of the paintings. They were common for families to have and helped establish social and economic standings based on the quality of the portrait. The necessity for ancestor paintings also drove the creation of specialized workshops. A single hanging scroll is a representation of the history of an entire dynasty and the progress that was made to improve the sacred worship of ancestors.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Images Used



Figure 1. Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Man (*title*)  
Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) (*date*)  
China (*region*)  
Ink and color on paper (*medium*)  
51 ¼" x 28 ¾" (*scale*)  
Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery (*location/collection*)



Figure 2. Ancestral Portrait of an Elderly Woman (*title*)  
Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE) (*date*)  
China (*region*)  
Ink and color on paper (*medium*)  
51 ¼" x 28 ¾" (*scale*)  
Vanderbilt Fine Arts Gallery (*location/collection*)



Figure 3. Beauty Holding an Orchid (Portrait of Lady Liu) (*title*)  
Qing Dynasty (mid-18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century) (*date*)  
China (*region*)  
Ink and color on silk (*medium*)  
90" x 61" (*scale*)  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (*location/collection*)



Figure 4. Portrait of an Elderly Couple (*title*)  
Qing Dynasty (19<sup>th</sup> –mid 20<sup>th</sup> century) (*date*)  
China (*region*)  
Ink and color on cotton (*medium*)  
231" x 165" (*scale*)  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (*location/collection*)