Emperor’s Masquerade – ‘Costume Portraits’ of Yongzheng and Qianlong

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Of the tiny portion of the Forbidden City’s enormous holdings of court art of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) to travel abroad in exhibitions, the painting Spring’s Peaceful Message (Fig. 1) has become particularly well known. An important imperial portrait painting, the work was inscribed in 1782 by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95) with this poem in gold paint:

In portraiture [Lang] Shining is masterful, he painted me during my younger days; The white-headed one who enters the room today, does not recognize who this is.

Howard Rogers, whose translation of the inscription is cited above, points out the painting’s value in documenting Qianlong’s early relationship with Lang Shining, the Italian Jesuit painter better known in the West as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). According to Rogers, this inscription confirms that these two men had developed a special tie even before Qianlong, then Prince Bao Hongli, ascended the throne in 1736. He thus identifies this work as a ‘portrait of Hongli while yet a prince’ (Rogers and Lee, pp. 182-83).

As informative as it is, Rogers’ discussion focuses on the patron and the artist. Questions left unanswered include the meaning of the painting and the nature of the artistic genre to which it belongs. First of all, can we label a work as a portrait of someone even when this ‘someone’ is only a secondary figure of depiction? In the painting, young Hongli is juxtaposed with an older gentleman who is obviously more authoritative. Standing straight with a solemn expression, this man is handing over a sprig of plum blossoms to Hongli. The prince receives the branch obediently. Slightly bending his upper body, he appears almost a head shorter than the older gentleman, at whom he looks upward with respect. All these features of Hongli’s image – his position, size, posture and expression – emphasize his subordination to and reverence for the other man. The two figures’ relationship that we find in the painting, therefore, discredits the idea that Hongli is accompanied by an ‘attendant’, as suggested by Rogers: ‘The young prince, who appears sensitive and a shade apprehensive, stands with an older attendant, perhaps a tutor, in a garden where the blossoming plum heralds the coming of spring.’ (ibid., p. 182). Another opinion is even more fantastic: Harold L. Kahn hypothesizes that both figures portray Hongli, with the older man representing ‘a projection of Qianlong later in life’ (Kahn, 1971, p. 77).

The identity of this older gentleman is actually quite transparent. This is Hongli’s father, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-35). Evidence for this identification will be given throughout this article, but it will suffice for now just to compare the image in Spring’s Peaceful Message with other portraits of Yongzheng (see Figs 6, 8 and 11), all depicting a person with a thin mustache hanging down at the corners of his mouth. Instead of making an individual portrait of Hongli, therefore, Lang Shining portrayed two successive rulers on a single canvas, and the painting should be re-labelled ‘portraits of Yongzheng and Qianlong’. This new identification focuses our attention on the painting’s real subject, which is the two men’s relationship, not their individual likenesses.

The artist employs various means to accentuate the ties between the two figures. In terms of physical appearance, their identical clothes and hair style create uniformity and a sense of ‘sameness’. This impression is again reinforced on a symbolic level: two stalks of bamboo in the background echo the two men. What is special here is not the image of bamboo – this traditional symbol of uprightness is ubiquitous in Ming (1368-1644) and Qing period painting. The important point is that this symbol is used for both figures; the implication is that they are endowed with similar fine characteristics and that they are of the same kind. This general uniformity, on the other hand, also highlights the two men’s different status and attitudes. I have mentioned that the variation in their posture and expression emphasizes Yongzheng’s authority and Qianlong’s obedience. This difference is clinched by a symbolic gesture: the son holds one bamboo stalk, bending it slightly to show his respect to his father. The most important aspect of the two men’s relationship, however, is that of transmission, symbolized by Yongzheng’s handing over the flowering branch to Qianlong. The crucial significance of this detail is announced in the painting’s title: the blossoming plum signals spring’s arrival. Pictorially, Yongzheng and Qianlong are physically linked by the branch, and the theme of transmission is represented, quite literally, by the only action in the painting.

Like many other imperial portraits in the Qing court, more than one version of this painting was made. The version in Figure 1 is probably only a study: some curious shapes marked in faint dotted lines along the lower edge suggest intended modifications, which were never realized. The final version of the painting still exists. Significantly, it is mounted inside the Hall of Cultivating the Mind, one of the imperial palaces in the Forbidden City. According to Qing historians, this palace achieved its importance during Yongzheng’s reign, being second only to the Throne Palace. Largely due to his intense concern with security, Yongzheng turned this enclosed hall at the heart of the Forbidden City into the seat of ruling power and the centre of his daily activities (Fig. 2). Here, he granted audiences to newly appointed officials, received members of the Cabinet for extensive consultation, read memorials and issued edicts. Abandoning the Palace of Heavenly Purity, he also moved his living quarters into the Hall of Cultivating the Mind, which happened to be adjacent to the imperial harem. The hall was divided into three sections – a central room for the audience hall, an east wing containing a bedroom and a living room, and a west wing used as a study. Qianlong followed his father in ruling China from the Hall of Cultivation, but further partitioned the west wing into a number of rooms to suit his way of ‘cultivating the mind’. This wing, which is extremely important for the present discussion, has been vividly described by Wan-guo Weng and Yang Boda.
This section, completely shielded by an outer screen, was the most protected core in the entire [Forbidden] City. A miniature hall within a hall, its own throne room is hung with imperial mottoes in many forms. A horizontal tablet with four characters admonishes: ‘Be diligent in state affairs and close to the able and worthy’; a vertical couplet reminds the ruler: ‘Though one person rules the world, the world provides not only for the one’, and the central rectangular frame contains a long poem composed and written by the prolific Qianlong poet-calligrapher-emperor himself, listing ten Confucian precepts for the monarch...

... But the place that really gave him endless pleasure was a small den at the southwestern corner of this hall, an inner sanctum within the inner sanctum. This is the famous Room of Three Rarities, so named for three rare pieces of ancient calligraphy, the last of which he acquired for his collection in 1746. Including the entrance area, the corner den affords a space only about 86 square feet in all...[the] painting on the right wall near the entrance, a joint effort of the Italian Jesuit painter Castiglione and his Chinese colleague Jin Tingbiao [act. c. 1757-67], done in the Western trompe l’oeil style, created an illusion of depth by extending the interior tiled floor and ceiling woodwork into the picture. (Weng and Yang, p. 67)

This mural is the final version of Spring’s Peaceful Message (Fig. 4). Compared with the study, it has a more complex landscape setting and appears as a painting within a painting – a scene viewed through a moon-gate on the rear wall of an inner chamber. The central figures, however, remain the same: Yongzheng and Qianlong stand side by side; the father is handing over a branch of plum blossoms to the son. In retrospect, we realize that Qianlong’s inscription on the portable version may in fact have responded, at least partially, to the mural. His lines – ‘The white-headed one who enters the room today, / does not recognize who this is’ – seem to directly refer to the Room of Three Rarities, in which the mural is located. His confusion about his earlier image seems to imply both the passage of time and the painting’s deceptive illusionism. We may even assume that Qianlong actually inscribed the portable version right in front of the mural, because the Room of Three Rarities was the place where he normally examined and inscribed the paintings in his vast collection, and where he plunged into connoisseurship and poetry writing.

Only when we understand this architectural setting can we understand Spring’s Peaceful Message, because the painting’s location discloses its original
significance. Everything this author has said about this painting must be reexamined – reconfirmed or revised – in relation to its physical context. Starting again from the appearance of the painted figures, now we notice that Yongzheng and Qianlong not only have identical hair style and clothes, but their hair style and clothes are modelled on an ancient Chinese fashion. Their wide, plain robes are those worn by Confucian scholars; their hair is tied with a black turban worn on the top of the head. These portraits, therefore, differed markedly from a Qing emperor’s shengrong (‘imperial visage’). Official in status and ceremonial in function, a ‘visage’ portrait employs a pictorial style that rejects any depiction of physical environment, bodily movement or facial expression (Fig. 5). It is true that some of these portraits convey a greater sense of personality, while others reveal a stronger impact of European modelling techniques, but none of them violate the basic codes of the genre: a ‘visage’ picture must present an emperor in a perfect frontal view, the Manchu-style hat and robe with embroidered imperial dragons serving as symbols of his ethnic and political identity.

Spring’s Peaceful Message was not a ‘visage’ portrait; it was installed in a side-chamber of Qianlong’s private study, not in the solemn ancestral temple of the imperial family. Because of such informality, this and other similar royal portraits have been called xingle tu (‘pictures of merrymaking’), but neither their differences from ‘visage’ portraits or the name ‘merrymaking’ should blind us to their seriousness. To be sure, painting an emperor’s portrait was never a casual matter. Yang Boda has proven that Qianlong’s tight control over court painters was especially apparent when they were working on imperial portraits, and that ‘only after inspection and approval of a preliminary version was the painter permitted to officially undertake the full painting’ (Yang, p. 335). While the multiple versions of Spring’s Peaceful Message support this observation, they demand an interpretation of the emperors’ ‘disguise’: in this painting the two Manchu rulers abandon their native and official costumes and dress in traditional Chinese fashion.

This ‘disguise’ is especially puzzling because of the Qing emperors’ stern attitude towards costume. From the beginning of their dynasty, these non-Chinese rulers attached great importance to their native clothes, rejecting all suggestions that they should now adopt Chinese-style clothes in order to demonstrate their mandate to rule China (Chen, pp. 83-84). Their policy concerning hair style was even more extreme; by demanding all Chinese to change their hair style to the Manchu fashion, they forced this conquered people to identify themselves as Manchu subjects. So why did the Manchu rulers have themselves portrayed in traditional Chinese clothes and hair style?

No straightforward answer to this question can be found. We must therefore return to the painting – not the portable version but the mural – to search for traces of its intention and historical circumstance. A clue surfaces in the func-

(Fig. 2) Plan of the Forbidden City in Beijing with the compound of the Hall of Cultivating the Mind indicated in orange
(After Weng and Yang, p. 62)

(Fig. 3) Cutaway drawing of the Hall of Cultivating the Mind
(After Yu Zhuoyuan, Zijincheng Gongdian, Hong Kong, 1982, fig. 30)
tion of the Room of Three Rarities, where the painting was mounted. As mentioned, not only were the most treasured masterpieces of Chinese art housed in this room, but Qianlong also inspected and inscribed numerous ancient paintings there. This tiny chamber thus embodied China's rich cultural heritage - but a cultural heritage removed from its roots and transplanted into the inner court of an alien ruler. This dislocation, however, is erased by the 'Chinese' images of Yongzheng and Qianlong in Spring's Peaceful Message: here these two Manchu rulers have themselves become representatives of Chinese culture; their virtues are manifested through traditional Chinese symbols, most notably bamboo and pines. The emperors' disguise, therefore, legitimizes their possession and appropriation of the Chinese cultural tradition by denying, however artificially, their image as outsiders who came to own this tradition through seizure.

The two figures' Chinese images also suit the pictorial metaphor for the painting's central theme of transmission: it is a Chinese belief that plum blossoms send the earliest signal of spring's arrival. A question still remains - what is being transmitted from Yongzheng to Qianlong? One possible answer is that the plum blossom, a traditional Chinese metaphor, symbolizes the emperors' commitment to promoting Chinese art and art connoisseurship. We know that Yongzheng studied Chinese literature from his youth and spent endless hours copying masterpieces of ancient calligraphy; his son developed this tradition into an enormous and obsessive enterprise of collecting works of art and compiling huge catalogues. However, this explanation is still too narrow, since the Chinese scholarship they promoted and the Chinese images they assumed were not purely artistic, but deeply political. Qianlong never considered his art collecting a pastime, and expressed his idea of connoisseurship in a couplet he inscribed in the Room of Three Rarities: 'Encompassing all in my observation of ancient and modern; relying on brush and paper to express my deepest thoughts.' He also wrote the centrepiece of calligraphy in his main study, to which the Room of Three Rarities is attached (see Fig. 3). He listed ten precepts for the monarch, which included, 'Two principles I have learned from my family heritage are to revere Heaven and take care of the people'. This 'family heritage' is obviously not native Manchu, but Confucian. As in the painting Spring's Peaceful Message, here Qianlong bestowed on himself and his ancestors the image of a Confucian sage.

Understood in this architectural and political context, what the blossoming plum alludes to - what Yongzheng transmits to Qianlong - is unmistakably the authority to rule China. In fact, this significance would have been plain to anyone in the Qing court who had a chance to see the work. Yongzheng had ten sons, but only one of them is portrayed here as his successor. In addition, the painting can be read as a political riddle: Qianlong's style name, given by Yongzheng, is Everlasting Spring Scholar (Changchun jushi); and spring implies the sense of renewal. 'Spring's message' in the painting is thus Qianlong's succession to the mandate of Heaven. This understanding, however, brings us back to the basic question about this painting's historical circumstance and dating; was it really created 'while Hongli was still a prince'? This opinion, which has been
accepted by all scholars, now appears erroneous. The reason is that Qianlong's succession to imperial power, however obvious to his contemporaries, could not have been openly discussed (not to mention illustrated) before this succession had actually been completed. It is an established fact that Yongzheng firmly rejected making his selection of his heir public knowledge. Instead, he invented a method to keep his decision secret: the name of the heir was written on a slip of paper, sealed in a casket and placed behind the large horizontal plaque hung some twenty-five feet above the floor of the throne room in the Palace of Heavenly Purity. The name on the paper—that of Prince Bao Hongli—was disclosed only after Yongzheng's death (see Kahn, 1971, pp. 239-41).

Instead of emerging from Yongzheng's court, therefore, Spring's Peace-
ful Message must have been commissioned by Qianlong after he ascended the throne. The picture does not 'record' any real event, however. As a political painting, it is largely symbolic, alluding to the transmission of power and expressing Qianlong's filial piety. As a historical painting, it is retrospective, illustrating a situation projected back into the past. As a portrait, it is deliberately fictional, disguising rather than representing the subject's normal appearance. Qianlong was not the first person, however, to commission such 'costume portraits'; Yongzheng started this trend, and in this too, was followed by his son. In this sense, the work also demonstrates the continuation of this fascinating sub-genre in Qing court painting, the history and symbolism of which demand further exploration.

A n album of fourteen leaves portrays Yongzheng in various guises (Figs 6a-k). Now he is a Persian warrior holding his bow and arrow (Fig. 6a), now a Turkish prince (or the legendary figure Dongfang Shuo?) receiving a peach from a black ape (Fig. 6b). He appears in one leaf as a Daoist magician summoning a fierce dragon (Fig. 6c), and in another as a fisherman daydreaming by a lake shore (Fig. 6d). He is disguised as a Tibetan monk meditating in a snow-bound mountain cave (Fig. 6e), or as a Mongol nobleman gazing into the distance from a mountain top (Fig. 6f). Most frequently he assumes the identity (and images) of a Chinese scholar watching a waterfall, inscribing a poem on a cliff, listening to the sound of a stream or playing a qin in a bamboo grove (Figs 6g-j).

No previous emperors, either Chinese or Manchu, had ever had themselves portrayed in this manner, and it is interesting to speculate what factor(s) may have contributed to Yongzheng's
curious self-fashioning. (He must have approved these images before they could have been painted.) One possibility is that he, or his court artists who were responsible for these and other costume portraits of the emperor, was inspired by the phenomenon of the masquerade, which became extremely popular in Europe from the early eighteenth century. As scholars have demonstrated, the eighteenth century masquerade had deep roots in court entertainment, in which the impulse towards travesty had always been a major motive. Masked parties played an important role in the life of the English aristocracy at least from the time of Henry VIII (r. 1509-47). In the seventeenth century, the masque was a lavish variation on the travesty theme: here nobility disguised themselves as gods and goddesses and acted out fantastic allegories of court life. During the Restoration, the court of Charles II (r. 1660-85) offered a rich domain for sartorial play.
When the 'Midnight Masquerade' became a primary feature of English urban entertainment from the second decade of the eighteenth century (when Yongzheng was ruling China), it was again supported by the aristocracy and 'people of fashion', and in turn stimulated the court's fascination with exotic costumes, jewellery and make-up. While the court of George II (r. 1727-60) had its own dressed-up balls, the king and the crown prince also attended public masquerades in disguise (Castle, p. 28).

England was not the only European country where high society favoured the masquerade. In fact, it has been suggested that the English masquerade originated in other countries, notably Italy and France. It was John James Heidegger (1659?-1749), a Swiss count, who introduced the popular masquerade to the London public (he orchestrated the weekly masked assemblies in Haymarket from 1717 and was named Master of
Revels to George II in 1728). Louis Duc d’Aumont, the French ambassador to England, held some of the earliest masquerades at Somersett House in 1713, which were considered diplomatic affairs with important political motivations (ibid., pp. 9-10). More important to the topic of this article are the records of the colourful costumes displayed at these parties: Aileen Ribeiro, in her exhaustive study Dress Worn at Masquerades, classifies these costumes into three types: the ‘domino’ or neutral costume; ‘fancy dress’ in which one impersonated a general class of beings; and ‘character dress’ in which one represented a historical, allegorical, literary or theatrical character. Many ‘fancy dresses’ represented exotic foreign countries and cultures. The result, as described in a 1718 issue of London’s Mist’s Weekly Journal, was a ‘Congress of Nations’. ‘By the vast majority of dresses (many of them very rich), you would fancy it a Congress of the principal persons of all nations in the world, as Turks, Italians, Indians, Poles, Venetians, etc...’ (Ribeiro, p. 3). Similar reports were also offered by critics of the masquerade: Henry Fielding wrote in 1728, ‘... here, in one confusion hurl’d, / Seem all the nations of the world, / Cardinals, quakers, judges dance; / Grim Turks are coy, and nuns advance, / Grave churchmen here at hazard play; / ...’ (ibid., p. 4).

We begin to sense an interesting parallel between such a masquerade assemblage and Yongzheng’s metamorphic images in his album; this Manchu emperor seems to be staging a ‘personal masquerade’, in which he, as the only participant, constantly changes dress, assuming different nationalities and roles. Two additional links further convince me that this parallel is not coincidental. The first link is between the masquerade and the art of portraiture in eighteenth-century European culture, a subject which has been thoroughly studied by Ribeiro. Her numerous examples, including more than five hundred paintings, sufficiently demonstrate, in her words, ‘the flowering of many diverse kinds of fashionable fancy dress portraiture’ (Ribeiro, pp. 103-312). The most fascinating aspect of this transformation from masquerade to portrait, in my opinion, is the process of ‘de-masking’: a nobleman or woman changes his or her role from a masquerade participant to a sitter for portraiture.

They took off their masks to reveal their faces, but retained their exotic costumes to signify the impulse towards travesty (Fig. 7). If Yongzheng’s costume portraits were inspired by contemporary European culture, this influence most likely came from such Western ‘fancy dress portraits’ (or the knowledge of such portraits), not from actual masquerades which, to this author’s knowledge, were never staged in the Chinese capital.

This, then, leads to the second link: in one album leaf, Yongzheng is portrayed as a European gentleman, wearing a tall wig and holding a spear in the attempt to kill a tiger (Fig. 6k). While this image is almost comical, a more dignified portrait of the emperor employs the same Western guise (Fig. 8). These two paintings seem to clinch the argument about the source of the costume portraits in Qing court art that first appeared during Yongzheng’s reign. (European portraits had been available in China before Yongzheng’s time and had inspired export works such as the statuette of Louis XIV of France [r. 1643-1715] illustrated in Fig. 9.) Significantly, although these two Western-dress portraits of Yongzheng seem to form a perfect symmetry with
European Oriental-dress portraiture (see Fig. 7), they were essentially different and even contradictory in implication. The European examples were 'imperialist': the popularity of this type of portraiture and the masquerade itself coincided with the expansion of Western culture into Asia. The Qing examples, however, were 'imperial' and only renewed the time-honoured self-imagery of a Chinese ruler as 'One Man Under Heaven'.

Yongzheng's patronage of costume portraits was continued by Qianlong, who began to commission such works while he was a prince. In a painting dated to 1734, two years before he ascended the throne, he appears as a young Daoist, holding a lingzhi fungus in one hand while resting the other hand on the back of a deer, both the plant and the beast symbolizing longevity and auspiciousness (Fig. 10). In addition to its value as Qianlong's earliest costume portrait, this work attests to his effort to link himself with his father through painting, an effort which also underlay the creation of Spring's Peaceful Message. The theme and imagery of the 1734 picture, in fact, were derived from one of Yongzheng's costume portraits, in which the emperor is dressed up as a Daoist, holding a lingzhi fungus and accompanied by an auspicious deer (Fig. 11). On the other hand, these two portraits signify an important difference between the father and the son: Yongzheng never inscribed his portraits, but Qianlong wrote a poem even on his earliest costume portrait and continued this practice in later years. Qianlong was therefore much more inclined to provide his own interpretation of his guises. In so doing, he made clear that these paintings, instead of reflecting his real image, served to confuse and conceal his identity. This idea was already formulated in his inscription on the 1734 painting, which ends with this question: 'Who knows the true self of this man - who enters this picture purely by accident?'

Some sixty years later, he wrote on Spring's Peaceful Message: 'The whiteheaded one who enters the room today, does not recognize who this is'. The painting which best exemplifies his deliberate effort to conceal and mystify himself, however, is his costume portrait known as One or Two? (Fig. 12a).

In this large painting, the main figure - a Chinese scholar with Qianlong's face - is seated on a low platform in front of a landscape screen. Clusters of furniture, including a round Western-style table and three stands, support antiques: a bronze gu of the Shang dynasty (c. 1500-c. 1050 BC), a famous vessel commissioned by Wang Mang (r. 9-23 AD) and a couple of beautiful ceramic vases, all
from the emperor’s private art collection. A servant is pouring tea into a cup. His gesture shows submission, and the master is looking at him with approval. This conventional master-servant relationship, however, is complicated by a third human image. This is the scholar-emperor’s portrait hanging in front of the screen. Looking down from above, the man in the portrait examines his model with an expression of severity. Qianlong explains this composition in his inscription:

One or two?
– My two faces never come together yet are never separate.
One can be Confucian, one can be Mohist.
Why should I worry or even think?

At least three versions of this painting exist and all bear this poem, but Qianlong signed each version with a different name. One of his signatures refers to himself as Narayana, a Buddhist deity with three faces (Fig. 12b). There were therefore not only two, but three Qianlongs: he was confronted with his Chinese image which was again duplicated in a painting within a painting. This work can thus be called a double costume portrait, which multiplied disguises to intensify the emperor’s self-mystification. According to Qianlong’s inscription, his two (mirror) images in the painting could represent two different political identities or strategies, one following the Confucian path, the other honouring Mohist doctrines. These were only ‘faces’, however, and the emperor’s true identity remained beyond comprehension. (For an interesting discussion of the concept of ‘face’, see Angela Zito, Silk and Skin: Significant Boundaries’, in A. Zito and T.E. Barlow eds. Body, Subject, and Power in China, Chicago, 1994, pp. 103-30.)

What we find here is a deepening symbolism of costume portraits in Qing court art. Whereas such portraits satisfied Yongzheng’s fascination with exotic clothes and expressed his imperial desire to rule the world, Qianlong never impersonated Europeans and his costume portraits were deeply political. If Spring’s Peaceful Message alludes to his succession of power, One or Two? is a symbolic representation of the Way of the ruler. Formulated some two thousand years earlier by the political philosopher Han Fei (d. 233 BC): ‘The way of the ruler lies in what cannot be seen... Hide your tracks, conceal your sources, so that your subordinates cannot trace the springs of your action.’ (Burton Watson, Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsuin Tsu, and Han Fei Tsu, New York, 1963, pp. 17-18). The purpose of this painting is not to exhibit or demonstrate, but to conceal and deceive.

Both Yongzheng and Qianlong commissioned costume portraits in which they are accompanied by beautiful women. The son’s portraits, however, are again imbued with deeper meaning, and in some cases they can be read as political allegories. One of these portraits, now mounted as a hanging scroll, was originally created as a mural or for a single-panel screen (Fig. 13). The inscription at the lower left corner – ‘Painted with respect on imperial decree by Your Majesty’s servant Jin Tinghiao’ – identifies the artist. Qianlong’s own inscription along the upper-right edge supplies a date: Spring, 1763. The scene is enclosed by rocky cliffs on all sides. A stream of abundant water flows down into a deep gorge. This natural landscape, however, has been turned into a royal retreat with elaborate human constructions: a commanding pavilion stands near the source.
(Fig. 12a) One or Two?
By Yao Wenhan
(act. c. 1739–56)
Hanging scroll, ink and slight colour on paper
Height 90.3 cm, width 119.8 cm
Palace Museum, Beijing

(Fig. 12b) One or Two?
Qianlong period
(1736–95)
Ink and slight colour on paper
Height 90.3 cm, width 119.8 cm
Palace Museum, Beijing
of the stream, overlooking a bridge that connects the royal retreat to the outside world. These two structures provide settings for two groups of figures: Qianlong, accompanied by an attendant, is in the pavilion looking out, while five young women, dressed in traditional Chinese clothes and escorted by a royal procession, are crossing the bridge. In explaining this painting, no one is more authoritative than Qianlong himself, who composed and inscribed this poem on the painting:

Tall trees, layered hills, a winding stone path.  
The guides look back, the followers shout out in response.  
– Liu Songnian’s depiction of the Eastern Hills  
Is remodelled into this painting of imperial enjoyment.

Relaxing in the pavilion over a clear stream,  
I hear my alert attendants pass on a message:  
‘New royal consorts are arriving!’  
– Isn’t this scene better than the picture of Lady Zhaojun leaving China for the north?

Having frequented immortal realms,  
Now I just lean against the railing, quiet and relaxed.  
Although people’s caps and robes follow the Han style,
What you see are images of deep meaning in a painting.

A waterfall cascades by my side. Tame deer beneath cliffs seem to understand my words. But instead of living like a hermit in deep woods, I must ensure peace, remember the hardship of my forbears and plan eternity for the kingdom.

The poem is poor in taste and literary merit, but it provides an invaluable piece of evidence for understanding the Qianlong emperor's costume portraits. To this author's knowledge, this is the only statement he made about the fictional and symbolic nature of such portraits: the figures' Han-style costumes are not real, but are 'images of deep meaning'. This meaning is two-fold. First, the Qianlong emperor's image in traditional Chinese
costume reinforces his self-identity as a Confucian sage-emperor (who would ensure peace and practise filial piety, and whose dynasty would last for eternity). Second, Qianlong compared the 'new royal consorts' in the painting to Wang Zhaojun, a famous palace lady of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 9) who was sent as a gift to a Xiongnu king north of the Great Wall. While this allusion implies China's submission to an alien ruler, Qianlong was more satisfied with himself: 'Isn't this scene better than the picture of Lady Zhaojun leaving China for the north?'. He, though non-Chinese in origin and also from the north, had conquered China and become its master.

Qianlong's statement, that this painting was based on a composition of the Southern Song period (1127-1279) master Liu Songnian (c. 1150-1225), reveals another important aspect of his costume portraits: these portraits were increasingly based on masterpieces in his collection. Sometimes his court artists copied an old composition, and only repainted the figure with Qianlong's face. Interestingly, we again find a close parallel (and possibly a historical connection) in eighteenth-century European masquerade and portraiture. According to Ribeiro, many contemporary sources testify to the presence at every masquerade of men and women wearing dress copied from old paintings. One of these sources written in 1742 reports: 'There were quantities of pretty Vandykes and all kinds of old pictures walked out of their frames' (Ribeiro, p. 136). When this fashion was carried into the art of portraiture, however, artists directly turned 'old pictures' into 'portraits' of living noble men and women. Ribeiro has discovered that numerous portraits created in the eighteenth century imitate, among other models, Sir Anthony van Dyck's (1599-1641) gentlemen and Peter Paul Rubens' (1577-1640) gentlewomen. Retaining almost everything in an old painting except for the central figure's face, the artist connected his work to a famed masterpiece and linked the sitter to a prevailing 'fashion', defined by John Boswell in 1780 as a uniformity, 'which could not happen without there being one original model after which all have copied' (Boswell, 'On Imitation', London Magazine, August 1780).

Qianlong's costume portrait One or Two? is modelled on an anonymous painting, formerly in his art collection and now in Taipei's National Palace Museum (Fig. 14). Judging from the mount-
The Qianlong emperor as a Chinese connoisseur examining a painting
By Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione, 1688-1766)
Hanging scroll, colour on paper
Height 136.4 cm, width 62 cm
Palace Museum, Beijing

(Fig. 18a) Detail of Figure 18 showing the painting-within-a painting

(Fig. 18) The Qianlong emperor as a Chinese connoisseur examining a painting.

signature of the court painter Ding Guanpeng (act. 1726-70), but as Nie Chongzheng of the Palace Museum has suggested, the realistic style of the emperor’s face indicates Lang Shining’s hand (Gugong bowuyuan, p. 270). In fact, this Italian artist may have been responsible for Qianlong’s images in all the emperor’s costume portraits discussed in this paper, and in so doing he became Qianlong’s official ‘face’ painter. In one instance, Qianlong himself first copied a snowy landscape by the Ming artist Xiang Shengmo (1597-1658) and then summoned Lang Shining to paint his portrait dressed up as a Chinese scholar (Fig. 17). Sometimes, an intertextual relationship adds another layer of meaning to these works. The revised Washing the Elephant (Fig. 15), for example, is paired with another of Qianlong’s costume portraits (Fig. 18). This second painting shows the emperor, as a Chinese connoisseur, examining a hanging scroll, which is none other than the original Washing the Elephant (Fig. 18a). Only Lang Shining signed this work. Judging from the diverse styles in the painting, however, he again only painted the emperor’s face; the rest of the images – clothes, trees and rocks – were done by the Chinese painter Ding Guanpeng.

Unlike their European counterparts, Qianlong’s costume portraits based on old paintings had little to do with a prevailing fashion. Instead, they demonstrate the emperor’s uncontrollable desire to dominate any existing tradition, whether it be Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist (Fig. 19). This tendency is most
obvious in his attitude towards the traditional Chinese arts. First, he had a passion for collecting as a Buddhist monk. Secondly, he was aware of the importance of preserving and promoting the arts, especially those of the Tang and Song dynasties. Thirdly, he was interested in the arts of the Western world, which he believed to be more advanced than those of China. He also encouraged the creation of new works, particularly in the areas of poetry, painting, and calligraphy. Finally, he believed that the arts were a means of expressing one's inner thoughts and emotions, and he encouraged his courtiers to create works that reflected these themes.