

The Qianlong Emperor and His Bannermen

Annette Bügener in: Sotheb's Auction New York 2005, Lot 280

The Qianlong Emperor himself regarded his Ten Victorious Campaigns as brilliant achievements of his reign. In order to consolidate the power of the Qing empire (1644-1911), he followed the expansionist politics of his grandfather, the Kangxi Emperor, and during the second half of the eighteenth century undertook several campaigns along the borders of his empire, in Central Asia, for instance, and in Tibet, Myanmar (Burma), Annam (Vietnam), Taiwan and Nepal. On his orders, the military campaigns were glorified in painting series, which mainly consisted of battle scenes and portraits of meritorious banner officers. Between 1760 and 1792 alone, a period of more than thirty years, four such portrait series were created with altogether 280 compositions in versions of different formats.[1]

When the Qianlong Emperor ordered the court painters to produce portraits of officers, he was following a tradition established at least two millennia earlier. Already in the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), emperors had honoured loyal officials and successful generals with painted portraits, which they displayed on the walls of the imperial palace. The paintings were meant to keep alive the memory of these immortal heroes and at the same time to demonstrate the ruler's power. During the Tang dynasty (618-907), the Taizong Emperor (r. 626-647) commissioned the famous court painter Yan Liben to produce twenty-four portraits of outstanding officials and generals. The Qianlong Emperor took up this tradition and surpassed it already by sheer number. The first series, which was painted after the successful campaign in East Turkestan (Xinjiang, 1755-59), already contained one hundred portraits. For the first half of these pictures, the Emperor himself composed the eulogies; for the second half, this work was given to high-ranking officials who were particular favourites of the Emperor. The same number was painted following the campaign in Jinchuan (Sichuan, 1771-76) in the Chinese-Tibetan border region. A further fifty portraits were commissioned after the campaign against Taiwan (1786-88) and thirty more after the victory over the Gurkhas in Nepal (1790-92).

The Qianlong Emperor was not only the patron of this mammoth project, but also carefully supervised the whole process involved in the genesis of these paintings. The officials and officers were recalled from the battlefield to the capital, where they had to sit a few hours for their portrait. The Emperor used their presence at the court to learn the latest news about the campaigns. Working from sketches drawn with charcoal, the artists would first provide bust portraits in oil on paper, and these were shown to the Emperor. If he was satisfied, the faces were copied on large pieces of silk and then the body, headgear and weapons added. The hanging scrolls together with the monumental battle paintings were then taken to the Hall of Purple Splendour (*Ziguangge*), a two-story building west of the imperial palace on the western shore of the Central Lake, where war trophies like banners and weapons were displayed on the upper floor. It was there that the Qianlong Emperor received envoys from foreign countries and regularly gave magnificent banquets for loyal officials and allies. After the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, many of these pictures from the imperial palace were spirited abroad. Of the original 280 hanging scrolls, fifty have by now been identified outside Beijing, of which a surprising two thirds are found in Germany. It seems that Berlin was the centre of this trade. Not a single portrait of this type appears to be preserved in the imperial collections in Beijing or Taipei. Among the almost forty surviving portraits, half can be ascribed to the first series of c. 1760.

The portrait of Grand Secretary Fuheng (c. 1720-70; Fig. 1) is the first of the hundred scrolls of the first series (1760) and shows the Emperor's closest adviser in the traditional ceremonial court dress (*chaopao*). Above the portrait is the so-called poetry hall (*shitang*), a separate piece of yellow silk where the eulogies are inscribed in black ink. The combination of a full figure, generally in three-quarter profile on a blank background, with a poetry hall symbolises dignity and can be traced back to the Song dynasty (960-1279). The inscription lists the officer's rank, honorary title and name and his memorable deeds in war, and gives the date and the author(s) of the eulogy.

The traditions of the Manchu people as steppe nomads are reflected in the tight cut and the lateral fastening of the garments worn by most of the officers, as shown in the portrait of Uksiltu (Fig. 2). The usual footwear consisted of knee-high satin boots. The head was covered with a winter hat trimmed with fur and surmounted by stones of different colours, called mandarin knobs and indicating the person's rank.

The so-called banner troops provided the crack and elite troops of the Qing army, a situation that was crucial for the dynasty's longevity. The groundwork for this military organisation, which would remain in place over several centuries, was laid in 1601 by Nurhaci (1559-1626), the founder of the Manchu nation, when he divided the whole Manchu population into eight banners.

Fuheng was the only one among the Emperor's advisers who had argued for the campaign in eastern Turkestan (1755-59), in which Jaohûi (no. 1) was the leading commander. The last phase saw the three-month long siege of the Chinese troops in winter 1758 at the Kara Usu river near Yarkand, which only ended due to the outright victory at Qurman in February 1759. The subsequent conquest of numerous cities was the first step in the eventual establishment of Xinjiang (lit. new territory) province.

The victory celebrations at the end of each campaign were accompanied, like the sacrifices regularly performed by the Emperor at various temples in Beijing, by splendid rituals designed to maintain the structure of political power. The most important work for the court artists was to document these ceremonies in countless paintings, ranging from narrow horizontal scrolls to monumental wall paintings several metres long. For these, the Emperor deliberately referred to European traditions of history painting, which the Jesuits, active at the imperial court since the seventeenth century, had introduced mainly by means of book illustrations. The Qianlong Emperor was fascinated by the true perspective and by the play of light and shadow (*chiaroscuro*), which made figures in engravings and woodcuts as well as in oil paintings so much more substantial and lively. As the Emperor abhorred spotted faces and allowed oil colours, because of their glossy surface, to be used only for sketches, almost all surviving portraits of the imperial family and officers are executed in ink and colours and in a Chinese-Western style, which achieves plasticity by modelling the faces through shading.

In the sixth month of the year 1760, the Qianlong Emperor ordered the much admired court painter Jin Tingbiao (active 1757-67) to paint for his private use a horizontal scroll with fifty portraits of officers involved in the East Turkestan campaign in brilliant colours on paper, of which only a few fragments have survived. A second scroll with fifty portraits was evidently commissioned by the Emperor in the following year. The imperial catalogue *Shiqu baoji xubian* (Precious Collection of the Stone Canal Hall, Second Series) of 1793 mentions only the first scroll, however.[2] Three portraits are kept at the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Berlin (Arigun, Looge and Daktana),[3] a fourth (Ayusi) is in the S.J. Noumoff collection in Montreal.[4] Jin Tingbiao, a native of Wucheng in Zhejiang province, during his ten-year activity as a court painter at the Painting Academy in Beijing, became a respected specialist in figure and portrait painting, and the Emperor equally appreciated his landscapes.

On the hand scroll, full-length representations of officers alternate with eulogies in cursive script (*xingshu*) in the Emperor's hand. Where two sheets of paper meet, the mounting shows along the borders a so-called seam seal of the Qianlong Emperor, which generally contains a poetic device. The broad sweep of the brushwork is impressive and conforms to the traditional mode of Chinese figure painting. While the faces are finely modulated with light ink and several colour washes, the body contours are left vague underneath the decisive and prominent outlines of the garments. Brilliant opaque colours, a typical indication of academy painting, are used both here and for the hanging scroll versions. The figures, despite some anatomical shortcomings in the representation, are nevertheless more harmonious than in the workshop portraits on the hanging scrolls. The artist's love of detail is expressed in the delicate shading of feathers, pearls and sword mounts. Here the influence of Western painting traditions is noticeable, which were introduced by Jesuits active at the imperial court. With his right arm bent at his back, the imperial guard officer Daktana (Fig. 3), for example, presents himself in a posture similar to that of European portraits of emperors and princes.

Whereas the large hanging scrolls, on account of their function as cult paintings and unsigned workshop productions, are not listed in the major catalogue of the imperial collection of painting and calligraphy, the *Shiqu baoji xubian*, the hand scrolls with portraits of officers from the first three series are recorded, which indicates how highly the Emperor regarded them. The pertinent hand scroll from the campaign in East Turkestan is entitled *Yubi pingding Yi-li Huibu wushi gongchen xiangzan* (Eulogies composed by the Emperor for portraits of fifty meritorious officers active in the pacification of Ili and the Muslim tribes).[5] Besides commissioning and supervising the project, the Qianlong Emperor was also the author and

calligrapher (in cursive script) of the eulogies for his favourite officers which appear in the more intimate hand scroll format.

As the supreme ruler of a multi-cultural empire, the Emperor aimed for a synthesis of civil (*wen*) and martial (*wu*) virtues in his relations with allies and subjects. Conquered peoples were sometimes affiliated to the military organisation of the Eight Banners, which of course supplied the fighting strength of the Manchu empire, and their leaders integrated into the existing power structure. Among the meritorious officers of the portraits one finds not only Manchus, Han Chinese or Mongols, but also Uighur territorial princes from East Turkestan and chieftains of the Jinchuan who lived in the region of present-day Sichuan along its border with Tibet.

Many of the warriors manifest their martial spirit with expressive gestures and the inclusion of weapons like swords, bows and quivers. They demonstrate Manchu virtues, the highest being the skill of mounted archery. The Manchu did not use the simple bows common in Europe, but instead composite reflex bows. These demanded much greater strength for drawing the string for the shoot. Mastering this skill took years and persistent training. The thumb-ring protected the archer from being harmed by the string flicking back. Boots with non-slip soles helped archers on horseback, as they permitted standing up in the stirrups. In actual warfare, however, mounted archery had already partly lost its importance with the introduction of firearms and canons.[6]

The order in which the officers in the portrait series are listed, was by rank and in particular by their merits on the battlefield. After a victorious campaign they would receive not only money and silk, but often also honorary or hereditary titles together with an entry in the official biographical records. Should an officer have been honoured with a portrait in the Hall of Purple Splendour, this would be specially mentioned. Some bannermen are shown wearing on their cap a peacock feather with one eye spot, an award for particular merits in battle, thus Bandi (no. 2), Namjal (no. 3), Saral (no. 6), Dou Bin (no. 7), Gao Tianxi (no. 8), Duan-ji-bu (no. 9) and Macang (no. 10); Dou Bin and Macang also received the honorific *baturu*, Manchu for 'hero'.

In traditional China, for centuries the cult of the hero was as important in public life as the cult of the ancestors was in family life. Officials who risked their life to assist the ruler in founding a new dynasty or saved a village from an attack by robbers, were celebrated as heroes. Their deeds for the common good gave them the status of 'adopted ancestors', whose portraits were venerated in temples. The populace occasionally accorded them divine status and they were called on in times of need. In his eulogies, the Emperor repeatedly mourns the untimely death of his brave warriors, as in the case of Gao Tianxi (no. 8). If they did not live to see themselves properly honoured, their portraits expressed posthumous gratitude, somewhat akin to ancestral portraits.

What was the function of the hand scroll within the overall genesis of the portraits of meritorious officers? To this day, scholars remain divided about the answer to this question. We know that the eulogies were written in spring 1760 and that the hanging scrolls were meant to have been finished by April 1760, for the banquet celebrating the victory in East Turkestan; in fact it seems that the hanging scrolls were only displayed in the Hall of Purple Splendour at the New Year's banquet of the following year. Without referring to this situation, Nie Chongzheng quotes a source from the archives of the Painting Academy covering the year 1763-4, which according to him states that the hanging scrolls were based on the hand scrolls by Jin Tingbao.[7] The same textual source as interpreted by Ka Bo Tsang says just the opposite, namely that the hand scrolls were modelled on the hanging scrolls finished in the sixth month (i.e. July) of 1760, adding that in 1763-4 a second series of hanging scrolls was executed, of which so far no evidence has come to light.[8] Tsang's suggestion seems more convincing, since the hand scroll version, as already mentioned, shows greater consistency. On the other hand, it is also possible that more than one hand scroll version was produced.

A fragment of the second series pertaining to the Jinchuan campaign and consisting of the preface and the portraits of seventeen officers, was sold in these rooms on June 1st, 1992, lot 77.[9] The inscription states that it was painted by the court artist Jia Quan in the fifth month of 1779, according to the Chinese calendar, that is, three years after the hanging scrolls of this series. No further hand scroll fragments from this or later series have otherwise been recorded.

The way in which the Qianlong Emperor made use of European traditions for history and portrait painting to glorify his rule is surely unique in history. An impressive example are the large- and small-format portraits of banner officers, which put faces and names to individuals (a feature rather scarce in Chinese history and art) and thus literally turned them into immortal heroes.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1 Anonymous, *Portrait of Fuheng*, ink and colours on silk, Qianlong period, inscription dated in accordance with AD 1760
Collection of Dora Wong (Sotheby's New York, 23rd-25th April 1987, lot 56)

Fig. 2 Anonymous, *Portrait of Uksiltu*, ink and colours on silk, Qianlong period, inscription dated in accordance with AD 1760
Collection of Dora Wong

Fig. 3 Jin Tingbiao (act. 1757-67), *Portrait of Dakana*, with imperial inscriptions, fragment of a handscroll, ink and colours on paper, Qianlong period, commissioned in AD 1760
Museum of East Asian Art, Berlin (OAS 1991-3c)

[1] Cf. the list of portraits in Walravens 1993, pp. 313-20.

[2] Tsang 1992, p. 72.

[3] Butz 2003, pp. 26-29, cat. nos 1-3.

[4] Tsang 1992, p. 54.

[5] *Shiqu baoji xubian*, 3652b-7b.

[6] See Ho & Bronson 2004, p. 108.

[7] Nie 1990, p. 67.

[8] Tsang 1992, p. 72; cf. Walravens 1997, pp. 407-9.

[9] See Tsang 1993.