

Empress Dowager, Politics, and Art: A New Reading Into the Portraits of Empress Dowager Cixi

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Abstract

Cixi, the Empress Dowager (1899-1983), though dominating the political scene of China for nearly fifty years, only left a handful of “portraits in leisure”, or “portraits in informal dress”. Strictly speaking, these paintings are traditional Chinese figure paintings without the use of Western technique (chiaroscuro and linear perspective) and their style is quite stiff and stereotypical.

Compared with the imperial portraits of her male predecessors, such as Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1678-1735), and Qianlong (1711-1799), her portraits are far inferior in terms of quality, quantity and the diversity of subject matter. Many factors account for this degeneration, the most notable being gender issues and the marked decline of Qing court painters after the Qianlong reign. Yet, in juxtaposing Cixi’s “portraits in leisure” alongside those of Empress Cian (1837-1881), her potential competitor, these paintings subtly exhibit her political ambitions through small details.

Four Cixi portraits by American portraitists Katherine Karl (1865-1938) and Hubert Vos (1855-1935) lucidly convey Cixi’s political influence. Though both American artists faced the same challenges of having to deal with the divergence between the Eastern and Western painting traditions, along with Cixi’s personal interference, they nevertheless overcame these obstacles and completed several portraits of her with much success, of which, four are still extant. It is ironic that foreign artists were able to accomplish vivid and realistic depiction of Cixi, as Cixi herself has sometimes been described by historians as xenophobic. Indeed, the works of Karl and Vos parallel and even surpass the imperial portraits of Qianlong by the Jesuit missionary and artist Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766), in their penetrating portrayal of Cixi’s strong personality and equally prominent femininity at the same time as the late Qing sovereign of China.

Keywords: Buddha worship, portraits in leisure, portraits in informal dress, guise portraits, mudra, twelve medallions on the imperial robe