

# Court painter of the Qing dynasty

□ Nie Chongzheng

## Lang Shining and His Art

Today I shall speak to you about a European painter who served in the Qing court, known in China as Lang Shining. You may have some recollection of him, yet over a century ago, few were likely aware of his existence. During the Republican era, Kang Youwei once described him as the earliest artist to pioneer techniques blending Chinese and Western painting styles. For a considerable period, Lang Shining remained marginalised within art history. Chinese art history seldom mentions him, if at all, while European art history also omits him. Chinese art histories, written by Chinese literati, simply ignored him because he was a foreigner; European art histories, meanwhile, excluded him due to the scarcity of information about his artistic endeavours in a foreign land, given his prolonged residence in China. Returning now to examine his life and works reveals considerable interest, making him worthy of study and introduction. I wonder if you have observed the auction market: in recent years, a small number of authentic works by Lang Shining have appeared in mainland China, alongside European and Hong Kong auction houses, fetching remarkably high prices. This demonstrates considerable contemporary interest among collectors and the art market, reflecting growing recognition of this artist and altering historical perceptions. His service in the imperial court might have been dismissed as feudal dross, compounded by his foreign origins – naturally marginalising him during periods of xenophobic sentiment. Judged by literati painting standards,



Figure 1: Portrait of Emperor Qianlong in Military Attire

However, examining Lang Shining's works housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taipei reveals their intrinsic merit. Today, I wish to re-examine this Italian painter who lived his entire life in China two to three centuries ago by exploring his biography and artistic legacy.

Lang Shining (1688–1766) originally named Giuseppe Castiglione, was born in Milan, Italy. He received systematic training in painting during his youth and joined the Jesuit order, a European religious organisation, at a young age. As is well known, following the arrival of Matteo Ricci and Johann Adam Schall von Bell in China during the late Ming Dynasty, European missionaries successively came to China to spread their faith. Some found their way into the imperial court, serving in advisory capacities. Lang Shining

In his twenties (1714, the fifty-third year of the Kangxi reign) he journeyed across the seas as a missionary. At that time, the only route to China was by sea, as the Suez Canal had not yet been excavated. They embarked from the Mediterranean Sea, sailing eastward past the Strait of Gibraltar off Spain, rounding the eastern coast of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean. They then circumnavigated the Indian subcontinent, entered the South China Sea, and reached Macau, then under Portuguese occupation. After disembarking, Giuseppe Castiglione studied Chinese etiquette, familiarised himself with Chinese culture, and adopted the Chinese name Lang Shining. Soon after, he moved from Macao to Guangzhou. The Governor of Guangdong at the time, aware that a painter was among the Europeans who had come to China, reported this to the Kangxi Emperor. The Emperor was greatly pleased and issued an edict inviting him to Beijing. Lang Shining travelled from Guangzhou to the capital.



Figure 2 Portrait of Imperial  
Consort Huixian in Court Robes



Figure 3: Spring Peaceful News

He spent the latter half of his life in China, residing in Beijing until his death. Upon his arrival, Lang Shining swiftly gained entry to the imperial court, becoming a highly esteemed court painter. He produced numerous historical paintings depicting significant contemporary events for the Emperor, alongside extensive portraits, animal studies, and flower-and-bird paintings. He also introduced European focal perspective techniques to China, assisting the Chinese scholar Nian Xiyao in completing the treatise *Shixue* (Theory of Vision) which detailed this method. In doing so, he became a pivotal cultural ambassador between East and West during that era. Lang Shining passed away in Beijing on 16 July 1766 (the tenth day of the sixth month in the thirty-first year of the Qianlong reign), aged 78.

The earliest known works by Lang Shining date to the first year of the Yongzheng reign. No works from the Kangxi period have yet been discovered. The Palace Museum currently holds one oil painting, though its condition is poor. As the Qing court lacked specialists in oil painting restoration and lacked knowledge of oil painting preservation, it was stored rolled up. Once the oil pigments dried, they became highly prone to flaking. We once partially unrolled one such painting depicting a middle-aged monarch, likely Emperor Kangxi. Upon slight unfurling, it proved virtually irreparable and was promptly rolled back. This work has never been publicly exhibited. We hope

to engage specialists in oil painting restoration to restore it to its original state. However, the Palace Museum has a vast number of works requiring restoration, and these oil paintings have not yet been prioritised. Should this painting indeed be a portrait of Kangxi, it would likely have been created shortly after Lang Shining's arrival in China, making it among his earliest works in the country.

The earliest extant paintings by Lang Shining date from the first year of the Yongzheng reign. Following Emperor Yongzheng came Emperor Qianlong. The Qianlong Emperor, styled the "Ten-Perfect Old Man", placed unprecedented emphasis on court painting. It can be said that Lang Shining was a painter greatly relied upon by the Qianlong Emperor. He produced numerous large-scale paintings depicting significant events of the time, some of which are still housed in the Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei, having been exhibited to the public on multiple occasions. Our published albums also feature selections of such works. Contemporary archival records indicate Emperor Qianlong frequently commissioned Lang Shining to paint his "imperial portrait" and to create decorative paintings for the halls of the Old Summer Palace.

Lang Shining made significant contributions to Chinese court painting, and I believe he and his art should be incorporated into China's art history. His paintings feature Chinese subjects and figures. While there is no record indicating whether he spoke Mandarin fluently, I imagine basic communication would not have been an issue. However, the signature "Lang Shining" on his paintings may not have been written by him personally. Certain works bear the inscription "Your humble servant Lang Shining, by imperial command, respectfully painted" in meticulous calligraphy, likely executed by others. His actual proficiency in Chinese characters remains unknown.

Lang Shining enjoyed considerable imperial favour. Within the Qing court, painters fell under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Household Department's Bureau of Manufactures and were termed "painters". These "painters" were divided into three grades, each receiving the same monthly stipend of three taels of silver for sustenance, though their wages varied by rank. Lang Shining was accorded the highest grade of painter.

Painting within the palace was not necessarily a desirable assignment,

as illustrated by one anecdote. While working in his studio, the Emperor visited with several consorts to observe his painting. The Empress, Qianlong said, "Yesterday I came to see your work. Which of the consorts did you find most beautiful?" Lang responded with remarkable tact: "When Your Majesty arrived, I was counting the patterned tiles on the floor for my painting." The Emperor inquired about the exact number, promptly dispatched a eunuch to verify it, and found the count to be precise. The Emperor was greatly pleased. Painting in the Emperor's presence demanded both composure and considerable wit. This incident illustrates how hard-won Lang Shining's honour within the palace truly was.

On his seventieth birthday, Emperor Qianlong held a grand celebration in his honour, bestowing lavish gifts.

Two to three centuries after Lang Shining's passing, his works gradually gained recognition. Let us first examine his portraiture.

Figure 1 depicts a portrait of Emperor Qianlong in military attire, standing over three metres tall. The Emperor is fully armoured, clad in plate armour and helmet, with quivers and bow cases slung over his shoulders, mounted upon a dappled horse and radiating imposing authority. At this time, the Emperor was in his early forties, portrayed as a commander-in-chief. Lingering on this painting reveals the intricate play of light and shadow across the metalwork of the armour. The horse in the painting

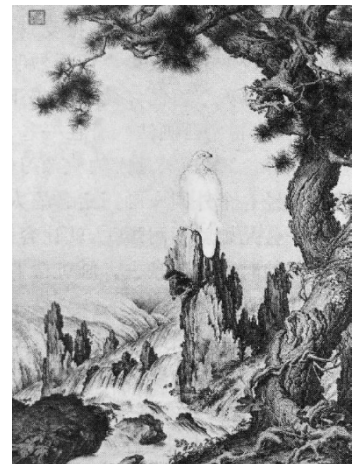


Figure 4: Song Xianying's Painting of Mushrooms



Figure 5: Pastoral Horses in the Countryside

His depiction of horses also diverged entirely from traditional Chinese methods. Ancient masters like Li Gonglin and Zhao Mengfu favoured continuous, flowing lines to outline equine forms, whereas Lang Shining employed minute brushstrokes to render the texture of horsehair. Through this technique, he achieved a three-dimensional effect, painting with remarkable precision—a hallmark of European artistic skill.

Figure 2 depicts his portrait of the Imperial Consort Huixian in ceremonial attire. This portrait bears pronounced traces of European painting techniques: the face emphasises three-dimensionality; the chair exhibits a perspective relationship where the front is larger than the rear; while the carpet's rendering creates a forward-extending visual effect. Even the accessories adorning the garments convey the texture of silk through light, shadow, and colour, with subtle folds discernible at the knees. The figures in these paintings possess clearly defined features, yet retain a certain chiaroscuro effect.

During the 1920s and 1930s, some urban artists trained in European painting techniques created portraits of local farmers in Yan'an. Yet upon completion, the elderly farmers expressed dissatisfaction, claiming their faces had been rendered

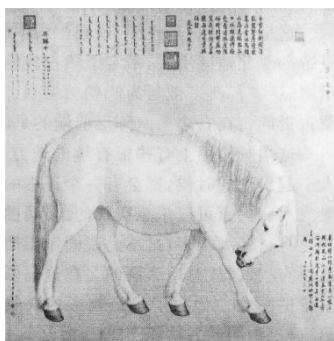


Figure 6: Portrait of Ying Jizi

Patches of white and black, for the peasants had never encountered European painting and did not understand the play of light and shadow.

The shadows and highlights created on the face were rendered in a European style that the villagers found unacceptable. For similar reasons, the emperor of the time might not have accepted this technique either. After arriving in China, Lang Shining abandoned the European tradition of using strong chiaroscuro in portraiture. He absorbed the strengths of Chinese painting, placing the subjects' faces under frontal lighting. Yet, grounded in European painting, he retained the ability to capture the structure of the figures, blending Eastern and Western painting techniques.

The fusion of techniques has created a new style of painting.

Moreover, while foreign painters typically pose models for portraits, Chinese artists emphasise "memory through observation and heart through recollection."

memory: During the late Qing dynasty, a foreign female artist once painted a portrait of Empress Dowager Cixi. Cixi initially posed fully dressed, but soon grew impatient and had Rongling dress in her robes to model for her. Only when it came to painting the face did Cixi personally return. It is possible that similar circumstances prevailed when painting Qianlong's portrait, though this remains unrecorded.

Figure 3 depicts the scroll "Spring Greetings of Peace". Though bearing no inscription by Lang Shining, it features an imperial poem by Qianlong attributing the work to him. The elder figure represents Emperor Yongzheng, the younger Emperor Qianlong – father and son. The painting leaves blank space at the bottom, suggesting it may have remained unfinished. The bamboo rendered here possesses a three-dimensional quality markedly distinct from traditional Chinese ink bamboo paintings. The drapery exhibits

The entire background is filled in, a characteristic of European painting. Such marked differences in Eastern and Western portraiture. Such marked differences may relate to racial variations: Chinese faces are flatter, while Europeans have high noses and deep-set eyes. Under light, this naturally creates strong chiaroscuro.

chiaroscuro.

Now, regarding Lang Shining's paintings of flowers, birds, and animals.

Figure 4 depicts the scroll "Presenting the Auspicious Mushroom from Mount Song," created by Lang Shining during the Yongzheng era after his arrival in China. It bears the inscription "October, sixth year of Yongzheng." As Emperor Yongzheng's birthday fell in October, this likely served as a birthday tribute painting. Chinese birthday paintings often feature a

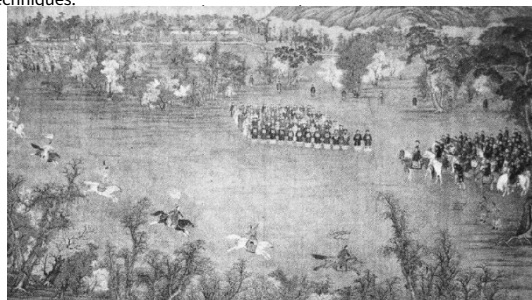


Figure 7: Emperor Qianlong Observing Equestrian Skills

, flanked by an ancient pine tree. This painting also features an ancient pine, several solid rocks, and lingzhi mushrooms, atop which perches an eagle with piercing eyes, conveying a celebratory intent.

The works by Lang Shining we see today, where both primary and secondary elements are executed solely by his hand, are clearly from his early period—that is, painted during the Yongzheng reign. By the Qianlong era, however, the principal subject matter employed European techniques while the background adhered to traditional Chinese painting methods, creating a sense of incongruity. This discrepancy was not solely attributable to the artist but resulted from specific directives issued by Emperor Qianlong. Archival records reveal the Emperor's precise instructions: portraiture was to be executed by Lang Shining, while the mountainous backdrop was to be rendered by Chinese painters.

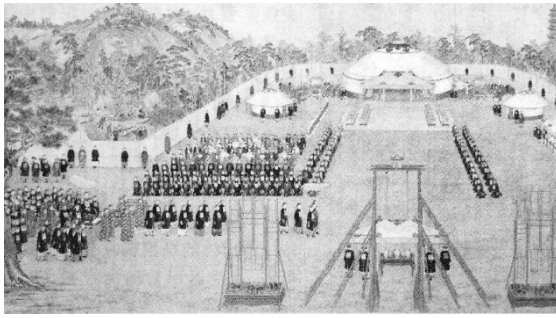


Figure 8: Banquet in the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees

A certain visual discordance emerges, yet the colophon bears Lang Shining's signature. This reflected Emperor Qianlong's preference: while he admired Lang's portraiture technique, he felt the background should adhere to literati painting conventions to better suit his tastes.

Figure 5 depicts the scroll "Herding Horses in the Suburbs". This painting features eight horses, drawing upon traditional Chinese allusions. A herdsman is visible, and the overall atmosphere of the composition is reminiscent of earlier periods. Figure 6 is titled "Portrait of a Fine Steed". This work depicts a white horse, with the painting inscribed with the horse's name, height, and width, all measured in dimensions. Such equine paintings could be classified as flower-and-bird or animal paintings. However, through this horse, we can observe the relationships between the Qing Dynasty and neighbouring ethnic minorities and tributary states at the time, making it essentially a documentary painting.

We shall now focus specifically on documentary painting.

The Qing court surpassed its predecessors in one particular aspect: the remarkable development of its documentary painting tradition. Two conditions were essential for such documentary painting: firstly, significant events worthy of recording – coinciding with Emperor Qianlong's era of territorial expansion; secondly, the presence of artists proficient in realistic techniques. Both conditions were fulfilled within the Qing court, leading to the emergence of numerous large-scale, documentary-style paintings. This achievement was inseparable from the presence of court artists like Giuseppe Castiglione.

Figure 7 depicts the horizontal scroll Qianlong Observing Equestrian Skills. The

Having subdued the Mongol rebellion through military force, certain Mongol nobles who had not participated in the uprising expressed their willingness to submit.

Consequently, they were appointed as officials within the Qing administration. In the foreground of the painting, a row of square

scene is set at the Mountain Resort in Chengde. At that time, Emperor Qianlong was in the northwest region

Lang Shining employed compositional techniques to emphasise the Emperor's presence. He arranged a group of figures in a conical formation, positioning the Emperor slightly ahead and apart from them. This distinction conveyed imperial dignity through composition rather than scale – a novel approach introduced by Lang Shining. Such compositional methods likely reflected the European humanist ideals he embodied.

The Banquet at the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees, horizontal scroll (Fig. 8)

Mongol nobles who had come to pledge allegiance. At the front of the cavalry formation on the right is Emperor Qianlong. The composition of this painting features some intriguing

. In traditional Chinese painting, whenever the emperor appears alongside other figures,

, it was customary practice to depict the emperor larger than ordinary figures. Consider the Tang dynasty

The Emperor Qianlong Hunting Feast

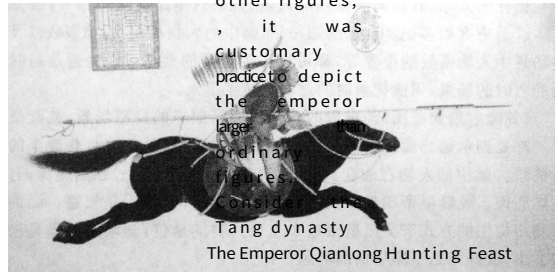
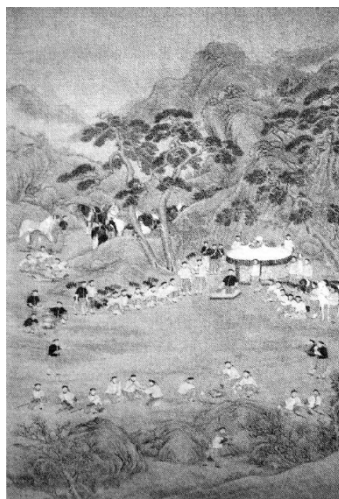


Figure 9: Emperor Qianlong Hunting and Feasting



The location depicted is also Chengde, within the Rehe Summer Palace, bearing distinct regional characteristics. In terms of technique, the mountains in the background exhibit the style of Chinese painting, suggesting it was executed by a Chinese artist.

Figure 10: Ayushi Holding a Spear to Repel Bandits

The figures, however, were executed by European artists employed at court. This painting likewise depicts Emperor Qianlong receiving Mongol nobles.

The Hanging Scroll Depicting Emperor Qianlong's Hunting Feast (Fig. 9) portrays a particularly fruitful hunting expedition. Each year, Emperor Qianlong would journey to the Mulang Mountains north of Chengde for the hunt, and this painting captures one such bountiful occasion. Within the composition, figures are depicted skinning venison, carving venison, simmering venison broth, and roasting venison. Emperor Qianlong sits regally amidst his vigilant guards, with a tent visible behind him. The composition further emphasises the sovereign's preeminence through its framing: the backdrop of pine forests and mountain ranges functions much like a screen behind a throne.

Figure 10 depicts the scroll "Ayushi Holding a Spear to Suppress Rebels", portraying a warrior who quelled a Mongol rebellion. Ayushi himself was a member of the Mongol

who joined the Qing army. Leading several dozen Qing warriors, he launched a night raid on the rebel camp and achieved a resounding victory. We Chinese often speak of "bravery surpassing all others" advancing as if entering an unguarded territory" – I believe this painting captures precisely that sentiment. Following this triumph, Ayuxi's portrait was displayed in the Ziguang Pavilion.

Figure 11 depicts another hunting scene—

The Qianlong Emperor Hunting Deer at Mulan. Interestingly, he combined hunting scenes from different periods. This painting depicts the

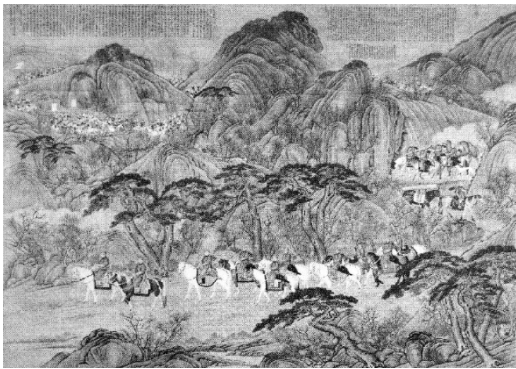


Figure 11: Qianlong Hunting Deer at Mulan

This scene depicts the return to camp. The composition transcends temporal and spatial constraints, reflecting multiple fragments from different eras. The figure mounted on a white horse is Emperor Qianlong. The mountainous backdrop was likely rendered by the Chinese painter Tang Dai. However, the painting bears only Lang Shining's signature, though it was actually this is a collaborative work between Chinese and foreign artists.

Next, let us discuss still life paintings.

Figure 12 depicts the scroll "Gathering Auspicious Signs," featuring a vase adorned with plants symbolising good fortune, such as multi-spiked millet and exotic flora.

Figure 13 is the scroll "Noon Auspiciousness," featuring lychees and zongzi rice dumplings. Lang



, rendering inanimate objects in vivid colours with remarkable realism. It bears strong characteristics of European still life painting, yet the subject matter remains unmistakably traditional Chinese.

Next, let us examine oil paintings.



Figure 14: Battle of Eryezhalat

For a considerable period, oil painting was believed to have been introduced to China by overseas students during the early Republican era, with a history of merely a century. However, within the Palace Museum's collection, we discover existing oil paintings, therefore, provide insights into Chinese oil

Oil painting is also a category of painting.

Engravings are another European painting medium. Lang Shining and other European artists collaborated on a series "Subjugate the Western Regions" (Fig. 14) produced following the Qing victory in suppressing the Xinjiang rebellion during the Qianlong reign. This series of copperplate engravings was based on sketches by Lang Shining and others, sent to Paris for engraving and printing, then transported back to China.

This series comprises sixteen plates depicting different battles, one of which is shown here.

The Battle of Eryezhalat. The Battle of Eryezhalat in the Campaign to Subdue the Western Regions. I wish to draw your attention

The history of oil painting in China can be traced back two to three centuries earlier. In Europe, oil painting has only a history of about five hundred years. Qing court archives also record Lang Shining teaching Chinese artists oil painting techniques. These Chinese painters who studied under Lang Shining can be considered China's first



Figure 12: Gathering Auspiciousness  
Luna A. Picures Peking

Figure 13: Note a particularly intriguing detail: the Qing troops have dismantled the Mongolian yurt depicted, and the figures fleeing from it are depicted nude. This is likely the sole instance of nude figures appearing in Qing court paintings, indeed in Chinese court paintings as a whole.

Nudity was commonplace in European painting, yet remained a taboo in China. This painting was later bestowed by Emperor Qianlong upon several significant academies and temples, serving as a work fundamentally representing official ideology. It is unlikely that Emperor Qianlong failed to notice this particular detail. This presents a most intriguing topic.

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