# Civic Portraits in 17th and 18th Century

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Abstract

By reviewing materials about living conditions and sketching techniques of *Qing* portraitists in Southern China folklore, this paper reveals the social influence on the rise of civic portraits in 17th and 18th century, e.g. ideology, economics and cultural needs, etc. It explicates various types and functions of portraits, also the psychology of those being portrayed and the novelty of female portrait paintings, all of which could hardly be separated from the notion of personality equality springing up between mid-*Ming* to *Qing* period.

**Keywords:** Civic Portraits, Family Portraits, Homely Celebration Paintings, Worship Ceremonies, commemoration, Self-Confidence, Monotype Female Portraits.

Portraits are one of the oldest subjects in Chinese paintings. Before *Yuan* Dynasty, people being portrayed were generally eminent personages, either the nobility and high officials, or those notable scholars and eremites. During mid-*Ming* to *Qing* Dynasty, the emerging citizenry improved their strength as for the increasing of local economy, thus portrait painting had been gaining popularity among them. It included individual portraits specifically for worship ceremonies and group portraits designed according to family hierarchy. Besides, there were also amusement portraits for entertaining, and portraits on Homely Celebration, etc.

Meanwhile, common people or even rural villagers had become the subjects of portraits, as well as educated civic females-- the latter type of portraits remained not only beauty painting enjoyed by collectors.

The popularity of portraits contributed to the civic portraitists grouping as well. In *Qing* Dynasty, the landscape painting held the most profound theories while the portrait painting extended the most practical functions. Various types of portraits formed up a full set of usage, e.g. worship, rites and commemoration, etc.

## Living Situations of the Portraitists

I surveyed among seniors to explore the situation of folk portraitists’ living in town during the early 20th century, and found that both their drawing manners and living traditions had been last for centuries. From there it could be deduced how the portraitists lived during the early and mid-*Qing* period.

As for *Zhejiang* province, there were many portraitists came from *Dongyang*, the famous “hometown of Chinese folk art and craft”, then *Pujiang*. Among them, those superbly skilled were mainly based in cities or market towns, while the inferiors wandering in rural area. The imparting of art skills was by mentorship, usually a master with one or two apprentices. Such small groups were suited for touring streets in town, and completely divergent from those muralists’ crowds often including dozens or even hundreds of people. The apprentices, usually sons or family relatives, began from toil works such as grinding paints or mounting papers, after then to learn delineating patterns and accessories. The master never easily taught his unique stunt on drawing faces to his apprentices until he had made sure that they were loyal and reliable enough not to threaten his own livelihood. When painting at the employer’s home, the portraitists would borrow a room and cook their own. The apprentices took care their master’s living and eating, as they usually would not share table with the employer.

The most important sketching method for portrait painting is memorial drawing. Portraying was referred as “对象”（*Dui xiang*, facing the image）.The word“对”(dui, to face) reflects the essence of eastern portraying art: Memorization to vividness. Before his painting, the portraitist first set down a wall and mounted layers of vellum. After their drying, he hung the drawing paper on which he settled the axis using charcoal sticks, also other points like center of eyebrows, nose and philtrum. He then figured out the height of shoulders to make sure the image upright. The client did not sit up in front of the artist throughout the whole portraying process, and he could leave in a moment, right after finishing the outline draft. Then according to mnemonics summarizing typical face images, the portraitist drew with memories. In the mnemonics, there were many metaphors: faces in shape of “由”(*you*, pear-like, narrow forehead and broad chin),“申”(*shen*, olive-like, prominent cheekbones and pointed chin) or “国”(*guo,* square face), “凤眼”(*feng yan*, literally as “phoenix eyes”, refers to slanted eyes)，“狮鼻”(*shi bi*, literally as “lion nose”, refers to snub nose), “招风耳”（*zhao feng’er*, literally as “wind-catching ears”, refers to protruding ears）and “柳叶眉”（*liu ye mei*, literally as “willow-like eyebrows”, refers to arched eyebrows）,etc. As he finished portraying, the employer would invite neighbors to judge his skills, then decide whether or not to approve his work. The portraitists were also able to draw the ancestors: it demanded the client to find one or two descendant models who looked alike. The portraitist would draw them a little bit older, then solicit ideas from those who had seen the person passed away. This deal would be made after the approval. This kind of portraits was called“太公太婆像”(*Tai gong tai po xiang*, portraits of great-grandfather and great-grandmother) or “追影”(*zhui ying*, retrospective images). Besides, the artists could portray according to the remains before coffin lid and the description from family, to draw out the vivid face with open eyes. The last portrait kind, named “揭帛”(*jie bo*, revealing silks), was comparatively the most expensive. In this method, all common people being portrayed could dress as officials in the picture (though not to point out the specific level), in which the background was magnificent palaces for feeding some clients’ vanity. To increase efficiency, the portraitists would sometimes leave the face blank and draw out clothes in advance. Meanwhile they are skillful for exquisite religious painting, such as *Shuilu* ritual painting (水陆画) for ashram, etc.

The portraitists had diverse skills far more than that. They were also good at mounting and restoration. It was only after mounting could a portrait be counted as complete. Some clients would also demand the portraitists to repair their old portraits collections. The artists were usually quite skilled in that to earn extra income.

During this period, a portraitist’s financial situation was more favorable than common handicraftsmen. Considering the lowest portraying price, it equaled to 10 piculs of millets, namely 1400 *jin*s of unhusked rice, or rice for 500 kilograms, which was about 2000 *rmb* for 5 days.

Though the portraitists had certain economic benefits, their social status was fairly low and nearly same with roughscuff. Thus most of them did not sign on their drawings. Although amazed by their modelling stunt, even peasants despised this business. At that time it was universally thought that portraying would take away souls, and more terribly, portraying the dead would hurt back the portraitist himself, causing him to lack male offspring or even shortening his life. So the client hardly bargained with them. There were seldom people willingly to serve an apprenticeship, even the bandit would not harass them.

## Social and Cultural Background for Family Portraits Development

At the end of *Ming* Dynasty, there emerged a school of portraying named *Bo Chen* (波臣派), which seemingly because of the development of portraying techniques, however, it was fundamentally as for the rise of civil society, which civic portraits more artistic. Seeds of capitalism brought up a large group of civic handicraftsmen and businessmen, whose cultural demands stimulated the civic literature and art. As for the portrait, it reflected the ideas and ruling of patriarchal clan, and favored considerably on keeping family relationships and cohesion.

 Family portraits flourished for the first half of *Qing* Dynasty till *Qianlong* period. It is notable that the “chorography during prosperity” was validated during the same time: local administrators or squires led the compilation of chronicles, and it became rife in almost every coastal provinces in Eastern and Southern China. There were under this influence, southern prominent families, or even humble ones, started to write their own heritage albums. Various kinds of genealogy came out unprecedentedly. As these prints usually attached the ancestors’ portraits in front of the content, the business of portraying was even more stimulated. It might be viewed, along with the inscription of family tree, as one of social customs during 17th and 18th Century

As previously mentioned, the ancestors’ portraits could roughly be divided into two parts: one is individual portraits, which had been the mainstream until the late *Ming* Dynasty; the other, group portraits, was emerged gradually in *Qing* Dynasty, usually including husband and wife, even two or three generations. All these people seemed almost at the same age, whose identities could only be told by their positions (the elder, the higher). This kind of portraits, taken care by the patriarch (namely the firstborn man of the eldest branch), were usually hung on the eve of lunar calendar’s New Year Eve for half month and worshiped by all family members. Those painted elaborately by famous portraitists, were allowed to be hung on wall only for the worship at the New Year’s Eve and would be stored away as soon as the ritual ended.

There also existed the “Ghost Festival” (July 15 on the lunar calendar) among many areas in Southern China. *BIAN Jiu[[1]](#footnote-1)* of *Qing* Dynasty drew a scroll named “*ZHU Maoshi* Worshiping Ancestors” (Image 3, ink and pigment on silk, 66.3cm X 47.1cm) now kept in the Palace Museum. It was a southern picture, telling from the plants growing. This gentleman, namely *ZHU Maoshi* himself, was worshiping his ancestors in the Ghost Festival: kneeling in front of the ancestors’ portraits, while there was this altar with offerings. Mr. *Zhu* held a plate with scissors inside, which was a southern folk habitude. People then thought the ancestors’ spirits might come during this ceremony as well as some demons, thus putting scissors here could scare off the evil spirits as they were afraid of clipping. Similar amulets were placed in houses newly built for protection. This tradition lasts till now in towns of Southern China: The homeowners often hang something edged on the outer wall when holding the Ghost Festival rituals.

Another special kind of civic portraits during 17th and 18th century was “家庆图”(*Jia Qing Tu*, Homely Celebration Paintings), which was rarely seen before *Qing* Dynasty. A cultural influence came from the urbanization and families becoming more scholarly. Its precondition on art is that, during the whole *Ming* Dynasty, paintings about amusement and literati gathering swept the whole country.

*Jia Qing Tu* describes the leading character’s reunion with his family members. It is with a strong sense of life, also a background combining both commemoration and togetherness. Commemoration refers to its timing—they always chose certain grand ceremonies or meaningful gathering in festivals or memorial days. The leading person, usually the patriarch, was at the elder’s position. The subject was often about the Lantern Festival (symbolizing his family reunion) or his birthday/promotion: the former one was presented on the picture as hundreds of kids celebrating, to bless the family’s multiplying; the latter, featuring literal gathering, initiated from similar layouts of artworks in *Ming* Dynasty, for example “Homely Celebration of *CAO Mutang*” by *MIN Zhen*, etc.

There is huge difference between *Jia Qing Tu* and common individual or group portraits where serious people sit properly. *Jia Qing Tu* was for neither worship rites nor antique collections. It aimed at recording those shining moments of people’s family life and the respect earned by the hero, so it was not suitable for uses above. Sometimes, *Jia Qing Tu* was even presented as a hand scroll depicting the hero’s gathering, with artistic skills it focuses on aesthetic tastes of literati. All kinds of *Jia Qing Tu* are galleries of family history, which spawn moments of reminiscence and remembrance of the descendants when they open up these paintings.

## The Novelty of Southern Folk Portraits

There were two art trends emerged in Southern portraits during 17th and 18th century. Though not the mainstream, they deserve a further discussion as meanwhile they also appeared in the creation of literati artists. One is a combination of chiaroscuro from the West and Chinese ink painting skills; another is there came the individual female portraits.

For the influence of Western painting methods on southern Chinese portraitists, it could date back to Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci’s preach activities in *Nanjing* in the late *Ming* Dynasty. Ricci exhibited many icon paintings during his stay there, which indeed opened the eyes of artists from *Nanjing* and surrounding areas. It was said that *ZENG Jing,* who was in *Nanjing* then, thus founded the school of *BO Chen*.

Chiaroscuro method also spread to cities like *Yangzhou* and *Danyang*. There were a lot of *Danyang* touring painters good at this and presumably the Catholics held similar icon painting exhibitions in *Danyang*. Western portraying occupied dominance in *Yangzhou*, which has been recorded by *LI Dou* in his book “扬州画舫录”(*Yangzhou Huangfang Lu*, “Collection of Gaily-Painted Pleasure Boats in *Yangzhou*”). It was quite obvious that chiaroscuro had a grand market in *Yangzhou*, as not only common painters but also literati artists were all considerably skilled. Take “Homely Celebration of *CAO Mutang*” by *MIN Zhen* for instance (Image 1, color on paper, 117cm X 62.5cm, collected by the Palace Museum). Minwas among the so-called “*Yangzhou* Eight Eccentric Artists”. In this picture, the clothes and background were all done by freehand brushwork, while the artist used thin lines to delicately highlight and contour on faces. Two methods contrast but still had been harmonized in one piece.

The rise of female individual portraits showed that women were increasingly respected in educated families. There were also female artists who supplied the backgrounds, which reflected some of their self-affirmation, self-esteem and self-confidence. “The Portrait of *CAO Zhenxiu*” by *ZHOU Li* and *CAO Zhenxiu* (Image 2, color on paper, 138.8cm X 79cm, collected by the Palace Museum) was among the most typical examples. This artwork was portrayed by Zhou and Cao did all the landscapes. This kind of collaboration itself, rarely seen in art history, was against the traditional ethics. Zhou was self-styled as *Yuanzan*, also known as *Yunyan* or *Yunlan Waishi*. He came from County *Wu*, which nowadays belongs to *Suzhou* City. Zhou was active during *Qianlong* and *Jiaqing* Reign (1736-1820), first as portraitist then turning to landscape and flowers painting, learning from *SHEN Zhou*.

The lady portrayed in this painting was *CAO Zhenxiu* herself (1762-1832), alternatively named *Moqin*. Her father *CAO Rui*, an *Anhui* native, had long been official in *Suzhou.* Zhenxiu was second wife to famous Suzhou local *WANG Qisun*, a *Ju-Ren* (provincial graduate) who only became county-level education instructor, while with a highly literary reputation. His collected works was entitled 渊雅堂全集 (Yuanyatang Quanji, “The Complete Works by Owner of Hall of Erudition and Decency”). Under his influence, Zhenxiu was skilled in painting wintersweet and calligraphy, and her works were quite meaningful. Thus she was considered as an educated lady from civic upper-middle-class. This portrait, with techniques fitting literati’s aesthetics, was in the mode of simplicity, freshness and grace, which was quite concordant with the lady’s own temperament.

Civic portraits formed a wave during 17th and 18th century, which reflected the sprouting of early civic humanism and the strengthening of patriarchal hierarchy. It evolved from memorial tablet to portrait worship, developing portraits from general idolatry to self-affirmation by families and individuals. There existed an historical prospect where the portraits, literature and operas interplayed in civil society, encouraging images of common people to become the leading role in artworks. This trend was a projection of the seeds of capitalism on spiritual domain. As for philosophical thoughts then or even earlier: *LI Zhi* in late Ming Dynasty came from wealthy families and he raised a series of anti-neoconfucianism heresy, arguing “The ultimate truth is of everyday use”, “Sages are everywhere to find”, and “Amusement equals eruditeness”. He opposed against class bias, advocated equal natural endowments, and emphasized individual self-consciousness by his method on “utter innocence”. Similarly for *HUANG Zongxi*’s enlightening philosophy from late Ming Dynasty, and conception of history by *WANG Fuzhi* in early Qing, etc. To a great extent all these emerging trends of thought enhanced the development of civic portraits. Haven’t you seen their confidence and delight?

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1. *BIAN Jiu* styled himself *Shen Zhi*, alternatively named *Da Zhuo*. He came from Country *Lou* (nowadays *Songjiang* District of *Shanghai*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)