

Aesthetic Self-Awareness in Ming-Qing Portrait Painting at the Sino-Western Crossroads

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Abstract: During the Ming–Qing period, the arrival of European missionaries introduced Chinese eyes to Western naturalism—an idiom of precise anatomy, linear perspective and chiaroscuro. The new visual order posed an immediate perceptual shock and an aesthetic challenge to China’s long-standing portrait tradition. Yet at this historic cross-cultural juncture Chinese portraiture did not capitulate to wholesale Westernisation; instead it displayed a robust cultural agency and capacity for adaptive self-reinvention. This essay argues that physiognomic visuality—*xiangshu*, a correlative science that reads the face as a micro-cosmos of fate—functioned as a crucial “cultural buffer” and “aesthetic ballast.” By comparing the philosophical foundations, observational protocols, conceptualisations of form and evaluative criteria that separate Chinese from Western portraiture, the study demonstrates how physiognomic culture shaped and consolidated the indigenous *yixiang* (image-as-concept) paradigm. Within its framework painters could dialogue with the Western “scientific realist” system while safeguarding and further developing a native aesthetics centred on *qiyun shengdong* (spirit-resonance), *gufa yongbi* (bone-method brushwork) and *chuanshen xieyi* (expressive transmission of spirit). Taking the writings of Matteo Ricci, Zou Yigui and Shen Zongqian as points of departure, and integrating the syncretic practice of Zeng Jing’s “Bochen” school with Ren Bonian’s modernist turn, the paper reveals how late-imperial portraitists metabolised foreign influences within a physiognomic horizon, effecting a creative transformation premised on “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as application.” Revisiting this episode of cultural self-awareness offers critical historical insight into China’s artistic path to modernity and into the construction of contemporary cultural confidence.

Keywords: Cultural Self-awareness; Image-as-concept (*yixiang*); Ming-Qing Portrait Painting; Physiognomy (*Xiangshu*); Sino-Western comparison; Scientific Realism.

1. Introduction

Between the late sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, Jesuit missionaries—most prominently Matteo Ricci and Giuseppe Castiglione—arrived in China bearing oil sketches, copper engravings and a systematic pedagogy grounded in Renaissance naturalism: linear perspective, anatomical proportion and chiaroscuro. For the first time, a visual language capable of “mirroring reality so faithfully that the painted seemed alive” was placed before Confucian scholars, professional painters and emperors alike. The encounter delivered an unprecedented shock to a pictorial tradition that had long privileged linear resonance, ink orchestration and poetic emptiness, forcing a fundamental rethinking of what painting was, what it was for and how it should be done.

Ming–Qing portrait painting stood at the front line of this upheaval. On the one hand, an expanding social market—merchants commissioning *xingle tu* (pleasure-trip) scrolls, lineages ordering ancestral icons—propelled portraiture toward professionalisation and mass circulation. On the other, the imported Western technologies of seeing destabilised indigenous notions of likeness, presence and selfhood. How did Chinese portraitists respond? By capitulating entirely to the Western scientific regime? By retreating into brush-and-ink orthodoxy? Or by forging a third path that was neither wholesale acceptance nor stubborn refusal?

Previous scholarship has mapped the diffusion of European visuality (Mo Xiaoye) or traced the creative adaptations of individual masters such as Zeng Jing, Jiao Bingzhen and Wu Li. Yet one question remains under-examined: when an assertive foreign visual culture suddenly becomes available,

what internal epistemic resource enables a local tradition to maintain its agency—selecting, neutralising and redirecting the alien elements? This study argues that the answer lies in *xiangshu* (physiognomy), a symbolic technology that correlates the human face with the cosmos, destiny and *qi*-flow. Long embedded in portrait praxis, physiognomy supplied a cognitive filter and an aesthetic yardstick through which painters measured the foreign against the familiar. Far from withdrawing in the face of “objective” science, the physiognomic gaze—metaphorical, correlative, *qi*-centred—became the very lens that allowed artists to discern the epistemological gap between West and East and to devise a self-conscious strategy of cultural adjustment. By reconstructing this dialogue, the essay illuminates how Ming–Qing portraiture negotiated its passage to modernity without relinquishing its epistemic core.

2. The Philosophic and Scientific Fault-Line Between Chinese and Western Portraiture

The fundamental difference between Chinese and Western portrait painting first arises from their divergent philosophies, worldviews, and definitions of “reality.”

2.1. Western Realism: The Imitation of Nature and Scientific Representation

The Western portrait tradition can be traced back to the ancient Greek concept of *mimesis*, which regards art as an imitation of the natural world. During the Renaissance, this tradition merged with the emerging scientific spirit, leading to

revolutionary changes. Leon Battista Alberti's *On Painting* and Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks systematically established anatomy, linear perspective, and optics (*chiaroscuro*) as the scientific foundations of painting. The human body was viewed as a precise, harmonious, and rationally comprehensible mechanical and geometric structure. The goal of painting was to create a visually logical and convincing three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional surface. This kind of "reality" is a "physical" or "visual truth" based on visual experience and scientific laws (Fig. 1). Portrait painting strives to capture the sitter's fleeting expression, skin texture, and ambient light with lifelike accuracy, and its authority derives from its close correspondence to what the naked eye perceives.



Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 42 × 30 cm, woodcut cabinet, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, 1514.

It was precisely according to this criterion that Matteo Ricci praised or dismissed paintings when introducing Western pictures to Chinese literati. Gu Qiyuan's late-Ming miscellany *Kezuo zhuiyu* records Ricci's remark:

"Chinese painting shows only the yang [light] side and not the yin [shadow] side; therefore human faces and bodies look perfectly flat, without any convex or concave appearance. Our country's pictures depict both yin and yang, so the face has highs and lows, and even the arms appear fully rounded. Whenever a human face turns directly toward the light it is all bright and white; if the person stands sideways, the side facing the light is white, while the opposite side—eyes, nose, mouth and all recessed places—exhibits shadowed tones. Our portraitists understand and apply this method; hence their images are indistinguishable from living persons."^[1]

Ricci pinpoints the key technical difference in the rendering of volume: Chinese pictures lack a systematic *chiaroscuro* under a fixed light source ("yin and yang"). In his eyes this leaves Chinese figures "flat," devoid of plasticity and truth. His critique rests squarely on the Western scientific-realist standard that models form through light and shadow (Fig. 2).

2.2. Chinese Imagist Aesthetics: Observing Things and Capturing Their Images, and the Vitality of Spirit-Resonance

The philosophical bedrock of Chinese painting lies in the

Yijing's imperative to "observe things and seize their images" (*guanwu quxiang*), in Daoist *qi*-cosmology, and in Xuanxue's dialectic of *xing* (form) and *shen* (spirit). Painting is never passive mimicry of a surface; it is the *yixiang*—the image-as-concept—born when the painter's mind and the object's spirit inter-penetrate. Xie He's sixth-century "Six Laws" rank *qiyun shengdong*—spirit-resonance and life-movement—above all else, while *gufa yongbi* ("bone-method brushwork") charges the linear skeleton with expressive vitality. Truth here is essential or spiritual, transcending optical likeness.

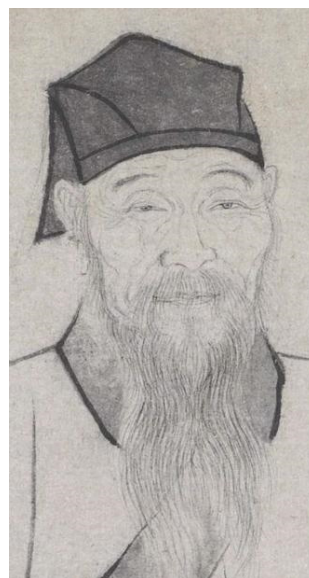


Figure 2. [Yuan] Wang Yi, Portrait of Yang Zhuxi (detail), handscroll, ink on paper, 27.7 × 86.8 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Physiognomy slots seamlessly into this aesthetics. A person's "real" is not epidermal accuracy but the *guxiang* (osseous pattern), *qise* (colour of *qi*) and *shencai* (spiritual brilliance) that betray destiny, virtue and vitality. The portraitist therefore performs a physiognomic reading: he isolates the nodal features—*san ting wu yue* proportions, clarity or turbidity of the pupil, flourishing or withering of complexion—and renders them with ink-lines that transmit *qiyun* and washes that intimate circulating *qi*, rather than with shadows that model mass.

Encountering Western pictures, the Qing painter-critic Zou Yigui conceded:

"The Westerners excel at right-triangle geometry; their depictions of light, distance and shadow are accurate to the smallest grain. Figures, houses and trees all cast sun-shadows; their colours and brushes differ utterly from ours. They measure recession with triangular grids, paint palace halls on walls so that one almost walks in. A Chinese learner might borrow one or two devices as 'awakening methods'. Yet they are entirely devoid of brush-method; however skilful, they remain mere craftsmanship and are not admitted into the category of painting."^[2]

For Zou, "brush-method" is not a technique but the calligraphic pulse that bears the painter's personhood and *qi*-rhythm. Without it, Western exactitude is only "artisanal breath." Shen Zongqian likewise censured Westerners for "being enslaved to ink": their tonal modelling serves physical light, whereas Chinese ink deploys shadow and void to write the *qi*-infused idea.^[3]

Thus, confronted with scientific realism, Chinese painters did not simply reject it; they diagnosed its ontological

difference and defended their own tradition through the physiognomic keywords *chuanshen*, *qiyun*, *gufa*.

3. Absorption and Transformation of Western Pictorial Methods within the Physiognomic Framework

The response of Ming–Qing portrait painters to Western pictorial techniques was neither wholesale acceptance nor outright rejection; rather, it was a complex, multi-layered negotiation. At its core stood the indigenous physiognomic visual regime, which acted as a selective filter, a transformative catalyst and an integrative mechanism.

3.1. Zeng Jing and the “Bochen” School: Integrating “Relief” into the “Ink-Bone” Mode

During the Wanli era of the late Ming, the Fujian-born painter Zeng Jing—courtesy name “Bochen”—was active in Nanjing, where he founded the far-reaching “Bochen” school and came to be regarded as the earliest master who successfully fused Chinese and Western methods. Jiang Shaoshu’s *Silent History of Painting* describes his manner:

“His likenesses are as exact as images caught in a mirror, yet marvelously seize the sitter’s spirit. His colours are saturated and lustrous; the dotting of the pupils brings the figure to life. Though rendered only on paper or silk, every glance and dimple, every smile or frown, is startlingly real. ... For each portrait he superimposes several dozen layers of wash, not resting until every ounce of ingenuity is spent.”[4]

Comments such as “like a mirror catching an image” and “startlingly lifelike” reveal contemporary admiration for his intensely realist effects—an admiration plainly shaped by Western visuality. Yet Zeng Jing’s synthesis remained rigorously self-directed. His trademark “ink-bone” method first mapped the facial contour and major osteological pivots—frontal bone, cheekbone, mandible—with a precise yet summary pale-ink line. Over this armature he “baked and dyed several dozen layers,” not according to a fixed-source chiaroscuro but in response to the face’s own anatomical relief and to the physiognomic premium on “bone-phase” (*guxiang*) modulation. Successive washes of diluted ink and ochre accumulated a subtle volumetric mass of flesh and blood beneath the skin, after which a final veil of muted color was applied.

The crux of the entire process lies in the “ink-bone.” Prioritized first is the inner “osseous phase” structure conceived within physiognomic thinking, not the play of light and shade. The successive washes serve to suffuse this bone-scheme with blood and breath, not to imitate external lighting. Hence, in Zeng Jing’s surviving works—such as the *Portrait of Wang Shimin* or the *Portrait of Ge Yilong* (Fig. 3)—while plasticity and tactile presence are greatly heightened and the figure seems to breathe, the spiritual nucleus remains resolutely Chinese: the image is dignified and reserved, the brush-line pure and fluid, the palette muted and elegant. What is sought is the sitter’s tranquil, magnanimous inner temperament (his *shen*), not a fleeting theatrical moment of light. Zeng’s “lifelikeness,” in short, is an imagist truth grounded in physiognomic bone-knowledge and traditional ink-resonance, rather than a Western optical truth. One may say that he took China’s own “ink-bone” as *ti* (substance) and selectively absorbed the Western *aotu* relief method as *yong* (application), achieving the first successful creative

transformation of its kind.



Figure 3. [Ming] Zeng Jing, *Portrait of Ge Yilong*, ink on paper, 32.5 × 77.5 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

3.2. Vernacular Ancestral Portraits and the Symbolic Appropriation of Western Methods



Figure 4. [Qing] Anonymous, *Ancestral Portrait*, ink and color on paper, 278.2 × 112.2 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art

In the broader sphere of vernacular portraiture—especially in ancestral images of the mid-to-late Qing—traces of Western influence are likewise visible, yet their application was invariably subsumed within a traditional symbolic order. In some lineage portraits, for example, the facial modelling acquires a mild relief: a faint shadow along the bridge of the nose or across the cheekbone. Such shading, however, does not aim at a convincing light source; rather, it functions as a visual intensification of physiognomic markers of nobility—“nose like a suspended gall-bladder,” “cheekbones full and commanding.” The artisan used this discreet “*aotu*” relief to

throw into prominence those very features that augur fortune, emolument, longevity and felicity, ensuring that, even within a planar image, auspicious signs dominate. Here the “scientific” component of the Western method is stripped away, its plastic effect converted into a new visual sign that serves time-honoured physiognomic beliefs (Fig. 4).

4. Ren Bonian and the Modernist Quest in Late-Qing Portrait Painting

By the late Qing period, intensified Sino-Western cultural exchange had turned Shanghai into a burgeoning hub of commerce and art. The port-city master Ren Bonian (1840–1896) re-aligned literati portraiture with this new, hybrid modernity, carrying out the tradition’s most decisive internal adaptation since Zeng Jing.

Ren Bonian possessed an exceptional realist facility, probably honed by early exposure to Western drawing or studio photography. His figures are structurally accurate, solidly modelled and vibrantly animated—far exceeding the mimetic reach of most contemporaries. Yet close reading of his canonical portraits—The “Sour-placket” Officer (Wu Changshuo) (Fig. 5), Portrait of Gao Yongzhi, Portrait of Xu Gu—reveals that his aesthetic substratum remains resolutely traditional.

First and foremost, Ren remained obsessed with chuanshen—the transmission of spirit. He excelled at seizing his friends’ disparate temperaments—droll, eccentric, aloof or melancholy—through heightened eyebrow-and-eye inflections and posture that verged on caricature, a practice continuous with physiognomic scrutiny of shen-tai (spiritual countenance). In The “Sour-placket” Officer Wu Changshuo’s wry, self-mocking grimace is incised to the bone, a textbook instance of “grasping Heaven’s endowment through shadowed observation.”

Secondly, the structural core of his images remains gufa yongbi—“bone-method brushwork.” Ren commanded a prodigious linear repertoire of infinite variation. In portraiture he delineated facial contours, features and drapery with taut, springy strokes whose very presence—now sinewy, now fluid, now parched—possessed autonomous aesthetic value and chimed perfectly with the sitter’s temperament. Facial modelling, though enriched by a bolder, more varied palette, still cleaves to this linear armature; it never relinquishes the supremacy of line for full plastic modelling.

Lastly, his pictures are pervaded by an emphatic xieyi—idea-writing—impulse. Ren eschewed believable back-space or rigorous proportion, often resorting to daring croppings and void-solid manipulations that float the figure in blank or pared-down settings so that the psychic presence dominates. Color is deployed subjectively, for emotional charge rather than optical local hue.

Ren Bonian’s success lay in his ability—grounded in a profound command of traditional painting and physiognomic seeing—to absorb, swiftly and astutely, those Western devices that heightened structural accuracy and expressive force, and to digest them completely into the ink-brush, qiyun and chuanshen core of Chinese painting. Unlike Xu Beihong later, he did not attempt to remake Chinese painting from the ground up with a Western drawing system; instead, while steadfastly preserving the ontological primacy of Chinese “image-as-concept” modelling, he vastly expanded its expressive frontier. He is the consummate practitioner of “Chinese learning as substance, Western learning as

application,” embodying a path of development that, confronting the shock of modernity, kept its own centre while achieving full integration.



Figure 5. 1888, Ren Bonian, Portrait of the “Sour-Placket” Officer, ink and color on paper, 164.2 × 77.6 cm, Zhejiang Provincial Museum.

5. The Modern Predicament and Contemporary Relevance of Physiognomic Thinking

In the early twentieth century, swept along by the tides of “Science” and “Democracy,” China’s art world underwent a more radical upheaval. Returned students from Europe—led by Xu Beihong—vigorously promoted “drawing from the cast as the foundation of all plastic arts” and imported a systematic Western academic programme aimed at “reforming” Chinese painting. While this historic move profoundly reshaped Chinese art education, its collateral damage was the rapid marginalisation—indeed the stigmatisation as “unscientific” and “backward”—of the indigenous yixiang (image-as-concept) paradigm rooted in physiognomy, calligraphy and qiyun.

Physiognomy, tainted by its association with “superstition,” was banished outright from the artistic canon. The result is a palpable rupture between contemporary Chinese figure-painting pedagogy and its own visual genealogy: students command anatomy, perspective, colour and compositional syntax, yet complain their works are “form-present, spirit-absent,” lacking inner depth or cultural sediment. When “hyper-realism” becomes fashionable, painting risks collapsing into photographic replication, forfeiting the traditional power of summary, exaggeration and symbol to pierce the heart.

Against this backdrop, revisiting the Ming–Qing experience of Sino-Western visual collision—especially the “aesthetic ballast” supplied by physiognomic culture—offers timely lessons. Late-imperial practice demonstrates that cultural subjectivity is the prerequisite for any fruitful

dialogue: only by clarifying its own criteria of xing-shen, qiyun and gufa could the tradition absorb foreign elements without being absorbed by them. The careers of Zeng Jing and Ren Bonian prove that successful synthesis replaces nothing with nothing; instead, it re-frames the alien within an indigenous logic. Resources such as physiognomy should not be jettisoned as “unscientific”; rather, their superstitious husks must be peeled away to release the poetic wisdom that couples appearance to spirit and the individual to the cosmos. The Chinese yixiang paradigm—its subjective distillation, spiritual address, brush-ink savour and symbolic density—provides a ready counter to the homogenisation of global images and restores human depth to portraiture. In an age of mechanical exactitude, the value of painting may lie less in outdoing the camera’s likeness than in out-thinking and out-feeling it—reaching, with a single brush-line, the soul the lens can never touch.

6. Conclusion

The encounter between Ming–Qing portrait painting and Western naturalism was a truly deep cross-cultural dialogue. In that dialogue, China’s traditional visual episteme—physiognomy prominent within it—functioned neither as passive recipient nor as stubborn resister, but as an active interlocutor and a generative frame for creative transformation. Armed with indigenous criteria such as chuanshen (transmitting the spirit), qiyun (spirit-resonance) and gufa (bone-method), Chinese painters identified the fundamental divergence between the two notions of “reality” and selectively appropriated, then re-coded, Western representational devices.

From Zeng Jing’s digestion of relief through the “ink-bone” to Ren Bonian’s integration of solid modelling with

calligraphic brushwork, we witness a modernizing path that remains culturally self-centred yet open-minded. Its core was the steadfast retention of an yixiang (image-as-concept) aesthetic sovereignty. Physiognomic culture, the soil in which that aesthetic was rooted, contributed less a set of fortune-telling rules than a unique mode of thought that links outward appearance to inner spirit, individual destiny to cosmic order. This mindset remains the cultural cipher distinguishing Chinese portraiture from Western mimetic likeness.

Today, as Chinese art re-enters a global arena and confronts an even more complex construction of cultural identity, this historical episode offers a vital reminder: cultural vitality springs from confident self-holding and from open-ended transformation. To rediscover and reinterpret traditional visual wisdom—including physiognomic thinking—is not to revive the past, but to reclaim in contemporary art that power of chuanshen which contemplates life as a whole and pierces straight to the spiritual core. In so doing, artists can create new yixiang worlds that are at once modern in spirit and animated by the genes of Chinese aesthetics.

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