

# Possession and Legitimacy

## In Yongzheng's Twelve Beauties

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**ABSTRACT:** Yongzheng's Twelve Beauties is a series of six-foot-tall painted screens depicting beautiful women in intriguing locations. The screens were created for the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722 to 1735) of Qing dynasty China while he was still a prince. In particular, a study of the screen featuring a woman surrounded by antiquities provides several insights into the concerns of the eighteenth-century Qing court. First, it helps us to understand how imperial collections of antiquities and art objects were used to legitimize the rule of the foreign dynasty. Second, the woman depicted on the screen is a representation of how art featuring ethnically Chinese women could be used to “geogender” China and justify the Manchu Qing rule over what they perceived as an exotic and feminine country. Last, the screen is an insight into courtesan culture and its representation in various artistic genres in eighteenth-century China. Through a close analysis of the painting, this paper will examine the eighteenth-century Manchu Qing court and how the use of art and imperial collections were used to respond to the perceived cultural threat of sinicization.

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**KEYWORDS:** Chinese art history, Eighteenth-Century Art History, Qing Dynasty, Yongzheng Emperor

Poised, beautiful, and elegant, a woman perches like a caged bird in a space lined with exquisite and unique treasures, a sumptuous image fit for a future emperor (fig. 1). The woman is dressed in multiple layers; a brown, loose-fitting outer robe, an ornately embroidered red and gold robe, and lastly, a long white robe that pools around her feet. She wears jewelry and holds a sinuous seafoam green cloth. Her hands and facial features are slender and delicate. One of the woman's sleeves is caught on the back of the chair and reveals her delicate, pale wrist. She is in the foreground, and her pale skin stands out against a work dominated by shades of black and brown. The walls behind the woman are covered in shelves of beautiful objects such as vases, boxes, a large black bell, and an impressive black lacquer chest.

This screen is part of a set of twelve, all featuring beautiful women in beautiful settings. They were created through the Imperial Workshop and commissioned for prince Yinzheng, who became the Yongzheng Emperor. The paintings were displayed in “the Reading Hall Deep Inside Weeping Willows in the Yuanming Garden,” (Hung 1996, 203) a favourite location of the prince. The women in the screens are presented as Yongzheng's lovers who are waiting for him (Hung 1996, 220). There is debate over the identity of the women; some scholars believe that they are depictions of actual imperial consorts, whereas others argue that they are simply generic beauties (Stuart 2018, 65).

The work is six feet tall, creating a sense of immediacy with the viewer. It and the other eleven works of the series were mounted on screens that enclosed a seating area, surrounding the viewer (Hung 1996, 203). Such large works of art function as “an invitation into the woman's actual presence” (White 2013, 25). The bodily relationship that is created in such a large work is appropriate to its subject matter: beautiful women. Undoubtedly, the visual pleasure that the emperor experienced when seeing these works was increased by their life-sized scale and their surrounding placement. In such an immersive work of art, the prince would be able to feel the presence of the painted ladies. Moreover, surrounded by the twelve screens in an enclosed sort of room, the viewer becomes part of the women's space, a guest in their quarters. The way the screens transport the viewer in space and time are essential to understanding their function.

To understand this work, it is necessary to understand the context in which it was created. The Qing dynasty was first established in 1636 by the Manchu people, an ethnically non-Chinese group who ruled the north-



eastern part of what would later become China. The Qing took control of China in 1644 and ruled until 1912, making them China's last dynasty. Questions of ethnicity were an issue throughout the Qing reign, as there was tension between the Han (ethnically Chinese) people and the foreign dynasty who ruled them. These tensions are visible in Yongzheng's Twelve Beauties. Yongzheng was the third Qing emperor to rule China and ruled from 1722 to 1735, when questions of ethnicity were still fresh in the minds of many Chinese people.

In the screen of the beauty with antiquities, the location of the treasure cabinet and the woman's identity are irrevocably tied to each other in service of the Qing court's demonstration of legitimate control over the people and the culture of China. For the Qing emper-

ors, finding ways to legitimize their rule was of great concern. In Yongzheng's screen, the woman is a part of the room, rather than a force that exerts agency on it. Just like the treasures that line the walls, she is also an item used to legitimize Manchu rule over China. First, through the display of an imperial collection, Yongzheng is positioning himself as continuing the tradition of palace collections and demonstrating Manchu rule as a continuation of previous dynasties. He is also employing the legitimizing nature of the treasures themselves, which were often seen as conveying qualities essential to a good rule. Second, through the depiction of a woman that fits Han Chinese beauty ideals, Yongzheng is positioning himself as having power over the Han people. This process also feminizes the space of China and invites conquest. Moreover, the screens draw upon other contemporary genres of art, such as popular beauty prints and *meiren hua* (paintings of beautiful women), to convey their meaning.

### **Beautiful Women in Beautiful Spaces**

Yongzheng's screens have many similarities to other styles of painting during the Qing dynasty, such as *meiren hua* and vernacular prints made for a mass audience also featuring beautiful women. The screens are similar to vernacular beauty prints, as they feature beautiful, refined, and wealthy women in beautiful settings. A key part of these popular prints was the creation of an idealized life, featuring high-class beautiful women dressed in fine clothing located in spaces frequented by the elite (Wang 2018, 63), like the women in Yongzheng's screens. These women could be depicted in "private spaces . . . often furnished with items associated with the cultured and wealthy" (Wang 2018, 74). In this way, the beautiful locations that the women were found in added to their beauty. Physical beauty, however, was not the only basis on which women were considered beautiful in the Qing dynasty. Education was also an important factor and was often pictured in vernacular prints (Wang 2018, 68). Perhaps this can also explain the location of the beauty in this screen: she is in a room filled with antiquities, beautiful objects, and books. These objects presuppose the woman's prior knowledge of history and literature that would lend a proper appreciation to her location.

Yongzheng's screens are also similar to *meiren hua* paintings. This genre often depicted women waiting for their lovers, like the women in Yongzheng's screens. In images like these, "the male viewer can take on, in imagination, the role of the one [the woman] is waiting for" (Cahill 2013, 14). This genre connects the owner of the works, in this case Yongzheng, to his paintings, as he is the one who the women are waiting for. As

well, courtesans were often the subjects of *meiren hua* and were possibly the subjects of Yongzheng's beauty screens. Images such as these quite often featured erotic undertones. For example, an open sleeve, like that of the woman in the painting, was often seen as a sexual invitation (Handler 2013, 37). These types of sensual undertones are an important part to understanding the functions of Yongzheng's screens and would likely have been heightened when the prince was physically surrounded by the twelve paintings.

Moreover, *meiren hua* serve to demonstrate the similarities between courtesan culture and Yongzheng's beauties. Oftentimes *meiren hua* display courtesans in locations with precious objects, such as antiquities, which demonstrate the education of the courtesan. This makes her a good match for a man of high social status, who also would have been educated (Handler 2013, 38). These objects demonstrate her education and status and are important to a courtesan's identity, as "the ideal courtesan is not merely an object of sexual desire but a true participant in a man's aesthetic, artistic, and literary life" (Handler 2013, 38-49). A courtesan must not only be beautiful but also have an education that would allow her to be a valued companion to a gentleman (White 2013, 29-30). These qualities of learning can consequently be transferred to Yongzheng's screen of the beauty surrounded by antiquities. Her location is crucial to her identity and suggests that she is someone worthy of the educated emperor's time. A man as well-educated as the prince would have appreciated a companion who was not only beautiful but shared his learned background. Therefore, the location of the beauty in Yongzheng's painting speaks to the refinement and quality of its subject.

### **Precious Objects**

The treasures in this screen hold further significance than simply demonstrating the educated and refined background of the woman. Similar to how palace women were hidden from men (Stuart 2018, 62), secrecy was an important aspect of the imperial collection. The concealment of important objects lent a greater amount of authority to the owner (Chiang 2019, 115). The power of the emperor was visible in the fact that he controlled who could see the objects in his collection (Chiang 2019, 118). The private location of both the woman and the treasures surrounding her speak to how highly valued they were by the Yongzheng emperor. The collection possessed by the emperor was a way to position himself in history as well as in the world – a physical way of demonstrating his rule (Chiang 2019, 121). It also revealed the diversity of his empire (Chiang 2019, 132). In this way, by collecting objects from

various regions of China, Yongzheng was positioning himself as the conqueror and ruler of these areas. The objects would have stood in as representations of specific regions of his empire. Objects were used as pieces of information, almost like a library (Chiang 2019, 134). The emperor controlled this crucial information, to which only he (and later his heirs) had access (Chiang 2019, 119). The location of the woman among these important objects demonstrates that she also is used as a way for the emperor to position himself, or as an exotic object providing him with information about his empire.

Throughout Chinese history, treasures have been a way to legitimize the emperor's rule (Ledderose 1978-9, 33-34). This continued into collections such as those of the Qing. Treasures were a way of physically representing the mandate of heaven, which legitimized the rule of Chinese emperors (Ledderose 1978-9, 34). Precious objects could be a tangible manifestation of an abstract concept. Moreover, virtue and the possession of treasures were interconnected (Ledderose 1978-9, 35). Oftentimes, the beginning of an emperor's reign (or a new dynasty, like the Qing) was a time of expansion for the imperial collection "as a demonstration that they were going to conduct a virtuous and enlightened government" (Ledderose 1978-9, 39). When the state became more secularized, art objects "acted as a guarantee for the legitimate political and cultural tradition in the secularized state" (Ledderose 1978-9, 35). The fact that the Manchus, a foreign dynasty, continued this tradition lent a sense of legitimacy to their rule. Not only did treasures themselves give a rule legitimacy but collecting Chinese objects and antiques in the same manner as previous dynasties would position the Qing as part of the same lineage throughout Chinese history. This continuation of tradition likely contributed to their attempts to legitimize and naturalize their rule. Perhaps, along with the treasures she is surrounded by, the woman is also a tool used to demonstrate that the reign of the Yongzheng emperor would be virtuous and legitimate.

### Chinese Beauties

The treasures are not the only intriguing aspect of this painting. It is also important to note that the beautiful woman was placed in this specific location and to question how the woman and her setting are related. Like the treasures in the background, imperial consorts were seen as the property of the emperor (Stuart 2018, 61). Similar to the way that important possessions were kept in secrecy, the way that these women were hidden from male viewers could also be a demonstration of their importance to the emperor. The possession of women

was also used as a symbol of status (Wang 2004, 212). This is evident in the position of imperial consorts. Under Manchu rule, the ethnicity of consorts was of great concern, as it was in other dynasties that were not ethnically Chinese (Wang 2004, 212-13). More Han and Manchu people were marrying, and Manchu lords in the eighteenth century became more interested in Chinese culture and less interested in their traditional culture (Wang 2004, 216). For many elite Manchu lords, as well as some emperors, this sinicization and loss of traditional Manchu culture was of great concern, and the court became more focused on keeping their Manchu lineage pure (Wang 2004, 216).

This concern can be seen in the imperial selection system, the *xiunu* system, which was created so that all imperial consorts were ethnically Manchu (Wang 2004, 214-15). However, this rule was not completely set in stone, as the emperors Shunzhi, Kangxi, and Yongzheng were all known to have had Han Chinese consorts (Wang 2004, 215). This fact demonstrates the fascination with and attraction to Han women experienced by the Manchu rulers. Moreover, many women who entered selection for being an imperial consort had Han lineage or were brought up in a Han Chinese manner (Wang 2004, 220). This adoption of Han Chinese culture was noticed by the Qianlong emperor, who noted that "this is truly not the Manchu custom. If they do this before me, what is willfully worn at home? . . . Although this is a small matter, if we do not speak to correct it, there must gradually be a change in our customs, which are greatly tied to our old Manchu ways" (Wang 2004, 220). Therefore, both Han Chinese women and Han manners of expression were regarded with suspicion by the Manchu court, as a threat to traditional Manchu culture.

Despite the fear of bringing Han women into the Forbidden City, the woman in Yongzheng's screen is dressed in a Han Chinese manner (Stuart 2018, 70). This is visible in the jewelry that she is wearing; Manchu women wore three earrings in their ears, whereas the woman in the screen wears one earring - a Han style (Stuart 2018, 70-71). The flowing robes of the ladies in Yongzheng's screens were similar to those in contemporary vernacular Chinese paintings (Stuart 2018, 71), a contrast to the stiff portraits of the imperial consorts in Manchu dress. These garments and jewelry created the appearance of being Han Chinese and contrasted with the official portrayal of Manchu women. This Han manner of presentation is notable, considering that it was frowned upon at the time. If the elite were so concerned with preserving their Manchu ways, why was the future emperor sitting in a location surrounded by images of beautiful Han women?

## A Feminine Space

Although the Manchu nobility were aware of the sinicization of its members and were wary of Han culture, the emperor still enjoyed images of attractive women who followed the ideals of southern China (Stuart 2018, 71). Perhaps the women in his beauty screens were more than simply beauties. The Han women in the screens could be representations of China itself; a way of “geogendering” southern China through attractive Han women (Stuart 2018, 71). This process may be similar to how treasures in Yongzheng’s collection stood in for abstract ideas, such as history or geographical space. Through the image of a beautiful Han woman, southern China is viewed as attractive and exotic to the Manchu elite, but also vulnerable and submissive (Hung 1996, 217). She is a way of representing China as foreign and feminine (Hung 1996, 217). This could be a reassuring image to a Manchu court feeling threatened by the sinicization of its members. There is an important power dynamic at play in these images: Yongzheng is seen as having control over this woman, which extends to control over China itself (Hung 2017, 221). Moreover, Yongzheng not only has control over Han women, but he also has control over their treasures. As discussed, treasures were not only beautiful objects but also contained information regarding the nation’s history. By demonstrating his possession of these objects, he may also be demonstrating his possession of Chinese history. In the same way that the Han women are a stand-in for the Han people, the treasures may be a representation of Chinese history itself. The depiction of Han Chinese women was not only an aesthetic choice but a demonstration of the emperor’s power and control over southern China, its people, and its culture.

Moreover, the screens do not show real people or locations, but are rather depictions of a “feminine space” (Hung 1996, 211). This idea is echoed by the location of the screens - Yuanming Garden, often seen as a feminine space and a favourite location of Yongzheng (Hung 1996, 210). The prince enjoyed spending his time in this place of beauty. As well, by being enclosed by images of beautiful women, he was inside another kind of feminine space.

Although created for a future emperor, Yongzheng’s twelve beauty screens are works that are situated in the artistic tradition of their time, such as vernacular beauty prints and *meiren hua*. The context of these genres provides the viewer with information crucial to understanding the screens, such as the depiction of educated and cultured women and the depicted women waiting for their lover, who can be seen as the viewer

of the works. The screen that is the focus of this paper, through its depiction of Chinese treasures, legitimizes the Qing dynasty, as it continues in the Chinese tradition of imperial collections. It also employs precious objects as signifiers of virtue as well as the Mandate of Heaven, and the objects may be a stand-in for concepts of space and time. Through analyzing the garments and jewelry of the painted beauties, we can discover that they are presented as Chinese women, which is especially striking when taken in context with the contemporary Manchu fears of sinicization. By depicting Han Chinese beauties, Yongzheng’s screens feminize China and invite the emperor’s control over the region while quashing concern over the sinicization of the Manchu court. Yongzheng’s Twelve Beauties, when considering the court at the time of their creation, provide an insight into the concerns of the Qing court and how it responded to perceived cultural threats.

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