Embodiment and Subjectivity of Qing Femininity in *Court Ladies at Play*

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In 1683, during the Kangxi Era, Chinese painter Xu Zhuang created the painting *Court Ladies at Play*, showing women in elegant clothing relaxing while waiting for an imperial summon. In the painting, four court ladies sit around a table covered with a red tablecloth, playing the card game in a garden surrounded by rocks, bamboo, cherry, and magnolia trees. As at that time it is the peak of Sinicization, women’s delicate clothes are intended to evoke the courtly art of the Tang dynasty (618-906).[[1]](#footnote-1) In order to unveil the femininity of court ladies in the late seventeenth century, this paper will explore how women clothes, background, and what they are doing embody the inheritance and uniqueness of females in the Qing dynasty in Xu’s picture.

Using ink and color on silk, like most artists in the Qing dynasty, Xu Zhuang overall used the obscure hue. The silk darkens with age, but, the bright red tablecloth, and the sporadic pure white of flowers in magnolia trees are giving the visual impact to make the picture vibrant. These bright elements indicate that this elegant garden is in the imperial palace, and the identity of these women are upper-class court ladies. During the Yong Zheng and Kang Xi era in the late seventeenth century, the Qing dynasty was experiencing mercantile flourishing.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cahill discussed *meiren hua*, or the painting of beautiful women, in his article, showing that an increasing number of painters prefer the *meiren* paintings especially the court ladies and courtesans to provide visible female images in the Qing dynasty.[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4)No doubt, *Court Ladies at Play* is one of the *meiren hua* showing visible women who were graceful, noble, and educated.

In the Court Ladies at Play, the audience could feel that the fashion of female clothes shared the similarity of Han clothes from the Tang dynasty at first glance. The clothes four ladies wear are similar, revealing the court fashion at that time. Women in the painting *Ladies Preparing Newly Women Silk* drawn by Zhang Xuan in early 12th century and women in *Court Ladies at Play* both focused on the pure aesthetics of the femininity: executed in rich colors in a subdued tone, their thin gauze robes expose patterned underclothes, inviting the viewer to discover the female body beneath[[5]](#footnote-5). Long trailing dresses have loose sleeves, with exquisite decoration hung over the grindle. Same as the hairstyle of court ladies in the Tang dynasty, tall coiffures are sculptural forms embellished with flowers and jewelry.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In 1622, the Manchu regent Prince Rui destroyed the Ming regime and established the Qing dynasty of the unified Manchu ruling class. Since Zhongyuan, also known as the Central Plains region, was firstly governed by the Manchu, the Manchu-Chinese relationship entered a new stage. As the communication and trade between Manchu and Han became closer and closer, Manchu culture was experiencing the acculturation. The bureaucratic system, land management, military establishment, and culture of the Qing Dynasty were all subject to drastic changes due to the influence of the Zhongyuan, which is called the Hanhua, or Sinicization.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sinicization successfully consolidated the Manchu rule and promoted the harmonious relationship between Manchu and Han people, even the difference between them was eliminated.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 1683, especially when Kang Xi who advocated Sinicization was the emperor, the fashion of female clothes especially reveal the Sinicization. The Tang dynasty was at the height of power and splendor and clothes in the Tang dynasty was always considered as the representation of Han clothes , so it is not surprised that Qing women in the painting *Court Ladies at Play* wear the Tang style clothes to evoke the prosperous Tang dynasty.

Obviously, there are some differences between the Tang beauty of Qing beauty. Ladies in the scroll heavily powdered white faces are painted with tiny lips and fashionable thin arched eyebrows, while beautiful ladies in the Tang dynasty were always painted with small, cherry-red mouth and rosy cheekbones.[[9]](#footnote-9) Besides, since ladies were waiting for court summons, they were wearing more conservatively, depicting by the high-cut clothes inside the dress, whereas low-cut dress was the fashion in the Tang dynasty painting *Ladies Preparing Newly Women Silk*. Therefore, they were dress to serve in an official capacity if necessary.

In Xu’s painting, ladies are playing the card game, which was a burgeoning recreation in early Qing. It is alluring that a woman strikes a beguiling pose, resting her chin in one hand. She does not pose like that on purpose, and instead, Xu Zhuang painted a moment just exuding a kind of beauty of unconstraint. Many paintings also depict the woman in the Qing dynasty in this charming pose, like *A Fairly Beauty at Quiet Rest* by Huang Shifu, and *Lady in Her Boudoir with Book* by Leng Mei. Even though ladies relaxed expressions probably reveal a feeling for passing boring time, this picture still provides an angle to show what court ladies do when they were not in duty, depicting the fragrant ambiance for socializing.

As Shuqin Cui mentioned in her article that Qing beauty prefers a lovelorn lady figure, physically fragile and emotionally melancholy, it is not strange that the audience can feel ladies’ lonely and bored expressions while they are relaxing.[[10]](#footnote-10) Those court ladies were sitting among the garden rocks. The rugged rocks even became soft because of the morbidezza of ladies. Moreover, white magnolias symbolize purity and nobility, and they are also a representative of the womanly beauty and gentleness.[[11]](#footnote-11) Court ladies had their free time for recreation and social activities, and they had a quite high social status at that time, but they would still feel the loneliness and boredom, since they were at court to serve or perform for people repeatedly day by day. In a sense, they were no totally free. Therefore, these rocks, bamboo, cherry, and magnolia trees are anthropomorphized: they and the ladies keep each other company and share each other's loneliness.

At first glance, typical court ladies in the Qing dynasty are visualized by hanging scroll Court *Ladies at Play* drawn by Zhuang Xu in 1683. More broadly, this picture speaks to the inheritance and uniqueness of femininity between the Qing and Tang dynasty, and embody fashions of both the female beauty and paintings in the Qing dynasty, through clothes, environment, and what they are doing — every component in this work.

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