

The Influence of Prince Yi Yunxiang on the Court Art of the Yongzheng Reign

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Abstract: During the Yongzheng reign, the court arts, including painting, porcelain, enamelware, snuff bottles, furniture, etc., reached a remarkably high level. This was not only attributed to the personal artistic cultivation and aesthetic preferences of Emperor Yongzheng but also, crucially, to the direct management of the Office of Palace Affairs by Prince Yi Yunxiang. Yunxiang shared an inseparable bond with Emperor Yongzheng since childhood, and he was well aware of the emperor's preferences. Yunxiang himself possessed excellent taste, enabling him to better implement Emperor Yongzheng's aesthetic preferences and establish the "Internal Court Respectful Production" style. Furthermore, Yunxiang led the utilization of Western missionaries, infusing fresh vitality into Qing court art and creating a distinctive aesthetic trend in the Yongzheng era.

Keywords: Yunxiang, Office of Palace Affairs, Western Methods Adapted for Chinese Use

1. Introduction

Yunxiang was born in the twenty-fifth year of Kangxi (1686), on the first day of the second month, at the hour of Chen. He was the thirteenth son of Emperor Kangxi, commonly known as the Thirteenth Prince. Yunxiang displayed exceptional talent, being described as adept in poetry, literature, calligraphy, and painting, all characterized by a keen and fresh style [1]. Additionally, he excelled in equestrian skills, demonstrating remarkable accuracy and speed while riding. During his early years, Yunxiang enjoyed considerable favor from Kangxi, as noted by He Chao in a letter to a friend: "His Highness the Thirteenth (Thirteenth Prince Yunxiang) is 'adored' by Emperor Kangxi" [2]. However, the father-son relationship turned sour in the forty-seventh year of Kangxi, during the political upheaval involving the removal of Crown Prince Yülü. Many imperial princes faced repercussions, but Yunxiang endured the harshest consequences—lifelong house arrest.

In his poem "Moonlit Night," Yunxiang reflects on his solitude: "Seated alone in the quiet corridor, deep into the night. Happily, I chance upon a new poem and joyfully recite it alone. Countless crickets silent, the wind unmoving. The bright moon reflects in the ripples of my heart" [3]. Alone in the silent night, Yunxiang contemplates the uncertainties of his future.

A new turning point emerged when Yongzheng Emperor ascended the throne. On the second day of his reign, Yunxiang was appointed as the Grand Councilor and granted the title of Prince. He quickly rose to become one of the most prominent figures in the court. Yongzheng Emperor's trust and esteem for Yunxiang were profound, evoking a sense of gratitude in Yunxiang. He

wholeheartedly dedicated himself to repay the emperor's favor, showcasing his talents during the Yongzheng era. Yunxiang assumed responsibilities ranging from national finances to the personal security of Yongzheng Emperor, as expressed by Feng Erkang: "He was not only a key minister involved in strategic decisions but also Yongzheng's chief steward and head of the imperial guard" [4].

2. Yongzheng Emperor's "Grand Steward"

2.1. Establishment of the "Internal Court Respectful Production" Style

This paper discusses the influence of Prince Yi Yunxiang on the aesthetic art of the Yongzheng era, most directly manifested in Yunxiang's management of the Court Office of Manufacturing. Yunxiang had a deep understanding of Yongzheng Emperor's aesthetic preferences, gaining his appreciation in the management of the manufacturing office. Therefore, Yunxiang effectively guided the aesthetic development of court production.

The Office of Manufacturing was a specialized department within the Imperial Household Department responsible for creating items for the imperial family, with its production directly dictated by the emperor. Typically, an official from the Imperial Household Department would be appointed to manage the manufacturing office. However, in an unusual move, Yongzheng Emperor personally entrusted Prince Yi Yunxiang, the Grand Councilor, with this responsibility. This decision showcased the emperor's admiration and approval of Yunxiang's aesthetic eye, allowing him full authority over the operations.

Yunxiang did not disappoint Yongzheng Emperor's expectations. Their close relationship allowed Yunxiang to understand Yongzheng's preferences thoroughly, enabling him to implement the emperor's intentions effectively. After Yunxiang's initial review, all manufactured items were presented to Yongzheng for final inspection, culminating in what was termed the "Internal Court Respectful Production" style.

To achieve this style, meticulous design efforts were required to ensure optimal functionality and aesthetic effects. The archives of the manufacturing office, documented in the "Design Records," contain numerous instances of "presentation of design samples." Yongzheng Emperor and Prince Yi Yunxiang actively participated in the design process, modifying patterns and discussing with craftsmen to achieve the desired stylistic results. For example, "Prince Yi presented a book of 'Authentic Tracings of a Hundred Beasts' to the trade. The Prince's decree: henceforth, all depictions of a hundred beasts should follow this pattern. Adhere to it" [5]. The depiction of beasts by the artist Shang Xi became the model for paintings of this theme in the Qing palace. Additionally, a snuff bottle personally designed by Yunxiang received high praise from Yongzheng Emperor, who gifted it to Nian Gengyao in the second year of Yongzheng, recognizing it as "a design by Prince Yi" [6]. The design specifications for a ruler were also referred to as the "system of Prince Yi" [6].

2.2. Actual Management of the Office of Manufacturing

To strengthen the management of the manufacturing office, Yunxiang was also responsible for assessing the skills of artists employed in the palace to determine their proficiency levels. An account in a letter from Father Dai Jinxian, who served in the Clear Sky Observatory of the Qing palace in the first year of Yongzheng, describes the examination of the Italian painter Lang Shining: "The supervising officer must test Lang Shining's skills. For a European painter, it is necessary to conform to Chinese customs and taste. Regardless of his talent, the first requirement is an enamel work, followed by an ordinary technique oil painting or watercolor, subject to examination by the Thirteenth Prince (Yunxiang) and the Emperor" [7].

Following the examination, artists underwent a probationary period. On the tenth day of the seventh month of the fourth year of Yongzheng, Prince Yi Yunxiang decreed: "The seven newly arrived painters at the Cining Palace, including Zhang Lin, Wu Gui, Wu Yu, Chen Min, Peng He, Wang Jun, and Ye Lufeng, shall be allowed to temporarily walk around and observe. Each person shall be provided with three taels of silver for meals per month. Adhere to this" [5].

Upon taking charge of the manufacturing office, Yunxiang initiated reforms, enforcing strict discipline and establishing regulations for attendance, performance, rewards, and penalties. In the archives of the Imperial Household Department, a record dated the twenty-sixth day of the eleventh month in the sixth year of Yongzheng (1728) states: "The sixth-ranking official Alantai reported instances of laziness and negligence among the painters at the Cining Palace to Prince Yi. Following the Prince's decree: Shen Yu is to follow the example of Tang Ying and inspect them daily. If anyone fails to appear, report it to me immediately. Adhere to this" [6].

Through the issuance of salaries [8], personnel transfers [9], and the resignation of Western painters [10], Yunxiang became the de facto leader of the manufacturing office. Yunxiang's artistic aesthetic preferences directly influenced the artisans in the manufacturing office.

3. The Westerners' "Grand Support"

In the twelfth month of the first year of Yongzheng's reign, the Ministry of Rites made a resolution: "All Westerners from various provinces, apart from those sent to serve in the capital, should be settled in Macao. As requested, the church dedicated to the Lord should be converted into a public facility, and strict prohibitions should be enforced against those who inadvertently adhere to their faith" [11]. Upon learning of this decision, missionaries Feng Bingzheng, Fei Ying, and Lang Shining jointly sought an audience with Yunxiang, earnestly pleading, "Your Highness, we implore you to take note of us foreigners who are like helpless orphans, without any support except for the mercy and assistance of the Emperor and yourself. We humbly hope that you will shelter us like a benevolent father" [12]. Yunxiang, aiming to pacify them, reassured, "Rest assured, the Emperor has entrusted your affairs to me, and I will handle them earnestly." Although Yunxiang advocated on their behalf several times, Yongzheng Emperor maintained his original decision. While unable to alter the Emperor's orders regarding the missionaries, Yunxiang provided assistance during the enforcement process, deeply moving the missionaries. They promptly expressed their gratitude, acknowledging his teachings and the good deeds he initiated. The Western missionaries regarded Yunxiang as their ultimate support.

3.1. Utilizing Westerners

According to records in "Biographies and Bibliography of the Jesuits in China," Yunxiang, appointed by Yongzheng Emperor to handle state affairs, treated Westerners differently and favored missionaries, often making use of their expertise to manage political affairs [13].

In 1726, when the Portuguese embassy arrived in China, opposing the use of the term "tribute" to enter Beijing, Yunxiang specifically consulted Dominique to inquire about the European meaning of the term "tribute." Dominique believed that the term "tribute" was inappropriate and failed to reflect the envoy's status. Ultimately, the embassy was allowed to be received under the title of "congratulations," a decision both sides found satisfactory [13]. Missionaries Dominique and Zhang Anduo mediated in this matter, ensuring mutual satisfaction in the audience.

During the establishment of relations between China and other countries, Western missionaries in China, proficient in multiple languages, were often temporarily recruited as intermediaries, responsible for translation and communication. They became mediators for China's foreign exchanges. For instance, in the continuous friction and communication between China and Russia, diplomatic

and trade relations were established. In the sixth year of Yongzheng, Yunxiang commissioned Song Junrong to survey the "Map of Russia's Bordering Territories with Asia, Turkey, Persia, Mongolia, etc."; and in the seventh year of Yongzheng, he ordered Song Junrong to survey the "Map of Turkey, Persia, and Mongolia's Adjacent Territories" [13]. The creation of these maps made a significant contribution to Yunxiang's smooth negotiations with Russia.

To overcome language barriers in foreign relations, in the seventh year of Yongzheng (1729), the Emperor ordered the establishment of the "Western Studies Institute." Upon Yunxiang's recommendation, Dominique was appointed as the director, and Song Junrong as the deputy director. The institute aimed to teach Latin to the sons of banner officials, cultivating diplomats and translators. Three years after its establishment, the students had acquired a considerable proficiency in Latin.

3.2. Western Methods Adapted for Chinese Use

Italian missionary Lang Shining, renowned as a Western painter during the Qing Dynasty, demonstrated rich and diverse artistic skills, earning significant favor from Yunxiang, who repeatedly instructed him to engage in painting. According to records in the "Court Office" archives: "On the twentieth day of the fourth month of the first year of Yongzheng, Prince Yi decreed: Commanding the Westerner Lang Shining to paint a scroll of osmanthus flowers, jade rabbits, and moonlight flowers. Adhere to this" [5]. "On the sixteenth day of the seventh month of the first year of Yongzheng, Prince Yi ordered forty painted fans. The decree: Commanding the Westerner Lang Shining to paint. Adhere to this" [5]. "On the eighteenth day of the ninth month of the first year of Yongzheng, Prince Yi decreed: Bandarisha, Eighty, Sun Weihuang, Wang Jie, Ge Shu, Yongtai, etc., are to study painting under Lang Shining. Adhere to this" [5]. These archival records indicate that Lang Shining's paintings were highly favored by the Qing nobility. However, according to "Biographies and Bibliography of the Jesuits in China," it is noted, "Lang Shining painted several pieces for Emperor Yongzheng, who liked them, generously rewarding him. Nevertheless, the Emperor never engaged in any discussions with Shining on religious matters" [13]. Despite Yongzheng Emperor's appreciation for Lang Shining's artwork, he never spoke with Shining on any religious topics. The Emperor did not favor missionaries, considering Westerners merely as skilled artisans, allowing them to utilize their talents in serving the Qing Dynasty but prohibiting any discussions on missionary matters.

The event that allowed Lang Shining to break through this impasse and further gain the appreciation of Yongzheng Emperor was Yunxiang's commissioning of the painting scroll "Hundred Horses." "On the second day of the third month of the second year of Yongzheng, Assistant Secretary Shen Yu, on behalf of Prince Yi, decreed: Commanding Lang Shining to paint the 'Hundred Horses' scroll. Adhere to this" [5]. Following the completion of this painting scroll, Lang Shining became the most respected Western painter in the Yongzheng court.

The "Hundred Horses" painting created by Lang Shining (Figure 1) is the earliest example of his collaboration between Eastern and Western art. In this artwork, he merged Chinese materials such as brushes, rice paper, silk, and pigments with Western painting techniques. For instance, he applied Western anatomical knowledge to analyze the structure of horses, ensuring accurate and proportionate depictions. By integrating Western painting techniques into traditional Chinese painting, the horses in the artwork exhibit a lifelike texture and volume, vividly coming to life. In "Hundred Horses," Lang Shining gradually adapted to Chinese aesthetic preferences, downplaying elements disliked by Yongzheng Emperor, and progressively developing his own artistic style, allowing continuous exploration and innovation in the fusion of Chinese and Western art.



Figure 1: Lang Shining, "Hundred Horses," Partial View, Taipei Palace Museum Collection

Why did Yunxiang ask Lang Shining to paint horses? On one hand, the symbol of "horses" in Chinese painting traditionally represents the prosperity of the nation, symbolizing military strength and power, especially in the Qing Empire where horses were a crucial component of armed forces. On the other hand, horses symbolize loyalty, and presenting a painting of horses was a way for Yunxiang to express his loyalty to Yongzheng Emperor. In the early years of Yongzheng's reign, the expulsion of missionaries was partly due to the unfavorable impact of foreign religious promotion on consolidating Qing rule. Additionally, some missionaries were involved in the power struggle among the imperial sons at the end of Kangxi's reign, supporting Yongzheng Emperor's political opponents. Lang Shining's nonpartisan strategy not only helped him secure a stable position in the Yongzheng era but also laid the foundation for gaining respect and recognition [14].

4. Conclusion

Within the works of the Western painter Lang Shining, there is a piece that captures the relationship between Emperor Yongzheng and Yunxiang, titled "Bamboo Shade and West Highland Landscape" (Figure 2), currently housed in the Beijing Palace Museum. In the lower right corner of the painting, there is a signature that reads "Executed with respect by your servant Lang Shining." The inclusion of the term "your servant" in the signature indicates that this painting was created by Lang Shining at the request of Emperor Yongzheng. Notably, in the upper left corner of the painting, there is a seal bearing the inscription "Treasure of Prince Yi" (Figure 3), indicating that this artwork was collected by Prince Yi, Yunxiang. This painting involves the highest power figure of the Yongzheng era, Emperor Yongzheng, and the most esteemed member of the imperial family, Prince Yi. This artwork, created by Lang Shining upon Emperor Yongzheng's request and presented to Prince Yi Yunxiang, symbolizes the emperor's approval and attempt to win favor by rewarding his subject. It is intriguing to consider the content of the painting—Emperor Yongzheng had Lang Shining paint a dog to give to Yunxiang. While it can be understood as an appreciation of Yunxiang's loyalty, it also suggests that Emperor Yongzheng used this painting to remind Yunxiang to remain humble and loyal.



Figure 2: Lang Shining, "Bamboo Shade and West Highland Landscape," Beijing Palace Museum Collection
Figure 3: Lang Shining, "Bamboo Shade and West Highland Landscape," Seal, Beijing Palace Museum Collection

Emperor Yongzheng's historical reputation is not favorable, often associated with terms like harsh and ruthless. Perhaps his attitude towards Yunxiang was merely an external display of brotherly friendship and humble subordination, a representation of the emperor's virtue and the subject's loyalty. Yunxiang, being well aware of this, maintained a low profile, was humble and cautious, never boasting of his achievements, but rather attributing them to Emperor Yongzheng and taking responsibility for any shortcomings. Hence, he deeply understood the intentions of Emperor Yongzheng.

In the Yongzheng era, Yunxiang played the role of the "grand steward" for Emperor Yongzheng, serving as his right-hand man. Not only did he handle political affairs meticulously, but he also elevated the craftsmanship and artistry of the Yongzheng era to its zenith. Yunxiang's direct management of the Court Office influenced the actual development direction of court craftsmanship. Adhering to Yongzheng's aesthetic preferences, he provided detailed modification suggestions for various tasks, resulting in the refinement of court craftsmanship in the Yongzheng era to form the "elegant and refined" style of "Courtly Creation with Respect." Additionally, Yunxiang guided Western missionaries to adapt to Chinese practices, improve their techniques, and create an artistic style that fused Eastern and Western elements, injecting new vitality into China's artistic endeavors.

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