

A Brief Discussion on the Art Education of the Qing Imperial Family

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Abstract: Throughout the history of the Qing Dynasty, its rulers showed great enthusiasm for literary and artistic pursuits, leading to the emergence of numerous imperial family members with talent in painting and calligraphy. This phenomenon holds significant importance for dynasties governed by ethnic minorities, making it a subject worthy of study. In this paper, the author explores the educational institution for imperial princes—the "Shangshufang" (the Imperial Study) to understand the curriculum they studied. Furthermore, the focus shifts to the art education, as not all imperial princes were required to study painting and calligraphy. However, mastering these art forms not only nurtured their characters but also brought them closer to literati, enabling their integration into the social circle of the Han Chinese. This, in turn, facilitated better communication and cultural blending between the Manchu and Han ethnicities.

Keywords: Qing imperial family, Shangshufang, art education, Manchu, Han

1. Introduction

During the Qing Dynasty, the imperial family was divided into three levels based on their blood relationship with the emperor. The descendants of Nurhaci's (posthumously known as Xianzuxuan Emperor) sons were referred to as "宗室" (zong shi), who could wear golden yellow belts and were commonly known as "黄带子" (huángdàizi). The descendants of Nurhaci and his several generations of ancestors' brothers were called "觉罗" (jué luó) and wore red belts, commonly known as "红带子" (hóngdàizi). As the imperial family grew in size after entering the Central Plains, various branches of the imperial family emerged. Consequently, the descendants of Emperor Kangxi's sons were referred to as "近支宗室" (jìn zhī zōng shì) to distinguish them from those with more distant blood relationships to the emperor [1].

The education of the imperial family members after entering the Central Plains can be categorized into three situations based on the status of the emperor's members and their proximity to the imperial lineage: 1. Imperial Princes and their descendants: They received education mainly in the mansions of their respective royal fathers. 2. Idle imperial family members and "觉罗" (jué luó): They were separately arranged to study in "宗学" (zōng xué) and "觉罗学" (jué luó xué). 3. Imperial Princes, grandchildren of the emperor, and some close relatives of the royal family attended "上书房" (shàng shū fáng) for their studies. Due to the relatively abundant existing materials on "上书房" (shàng shū

fáng) and its significant influence during the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the imperial princes, grandchildren, and descendants of the near royal family who achieved remarkable accomplishments in painting and calligraphy mainly belonged to the category of "近支宗室" (jìn zhī zōng shì) who attended "上书房" (shàng shū fáng) for their education.

2. The System of the Imperial Study

Since the Shunzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty, the tradition of emphasizing the education of imperial princes was formally established. With the continuous emphasis on the education of the imperial family throughout different dynasties, the system of the Imperial Study gradually took shape and became more refined. Qing rulers consistently maintained the goal of nurturing the princes into versatile talents proficient in both literary and martial arts, with a comprehensive understanding of both Manchu and Han cultures, along with other relevant knowledge.

The Imperial Study held high importance in the education of imperial princes. Shangshufang was located close to the imperial residence to facilitate regular supervision [2]. Whenever the emperor moved his court, Shangshufang was set up accordingly, where the princes attended their studies while the emperor conducted affairs of state. Thus, the study rooms were established in places like the Qianqing Palace, Xiyuan, and the Yuanmingyuan, allowing the emperor to periodically assess the academic progress of his sons.

The daily routine of studying in the Imperial Study was arduous for the imperial princes. Typically, they entered the study at the age of six for elementary education, with a daily study time from 5 am to 3 pm, totaling ten hours [3]. Zhao Yi, in "Yan Bao Za Ji," mentioned, "When I was an inner supervisor, I used to enter at the time of the early shift, leading the way by entering at the fifth drum (around 4 am). No other officials had arrived at the imperial court, only the eunuchs of the inner household were coming and going. In the darkness, still drowsy and half-asleep, I would lean against a pillar and doze off. However, I could faintly see a white veil or something else being brought into the Longevity Hall, which indicated that the imperial princes were entering the study room"[4]. Throughout the year, except for several holidays such as Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Emperor's Birthday, and the princes' own birthdays, they were required to attend their studies without any breaks, except for an early dismissal on New Year's Eve. The duration of continuous study was at least ten years or more.

The curriculum included learning Han Chinese, Manchu script, and equestrian skills. The selection of teachers for the Imperial Study was strictly regulated. According to the "Qing Shi Gao," it was considered an esteemed place for teaching virtue and moral values, with a particular emphasis on teaching politics. Therefore, virtuous and knowledgeable Confucian scholars with high moral standing were carefully selected to instruct the princes in Han Chinese [5]. They used materials such as "Di Jian Tu Shuo," "Yang Zheng Tu Jie," the Four Books, the Five Classics, and the "Zi Zhi Tong Jian" as teaching materials [6]. The teaching method involved the master reading a sentence, and then the prince repeating the sentence, repeating this process until it became memorized. This approach enabled the young princes to become well-versed in Confucian classics from an early age, making them proficient in both spoken and written Han Chinese and capable of composing poetry.

On the other hand, the teachers for Manchu script and equestrian skills were chosen from among the skilled Manchu and Mongol officials, known as "谙达" (āndá). The internal "谙达" taught Manchu and Mongolian languages, while the external "谙达" instructed archery and equestrian skills. The learning of Manchu utilized materials such as "Manzhou Shier Tou," "Yi Bai Tiao," and "Manwen Qi Meng" , with the "谙达" teaching pronunciation and handwriting. Apart from the teachers, the emperor personally instructed the princes in Manchu script, especially emphasizing that the princes must write their own memorials in Manchu without the assistance of others to strengthen

their Manchu proficiency. As a result, during the Kangxi period, the princes not only spoke fluently in Manchu but also demonstrated exceptional skills in composing memorials, a feat that later Qing princes were unable to match. Archery was an essential daily practice for the princes, usually scheduled after the recitation of classics to integrate cultural learning with practical skills. To facilitate archery practice, archery ranges were set up near the study rooms.

The education provided by the Imperial Study proved to be highly successful in cultivating the imperial offspring during the Qing Dynasty. With the exception of those who ascended to the throne at a young age, all Qing emperors received their education in the Imperial Study. For instance, Emperor Yongzheng, during his youth, received court education along with numerous brothers. They were required to be well-versed in the Four Books and Five Classics, as well as proficient in the Manchu language and equestrian skills. This rigorous court education proved highly beneficial for his rule. Emperor Qianlong, building upon the prosperous foundation established by Emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng, displayed outstanding achievements in both cultural and martial fields. He excelled in numerous military campaigns, such as pacifying the Dzungar Khanate and consolidating Jinshan (a region in Xinjiang). Moreover, he made significant contributions to literature and painting, being the Qing emperor who invested the most in these artistic pursuits. Emperors Yongzheng, Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang, during their princely years, wrote many poems and essays, some of which were later published in collections. After ascending to the throne, their passion for literature and art continued, and they would often compose poems and essays during their tours and hunting expeditions, sometimes singing with court poets and writers.

Furthermore, the princes and grandsons who were born into the imperial family, such as princes, dukes, and beile, received meticulous cultivation through the Imperial Study and displayed remarkable talent. Some outstanding individuals even became important aides to the emperors. For instance, Aisin-Gioro Yunxiang was a renowned and capable prince during the Yongzheng period, known for his exceptional governance of river affairs, water conservation efforts, financial reforms, military affairs management, and overseeing the imperial bureaus. He became a prominent imperial sibling during the Yongzheng period, contributing significantly to the influence and achievements of the Yongzheng reign.

3. Qing Imperial Family's Painting and Calligraphy Education

3.1. Calligraphy Education

Calligraphy education was an integral part of the education for imperial princes, exerting significant influence on their temperament, character, and even governance. In the Qing Dynasty, the calligraphy education of imperial princes encompassed both Manchu and Han calligraphy. Given the importance of calligraphy in daily communication and correspondence, coupled with its profound political significance, successive Qing emperors attached great importance to the calligraphy education of the princes and members of the imperial family, achieving remarkable results. Regardless of whether they later ascended the throne or not, imperial princes from all generations demonstrated a certain level of accomplishment in calligraphy.

3.1.1. Learning Manchu Calligraphy

Language and writing are crucial external features that distinguish one ethnic group from another. As Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure stated, the customs of a nation are often reflected in its language, and, to a large extent, the language itself constitutes the essence of the nation. In the Qing Dynasty, Manchu script was designated as the "national script" and highly esteemed. Consequently, the education of Manchu language and script for the imperial princes and members of the imperial family was regarded as an essential subject.

Due to the scarcity of research materials on Qing Manchu calligraphy, the author can only draw evidence from historical records of emperors' calligraphic practices. According to the "Xiao Ting Za Lu," it is recorded that during his childhood, Emperor Kangxi relied on Su Jiamu (苏继祖) for training and received personal instruction in the national script [7]. Scholar Wang Yiyu also discovered during the compilation of Emperor Qianlong's calligraphy that there were two kinds of scripts—Manchu and Han—comprising 13 volumes written between the first and thirteenth years of Emperor Yongzheng's reign. The Han scripts were stored in 14 packages, some bound into books, while others remained as individual pages [8]. In Tong Yue's work "Qing Palace Princes," there is mention of Puyi's Manchu practice book. In addition to the imperial princes, the Qing court also established various official and private schools to teach Manchu language and script. For instance, the Zongren Fu had its Zongxue (宗学, school for teaching Confucian classics) and Bajia Jueluo School (八旗觉罗学, school for teaching Manchu language and culture) to educate students from Zongxue and Bajia Jueluo families [9].

Since Manchu language was recognized as the "national language" and Manchu script as the "national script," a pursuit of perfection in writing naturally followed. As a result, Manchu calligraphy evolved into four distinct styles: Regular script (楷书), Running script (行书), Cursive script (草书), and Seal script (篆书). Regular script was widely used for various book publications, fine copywriting, as well as the transcription of imperial edicts, decrees, memorials, and official documents. Running script had a broader application, including copying regular books, drafting various manuscripts, and transcribing official correspondence at all levels of the central and regional government, as well as archiving official documents. Cursive script was more narrowly applied, mainly used for drafting personal writings, letters, notes, and calligraphy creations. Seal script in Manchu appeared early, but the variety of characters was limited, and the style was monotonous, resulting in limited usage [10].

Manchu calligraphy prospered during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. During this period, numerous scrolls and plaques with Manchu calligraphy were produced, and Manchu calligraphy became a cultural trend among the imperial family and high-ranking officials. Manchu characters were even used in Spring Festival couplets. In the 33rd year of Emperor Qianlong's reign (1768), during his tour to Shengjing (盛京, present-day Shenyang), he composed the renowned Manchu work "Shengjing Fu" (盛京赋), which was later translated into Han Chinese and published as a bilingual piece in Manchu and Han Seal script.

3.1.2. Learning Han Calligraphy

After the Manchu aristocrats established their rule in the Central Plains, their primary challenge was how to effectively govern a Han population with a far higher level of cultural development. After a series of explorations and drawing lessons from ruling experiences, the Qing rulers decided to adopt a policy of learning Han culture and administering the Han people through Han methods. To govern the nation, they must win the support of the people, and to win the support of the people, they must first win the support of the literati. Calligraphy, as an artistic tool used by Han literati to express emotions, held a strong cultural appeal and national identity for them. Therefore, the Qing rulers attempted to gain a shared cultural identity with the literati and further achieve political recognition and legitimacy for their regime by studying Han calligraphy.

The Qing rulers chose "Dong Shu" (董书) as their model for learning Han calligraphy. On one hand, Dong Qichang's calligraphy style inherited the tradition of the two Wangs (two renowned Ming calligraphers), making it conform to the orthodox calligraphic tradition. Dong's style possessed an aesthetic of "harmony and beauty," which aligned with the Qing court's emphasis on the governance philosophy of "harmony" to ensure political stability. On the other hand, Dong Shu was widely

renowned in Jiangnan, making it a political strategy to win over the literati and officials in the Jiangnan region.

The main method of calligraphy learning for the Qing imperial princes was copying the works of famous calligraphers, known as "临帖" (lin tie). There were two types of "临帖": one involved tracing thin paper over the calligraphy works of others, and the other was direct tracing (对临) using abundant collections of calligraphy masterpieces available within the palace. Regarding the study of Han calligraphy, Emperor Kangxi often reminded his princes, "Those who excel in calligraphy do so not only due to natural talent but mostly due to diligent learning. From a young age, I had a fondness for calligraphy. Now that I am getting older, even during the busiest times, I still take the time to write some characters every day without interruption. Hence, I have yet to neglect this pursuit"[11]. Kangxi set a personal example by diligently learning calligraphy, inspiring generations of imperial family members. No wonder it was recorded by Qing people, "It is fitting that the imperial princes and grandsons excel in poetry, literature, calligraphy, and painting"[12].

3.2. Painting Education

Compared to calligraphy, the study of painting does not carry such strong political implications. In the education at the "上书房" (Shangshufang, the study hall for imperial princes), there were no dedicated painting teachers, and most of the time, the Shangshufang teachers also served as painting instructors. Moreover, not all imperial princes were required to study painting; it was based on their personal interests and preferences. Through the study of Qing imperial family artists, the author found that many Manchu aristocratic artists had two artistic aesthetic tendencies: appreciation for traditional Han literati painting and admiration for bold and vigorous finger paintings.

3.2.1. Learning from the "Orthodox" Painting Schools

Similar to calligraphy learning, painting education also emphasized the study of "orthodox" painting styles. Although there were no specialized painting teachers, imperial princes could invite accomplished artists they admired to serve as their teachers and instruct them in painting. Yixin, the ninth son of Emperor Daoguang, was fond of painting and admired the skills of Chen Jiale, so he invited Chen to the capital to teach him painting. Similarly, Zhao Youchen was invited by Yixin to his residence to teach painting. In the painting styles of Manchu aristocratic artists, we can see their influence from the "Four Wangs" (the four famous painters of the late Ming dynasty) or Dong Qichang, emphasizing learning from ancient works and emulating them. For example, when Emperor Qianlong was still a prince, he copied the style of Huang Quan from the Five Dynasties and the "Yuan-style" landscape of the Northern Song Dynasty. Yuxi, known as the "number one painter of this dynasty," showed influences from the "Four Wangs" in his landscape paintings, especially from Wang Yuanqi and Wang Hui. Hongshi, proficient in poetry, painting, and calligraphy, was hailed as the "three excellences." His flower and bird paintings followed the style of Chen Chun and Lu Zhi, while his landscape paintings were inspired by Dong Yuan, Juran, and Huang Gongwang, with Dong Bangda as his contemporary mentor. His works embodied the orthodox lineage of court painters.

3.2.2. Appreciation for Manchu Art

In addition to their appreciation for traditional Han literati painting, the Manchu aristocracy also admired the "bold and vigorous" finger paintings. According to Zhang Geng's book "国朝画征录" (Guo Chao Hua Zheng Lu), Emperor Shizong once painted a buffalo with his fingers. Although there are only records and no surviving works of Emperor Fulin's finger paintings, this form of finger painting developed into an important genre in the Qing painting circle. Prince Yuxi was also skilled

in finger painting, and he wrote a poem for one of his finger paintings: "A silver chain, two green pines; steep cliffs, ten thousand layers of emerald. Boasting the beauty of Jisheng, moving peaks with my fingertips"[13]. It is a poem about his finger painting. Fu Wen, a Manchu painter highly praised by Prince Shen, was also adept in finger painting. Other Manchu painters such as Gao Qipei, Li Shizhuo, and Zhu Lunhan were also skilled in finger painting. Emperor Qianlong also admired the spirited and unrestrained finger paintings, collecting works by Gao Qipei. The Manchu aristocracy showed a preference for finger paintings with Manchu characteristics. This preference might have been due to the bold and vigorous style of finger paintings resonating with the aesthetic sentiments of minority ethnic groups. Additionally, it could also be an attempt by the rulers to leave a distinctive Manchu style of painting amid the vast and profound Han culture. Thus, they encouraged diversity in artistic expression and allowed all flowers of art to bloom together.

4. The Circle of Calligraphy and Painting in the Shangshufang

In the preface to the collected works of Wei Yu's Shushi (a literary collection room), Emperor Jiaqing stated, "The sons of the royal family enter the Shangshufang at the age of six to study under teachers, cultivating their temperament and absorbing Confucian virtues... I, being of slow understanding, entered school in the year Yiyou (1795), studying with Shangshufang teachers Feng Shouting and Fu Shiting. By the year Renchen (1802), I had a basic understanding of the Five Classics, then I learned contemporary poetry from Xie Dongshu, and only in the year Bingshen (1816) did I begin learning ancient prose and ancient-style poetry from Zhu Shijun. To this day, in my leisure time, I still engage in discussions and share the joys of literary pursuits, as if it were yesterday"[14]. In this preface, Emperor Jiaqing talked about his experiences of studying under teachers. It can be known that the sons of the royal family began their studies at the age of six, accompanying teachers every day. Therefore, Shangshufang teachers were the people who accompanied the imperial princes the most during their growth, and the imperial princes respected their teachers very much. As a result, a profound teacher-student relationship was formed between the imperial princes and their teachers. In the Shangshufang, there were no dedicated teachers specifically for teaching calligraphy and painting to the imperial princes. Usually, one or more Shangshufang teachers also taught the imperial princes calligraphy and painting.

Yongrong's painting "Ancient Snow Pavilion" was created for his Shangshufang teacher Ni Chengkuan, with poems inscribed by Yongxuan, Yongqi, Yongxun, Yongting, Yongdi, Miande, Mianen, and other imperial princes. This painting allows us to glimpse the sincere teacher-student relationship between the imperial princes and their Shangshufang teachers, which is rarely recorded in historical books.

Another handscroll painting records the intimate interactions between teachers and students. In the winter of the 29th year of Emperor Qianlong's reign (1764), Emperor Qianlong rewarded the imperial princes and Shangshufang teachers with Hami melons from the Western Regions. They all composed poems, praising Emperor Qianlong's extraordinary talents and the abundance of the Qing Empire's products. In the colophon, Yongxun clearly stated that he wrote thirty-six rhymes as a gift for the Hami melon, and composed a joint poem with Buting and Fu Shouting. The order of the poems recorded in this handscroll is as follows: "Yongqi-Yongdi-Miande-Mianen-Chen Zhaolun-Zhang Taikai-Jin Shen-Wang Tingyu-Wang Tingyu-Liu Xingwei-Li Zhongjian-Lu Wenchao-Xie Yong-Ni Chengkuan-Ni Chengkuan-Wang Yongxi-Fengkuan-Yongxun-Yongxuan-Yongxun-Miande-Mianen-Chen Zhaolun"[15]. The scenes recorded in the handscroll make people feel as if they were present, vividly displaying the daily life between teachers and students.

The frequent interactions between teachers and students in calligraphy and painting not only verify the attentive guidance of the Shangshufang teachers but also illustrate the harmonious teacher-student

relationship. Additionally, it indirectly proves that the appreciation of calligraphy and painting between teachers and students was not a mere whim but an essential part of their daily social activities.

Although Shangshufang teachers had a profound impact on the education of the imperial princes, the preferences and artistic styles that the imperial princes admired and studied would also directly influence the Shangshufang teachers. Even, in some cases, they could have an impact on the entire country's art trends. For example, "Qing Bailei Chaoxuan" records that Prince Cheng (Yongxun) "held a pen from a young age and wrote accomplished verses. Once, during the Kangxi era, a eunuch remarked that when his teacher was young, he still saw Dong Xiangguang holding a pen, but only using the first three fingers to hold the brush and hanging the brush to write. Prince Cheng then promoted this technique, called 'bodeng method,' and it became popular for a time"[16]. Simply changing the way of holding the pen, due to the prince's study and promotion, became a trend. Of course, this is also related to Yongxun's position in the world of calligraphy and painting; Yongxun's name was well known at that time, and the literati would treasure a piece of paper with his words as if it were a precious gem.

5. Conclusion

In Qian Zai's "Xingshu," it is mentioned that in the eleventh month of the Dingxi year (1817), he returned to the capital to express his gratitude and was summoned for an audience. He was then instructed to continue his activities in the Shangshufang. The discussion at that time involved the management of books in the Wuying Hall by the imperial princes. The Grand Tutor (Fujun) memorialized, "The princes should receive visits from literati to familiarize themselves with the affairs of the people and the state." The Emperor was pleased with the memorial and remarked to the Grand Tutor, "You have done well as a teacher." Praise and commendation were granted repeatedly[17]. From this, it can be inferred that the interaction between the imperial princes and Han literati served not only as an opportunity for education but also as a means to become acquainted with social norms and customs. Even in a society dominated by Han culture, those in positions of power needed to understand and engage with others and integrate themselves within society. Education in calligraphy and painting further facilitated the swift and profound integration of the imperial princes into the social circles of Han literati.

Furthermore, when the imperial princes engaged in artistic creation or artistic exchanges, they often gathered in relatively fixed academic organizations. The formation of these academic organizations contributed to the stability of Qing rule and society. Yixin (Prince Gong) and Zheng Banqiao, one of the "Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou," were close friends and frequently exchanged ideas on painting techniques and artistic pursuits. After the Qing's entry into the Central Plains, literati played a significant role in resistance. The establishment of these fixed or relatively stable academic organizations favored the dissemination of orthodox Manchu culture and enhanced its influence, providing robust support for social stability.

Calligraphy and painting are essential components of Han culture, and during the Qing Dynasty, they served as vital media for communication between rulers and Han people. They were instrumental in the effective continuation of Han culture in the Central Plains, and as a result, the relationship between Qing Dynasty calligraphy and painting and politics was particularly close. It was a historical necessity for emperors to provide calligraphy and painting education for the imperial princes. As future rulers and high-level leaders of the country, the imperial princes must be proficient in this governing tool.

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