

Seeing the Peony in Early Qing-Dynasty Art: An Embodiment of Individual Identity

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Abstract. Within the context of the Manchurians' conquest of the Ming dynasty and their subsequent establishment of a new imperial rule, the intricate symbolic systems embodied in floral imagery, particularly the peony flowers, instilled a profound sense of insecurity in the nascent Qing court. Despite the government's strict scrutiny of the visual and literary works of literati, as well as the imperial authority's monopolization of peony portrayals, Yun Shouping and Gao Fenghan's paintings of peonies exude an air of innocence and purity. However, beneath their seemingly tranquil facade lay internal struggles with themselves in the context of the era, along with a subtle defiance towards the new governing regime. This study examines how the two artists transcended the constraints of traditional depictions and aesthetic conventions surrounding peonies dictated by the highest social class, by analyzing the visual aspects of their peony paintings in conjunction with their biographical accounts, thus individualizing the floral motif with distinctive artistic languages. It exemplifies the reclamation of Yun and Gao's dominion over each visual realm, wherein they assert their autonomous authority in shaping the conveyed information and emotions through the blossoms, while also finding security and solace in redefining and recontextualizing the subject matter whose symbolic significance has endured for millennia.

1 Introduction

From the mid-to-late 17th century, the Manchurians, originating from a regional culture rooted in northeastern China, gradually conquered the territory ruled by the Han Chinese, eventually vanquishing the Ming and establishing their own Qing rule (1644-1912). The succession of dynasties and the ever-evolving power dynamics not only engendered significant societal transformations but also bred a paradigm shift in individuals' perceptions of themselves and their nexus with the state. In this turbulent and volatile historical period in China, artists who witnessed the transition of dynasties were confronted with the dislocation of their self-identity resulting from the forced fragmentation of social identities, a phenomenon that particularly manifested itself in the quintessential Chinese artistic and cultural element of the peony. With recourse to the overpowering conventionality in the aesthetic values and auspicious meanings associated with the peony symbol, utilized by the governing authority to promote their cultural hegemony, two individual artists — Yun Shouping and Gao Fenghan — disguised their feelings towards the new imperial power as well as their inner entanglements under the familiar garden subjects. Through a complex internal self-conflict and process of agitation, the consciousness of the two artists attains a harmonious reconciliation and unity between individual perception and outer-world influence. The representation and personalized symbolic meaning of peonies in each of

their works, distinct from those of Qing court art, further cement each identity transformation within the distinct Qing context. Instead of employing the conventional research approach in examining the school or genre of art to which peony images belong, this paper takes a fresh perspective by drawing upon each artist's unique viewpoint, intertwining it with their personal experiences and the distinct backdrop of their era. Furthermore, the selected research domain in this paper compensates for the dearth of knowledge regarding the profound significance of peony elements within literati paintings during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.

2 Peony in the Qing court

The visualization of the peony under the Qing court, by and large, adheres to conventional visual representations of this motif and, correspondingly, its auspicious associations. Instead of escalating tensions between the general public and Qing power brokers or widening the fissure between culture and political dynamics in subversion, the newly established foreign political system would benefit more by forging a cogent relationship with Chinese culture, historically dominated by the Han ethnicity. This would allow them to better legitimize their imperial rule and solidify their cultural hegemony. To put it another way, the legitimization of the ruling position governing a broader territorial state comprised of non-Manchurian peoples was achieved through the incorporation of cultural and aesthetic

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traditions accumulated throughout Chinese dynastic history. The adoption of Han cultural essence, rather than menacingly reshaping individuals' cultural identities, effectively reduced resistance or defiance towards the new political regime. This swift and seamless assimilation of novel concepts is also evident in the manifestation of peony motifs in Qing court art, particularly in the embellishment of tableware adorned with ornamental peonies. For instance, when examining the bowl crafted in the Jingdezhen kiln during Emperor Kangxi's reign (given that both artists mentioned below lived under his rule), it is clear that the indisputable status of the imperial authority is embodied in peonies symbolic of regal power and the wealthiest and most aristocratic temperaments they represent [1]. Therefore, anchoring the imperial power through the symbolism of "King of Flowers" demonstrates a profound comprehension and acknowledgment of the traditional aesthetic system. It also signifies a political affiliation with the preceding dynasty by accepting the auspicious rebus that can only be deciphered by individuals who share the same cultural foundation as the political institution responsible for constructing the imagery of peony flowers.

The significance of the peony in Qing court art cannot be fully explained by its auspicious connotation alone, however. Other flowers, such as orchids, lotus, and hibiscus, as well as trees like bamboo, plums, and pines, are also intrinsically linked to descriptions of valued personalities and moral characters in the human world due to their graphic features. In addition to the compelling symbolic reference, the exclusive prominence of peonies can also be attributed to their frequent portrayal in paintings depicting the pastimes of social elites and intellectuals in springtime gardens. This artistic tradition can be traced back to the emergence of urban garden culture during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties [2]. Considering that access to garden landscapes was limited to individuals who possessed political and intellectual prowess as well as substantial wealth, peonies, serving as prevalent motifs in springtime gardens, symbolize the refined and cultured upper social stratification. This layer of metaphoric implications associated with the peony symbol gives rise to a transformation in the negative portrayal of the Qing conquerors, replacing their lack of manners, culture, and refinement with an elegant, genteel, and scholarly impression. The non-Han rulers, therefore, accepted the inherent metaphorical significance of the peony motif that is associated with specific social and cultural contexts. By virtue of the appropriation of the peony motif in symbolic correlation with the ideals of a benevolent monarchy and cultivated intellectual elite, there has been a partial reversal in perception towards the Qing imperial house and the Manchu political system as a whole.

Nevertheless, unparalleled visuality was not the primary concern of the Qing court. The pursuit of refinement in visual expression was circumscribed by the intention to assert absolute hierarchy and political dominance through the employment of provocative artistic language. The representation of the peony motif

on the bowl appears to be comparatively stylized, albeit technically impeccable. The surface's flatness, composed of lines and colors devoid of any expressive or dynamic composition, suggests a rigid standardization within the realm of court art [3]. The yellow backdrop paint evokes the regal hue of the dragon robe exclusively donned by imperial rulers, thus employing the peony motif as a remarkable mobilization of labor and resources that metamorphose them into personal possessions [4]. These peony patterns, characterized by their technical and normative manifestations, along with the royal family's exclusive control over the methods, materials, and sites for production, stress the social distinction between commoners and royalty. Moreover, the imperial-monopoly kilns further marginalized the presence of craftsmen and disenfranchised their voices within the broader art field, thereby reinforcing excessively the political and commodity attributes of these appliances. In contrast to the usual seal stamps left on artifacts, which are typically primarily from painters and later may also include those of collectors and connoisseurs, only the seal bearing the name of the Kangxi emperor is visible in this bowl's bottom. This crude intervention of the inequality of political discourse into the realm of artistic creation, coupled with the utilization of imperial power to take possession of artifacts and stifle their emotional and conceptual value as personally attributed by the artist, hindered the potential development of aesthetic standards within Qing court art, despite its ability to further assert its ruling status.

3 Two individualists and their distinctive approaches to peony paintings

3.1. Yun Shouping (1633-1690)

Despite visual hegemony extending beyond the empire, however, a more individualistic approach to depicting peonies started to emerge within the circle of literati artists, characterized by its profound infusion of obscure sentiments. Artist Yun Shouping, a renowned master of flower painting, utilizes an exclusively visual language that reinterprets recognizable subjects to convey sensitive information and concealed emotions within the confines of strict government censorship. This particular coded visual language was circulated only within a social circle consisting of individuals who shared similar beliefs and values as Yun. The major theme depicted in artworks by this group of artists was Ming loyalism, which intertwined sentiments of nostalgia towards the Han-rule state and a profound dissent against Manchu power [2]. Yet the insubordinate emotions and unwavering intransigence of Yun towards the Manchu power, interwoven with a poignant bitterness in the face of the reality of the loss of the Han empire, are skillfully concealed beneath his elegant and delicate stylistic features, as well as the familiar auspicious motif of the peony. The persistent and rebellious refusal towards the

new dynasty, in light of the relentless rise of foreign political discourse and non-Han cultural influence, appears to lack efficacy. However, Yun's disobedience and outrage can be fully understood as a result of his life experiences. Having been imprisoned at an early age for resisting the Manchu troops responsible for the demise of Yun's brother and the separation from his father, and subsequently witnessing his adoptive father's untimely assassination at nineteen, Yun was forced to confront bereavement during his formative years [5]. It is possible that during this time he had already grasped the fundamental brevity and impermanence underlying the world, which aligns with the transient nature of objects symbolized by the peony motif. In his *Peonies* painting, the five peonies of subtle tonal nuances are transcended into a void realm, unveiling an exquisitely hyperrealistic depiction by the artist that eschews mere verisimilitude in form. In contrast to the naturalistic rendition of the subject or the vulgar, ornamental depiction of flowers as mere embellishments on tableware in the hands of craftsman-painters, each peony under Yun's brush embodies its own spirit and autonomy, as if their life journey continues beyond the beholders' act of observation [5].

Despite having created the transcendental realm from which the peonies attain eternal vitality, a subtle tinge of distress and loneliness permeates the translucent pictorial surface, mirroring the circumstances of the artist's life. In order to achieve this desired visual effect, the artist chose to paint on silk instead of paper. The advancement of silk technology and the evolution of production modes during the Qing Dynasty resulted in remarkable improvements in both the quality of silk and the artistry of its painting [6]. In addition to the establishment of three official weaving institutions in Jiangning (Nanjing), Suzhou, and Hangzhou, dedicated to providing silks of superior quality for the royal nobility or as prestigious tributes entering the international commodity market, a flourishing family handicraft industry production mode also emerged and quickly gained prominence during this era [7]. The silk material's portability and durability, combined with its lightweight and easy-to-store nature, as well as its enhanced flexibility and resistance to damage compared to the fragile paper, perfectly catered to the needs of Yun Shouping, who, being a freelance artist, extensively traveled along the Grand Canal in order to sell his paintings for sustenance [2].

Moreover, the exceptional quality and fineness of the silk allow for a wide spectrum of color shades, which assist the artist in rendering a poetic and ethereal ambiance. By virtue of the glossy, soft silk and its high permeability, Yun's peonies are imbued with an inherent sense of delicate fragility, as exemplified by the lustrous, gauzy washes of colors and watery yet restrained contour lines. The fragility exhibited by the painting technique, however, stands in stark contrast to the immortal and celestial ambiance in which the peonies flourish. To a certain extent, the conflicts in the visual presentation reflect the artist's mental struggles. It can be observed that his displacement between disillusionment with reality and the chaotic self-identity has been deconstructed into the wandering rootless peony drifting

in an illusionary space, transcending the boundaries of rationality and hallucination, ultimately leading to a complete stripping away of normal temporal and spatial order. Accordant with the picture, the accompanying inscriptions eloquently depict the striking contrast between gorgeous beauty and grandeur, and their transient nature or fleeting existence:

吹罢琼箫咽凤尘，粉痕暗减镜中春。低垂翠袖红妆侧，舞倦龙绡金谷人。

Blowing the ethereal jade flute, the phoenix's iridescent dust gently settles; traces of delicate powder fade amidst the reflection of vibrant spring in the gilded mirror. With verdant sleeves gracefully drooping and crimson makeup adorning her visage, the dancer clad in tattered dragon silk exudes an aura befitting a denizen from the resplendent Golden Valley [8].

In this passage, Yun subtly incorporates a literary allusion to the renowned Golden Valley Garden, located in Luoyang and owned by Shi Chong during the Jin Dynasty. Amidst the tumultuous tides of time, the garden has borne witness to the ebb and flow of countless individual destinies and the intertwining of diverse emotions—from the exultation of convivial reunions to the heart-wrenching reality of inevitable farewells; from grandiose balls brimming with mirth to the tragic demise of a mesmerizing dancer [8]. By tracing an iconic event in a specific historical period and combining it with the exploration of his marginalization between two dynasties and two identities, the artist ultimately perceived the quintessence of existence to be nestled within impermanence. He broke free from external political oppression and achieved self-harmony between personal social identity and the internal world. Therefore, Yun came to the realization that being trapped in distorted memories does not lead to spiritual liberation, but rather acts as a shackle on one's freedom. He understood his individuality within a consciousness that is constantly being overthrown and rebuilt, instead of identifying himself through analogy with the fall of the Ming empire.

3.2 Gao Fenghan (1683-1748)

Shifting to the Jiangnan area of eighteenth-century China, it has long been a hub of cultural activity in southern China, with Yangzhou emerging as the most economically prosperous and culturally vibrant city due to the patronage of professional artists by the burgeoning class of salt merchants [9]. This thriving environment has attracted numerous artists to this city, thereby catalyzing vital cultural exchanges and fostering artistic creativity. Gao Fengshan, a Shandong native, came to Yangzhou city at the age of over fifty, when he had already transitioned to painting with his left hand. Although it is debatable whether Gao Fengshan's brief residence in Yangzhou was the sole factor in determining his extraordinary artistic development, there is no denying that his immersion in the city's vibrant artistic and inclusive milieu, as well as his close relationships with fellow artists who prioritized art as a means of private expression, undoubtedly contributed to the development of his later conception of art [10]. In

particular, Gao regarded Shitao, one of the Four Great Monk Painters, as his spiritual and aesthetic exemplar, holding him in high regard [11]. With a background similar to Yun Shouping's, Shitao's sense of patriotism is comparatively less fervent than that of the former [12]. Influenced by Shitao, who epitomizes the contemplation of self-ego in his artistic expression, Gao Fenghan's flower painting exemplifies a transformation from observing the intricacies of the external world to analyzing and reflecting upon individuality. He incorporates covert meanings associated with personal life within the floral imagery. In line with his uninhibited persona, Gao's Plum Blossoms and Peonies presents a novel and disruptive portrayal of peonies that exudes an autonomous and untrammelled essence.

4 A comparative analysis of the formal and stylistic features of the two peony paintings

By juxtaposition, neither artwork depicts peonies arranged in a vase or situated within a garden setting. Instead, Yun eliminates all artificial elements from this painting, focusing solely on the morphology of peonies, as if entering a transcendental state where flowers bring to life with autonomous vitality. The petals and leaves appear to dance with a sense of freedom, as indicated by their varying degrees of rotation and curling, as well as the diverse levels and depths created by different tonalities. On the other hand, Gao emphasizes the untamed nature of peonies by placing them next to the strange, irregular-shaped stone and the angular plum trees. Therefore, the symbolism of peonies as representations of imperial power naturally vanished from both artworks.

In terms of the overall texture, Yun's painting emanates a poetic elegance that evokes a delicate softness reminiscent of ephemeral mist, while Gao's work captures the qualities of the organic, unprocessed freshness of peonies. Yun's brushwork is characterized by smooth and consistent strokes with minimal variation in thickness. The focus is not on accentuating lines, but rather on deliberately subduing them. Furthermore, through the application of smooth color transitions and the natural yet opulent interplay of light and shadow, Yun's vibrant energy and spiritual uniqueness are effortlessly conveyed through the animated subject, thus encapsulating the intoxicating fragrance and pristine character of the peony. By comparison, Gao's brushwork emulates the rhythmic calligraphic movements of cursive scripts, emphasizing bold, casual, uninhibited strokes as well as indiscriminate use of ink (even some odd-looking but eye-catching spots). Due to the rapid brush movements on the paper, white streaks known as flying white were left within the black ink, capturing the artist's dynamic wrist or even full-body movements during the art-making process [13]. In contrast to Yun's colorful peonies, Gao's scroll is dominated by monochromatic ink lines and washes, creating a striking visual impact between the free-flowing darkness of the ink and the white background. The absence of color and deliberately

unpainted areas further captivate the viewers' gaze toward the silhouettes of the subjects, which are created through strokes varying in tonalities and heaviness.

5 Two artists' shared conceptual framework and creative motives

After experiencing multiple crises, including psychological and physical trauma, the annihilation of individuality, and self-imposed exile, the artists realized in their respective peony paintings the complete process of redefining and constructing personal identity within the context of a new dynasty governed by foreign rulers. Despite the gradual narrowing of artistic space by authorities' manipulation of aesthetic intention and the weakening influence of artists' voices, individual artists have not succumbed to mere repetition or direct appropriation of past traditions. On the contrary, they deconstructed and personalized the ubiquitous peony motif, which has created a deep reference relationship with certain groups or organizations, into a unique symbol within the self-referential art system, thereby playing a pivotal role in reshaping subjectivity while simultaneously undermining the authority of art as an instrument for consolidating imperial power.

6 Conclusion

The image of the peony held sway in both the orthodox and literati painting schools during the early Qing Dynasty, serving as a powerful tool employed by governmental institutions and artists alike to assert their distinct ideologies. Despite sharing this common motivation, the representation and conveyed meaning of peony flowers diverge completely. The peony motif, adhering to the rigid ornamental mode, metamorphoses the dominant position of the imperial lineage and its political authority into an aesthetically appealing expression resonating with the masses, while subtly confining it within an aristocratic framework exclusively accessible to emperors of the highest social class. Despite the authoritative clique within the political system wielding the power to confer and dominate the connotations of imagery, individual artists have persistently endeavored to redefine and interpret peonies' visual representation and techniques under challenging circumstances. The painting of Peonies by Yun can be best described as a restrained delicacy, wherein his emotional vulnerability, nonconformist ideological stance, and dissident and maverick qualities are subtly veiled. On the other hand, Gao's approach involves employing candid and organic techniques to accentuate the untamed, wild character of the peonies, liberating them from any sensual pleasures or erotic indulgences. As a recurring garden subject entrenched in traditional culture, the peony flower has been both politicized and commodified by the Qing imperial system. An inconsistency, incongruity, and even disharmony between the artistic visions of individual

artists and the prevailing zeitgeist that authority seeks to shape, provides a secure and private conduit for emotional release and self-expression for Yun Shouping and Gao Fenghan, two artists whose pioneering techniques and conceptual approaches infuse this conventional subject matter with an exuberant and euphoric spirit. This essay focuses solely on the peony paintings of two prominent artists in the early Qing Dynasty. In future studies, a similar approach can be taken to analyze peony paintings from different artistic schools throughout various periods of the Qing Dynasty, investigating how individual artist styles were influenced by multifaceted political, economic, and geographical factors, as well as how these overarching factors are reflected in the visual representation of peonies.

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